

**Black Writing, Culture,  
and the State  
in Latin America**



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# 12

## (W)riting Collective Memory (De)spite State

### *Decolonial Practices of Existence in Ecuador*

*Catherine Walsh with Juan García Salazar*

**S**tate in Latin America has never been an ally of African-descendant communities, nor has it been a key referent. Similarly, the written word has not been the medium or mechanism by which Afro communities typically position and pass on their stories, teachings, philosophies, knowledges, and thought. In essence, both writing and State have been considered as forces *casa afuera* (out-of-house). While State negates, orders and regulates, writing re-presents for a world that is not—or not only—the community's own. As such, the theme of this volume and project, *Black Writing, Culture, and the State in Latin America*, brings to the fore a number of interesting and crucial tensions and questions, including about the significance of State and writing today and about the intersections of both with collective memory and the ongoing struggles of and for existence.

Afro-existence has, without a doubt, been molded, signified, and constructed without, despite, and notwithstanding State; in essence, to spite State itself. That is, in its margins, blind spots, and “wastelands,” and outside the very frames—of recognition, rights, and citizenship—that State assumes as constitutive and dear. Collective memory and oral tradition find their historical base here. They are grounded in the experiences, practices, and pedagogies of thinking and being that people of African origin have sown and cultivated on lands they were forced to make their own. What happens then when the present-day State offers its embrace? And in this context how is a new “riting” and writing of collective memory emerging today that recalls, spites, and transgresses State, while at the same time warning of newfound affections?

Such questions are particularly relevant in contemporary Ecuador. The making absent of African descendants is, in fact, a legacy and characteristic of the Ecuadorian State, one that can be traced back to the nineteenth-century decrees of abolition and

manumission, where there is no mention of the identity and subjectivity of the enslaved. The first official recognition of blacks only came with the Constitution of 1998, 189 years after “independence.” Here and in the more radical 2008 Charter, Afro-Ecuadorians are identified as “peoples” with collective rights.<sup>1</sup> The 2008 document also recognizes ancestral territory and knowledge, makes nature the subject of rights, and identifies racism and the need for reparation, compensation, and affirmative action. The state that historically denied existence and rights now confers. Yet as Abuelo Zenon, the voice of Afro-Ecuadorian collective memory, makes clear, State is, and always has been, part of the problem. With state recognition comes a new set of norms and apparatuses of state control that work to negate, supersede, and disrupt ancestral memory and being. The sad reality is that in the policy and practice of rights, recognition, and “progressive” government today, Afro-community and territory-based existences have probably never been more challenged.

This chapter examines how collective memory as the philosophy and teachings of the elders has been used in most recent years as a decolonial practice to recuperate, strengthen, reposition, and reconstruct Afro existence as ancestral right. Such practice is re-presented in the figure of *Abuelo Zenon*, who many years ago passed to the other side, and is strategically put in voice and writing by his grandson Juan García Salazar, who is considered by Afro-Ecuadorian communities as the “guardian of tradition” and the “worker of the process.” The chapter works to return the word, question the present order from State, and act against the deterritorialization and social-cultural dispersion of ancestral land, knowledge, and will that threaten existence and/as life.

The “riting” and the writing today of this memory and these struggles by García and others allied to this process (in which Catherine Walsh includes herself) are socially, politically, culturally, and epistemically insurgent and strategic. This insurgency and strategicity work both *casa adentro*, or “in-house,” and *casa afuera*, or “out-of-house.” In house, the project is to build and strengthen a sense of belonging, understanding, and engagement among the newer generations distanced by modernity and technology from oral tradition and the elders, and to leave a record supported in the written word. Out-of-house, the work and project are meant to transgress, disrupt, and interrupt the frames, visions, and perspectives within which and through which African descendants are studied and written “about,” as well as those within and through which they are now “included” as State’s subjects-objects.

The interest of this chapter is to bring all of these considerations, processes, and projects to the fore. As such, the chapter does not speak in a single voice, nor does it present findings “about” Afro-Ecuadorians gleaned through observation, study, and research. Instead, it is conceived and constructed as a dialogue and thinking “from” and “with” collective memory and the decolonial practices of existence in Afro-Ecuador as expressed in the words, thoughts, writings, and personas of Juan García and Abuelo Zenon.

With this interest and proposition in mind, we have chosen a nonconventional writing style of italics and non-italics. The italicized represents the words of García spoken in an ongoing dialogue and conversation with Walsh, and the non-italicized represent the words of Walsh and the quoted citations of García and Zenon, along with other related references.<sup>2</sup> This style, which we have used together before, attempts to break the singularity and homogeneity of voice most often present in co-authored texts as

well as the authoritative-interpretative stance frequently assumed when one individual writes about the thoughts and writings of another.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, it raises important considerations about the logics, methodologies, pedagogies, and ethics of writing, and, of course, of collective work itself, considerations that are constant in our individual and shared work and in our efforts toward decolonial praxis.

In what follows, then, we will explore the significance of collective memory and its present-day (w)riting, consider the notion of existence and/as ancestral right, and engage the problematic of the present ordered from State, including its accompanying deterritorialization.

## Collective Memory and its (W)riting

For us collective memory is the reaffirmation of that which tradition teaches us, of what the ancestors teach. And, precisely, it is collective memory because it is in the entire collective. While some may have more and others less knowledge about an act, fact, or event, about a way to do things, about a value or saying, about a person or being, all [in the community] generally have a shared comprehension of what it means to have a way 'casa adentro' to understand; everybody [in-house] knows what we are talking about here. Collective memory is collectivized knowledge; for us the guarantee and verification of the ancestral, then, is in its shared and collectivized nature. It is that which enables us to live on.

In Ecuador in general and most particularly in the Afro-Pacific territory-region of the north of Esmeraldas,<sup>4</sup> collective memory is not an ephemeral account of the past, but an enduring register and construct that signifies, nourishes, builds, and sustains belonging, existence, and continuance as present with past. In this the elders have always been key. As Abuelo Zenon says, "the elders are our witnesses and from their word we have much to learn" (qtd. in García, *Territorios* 15). Their oral re-creations and narrations pass lived knowledges from generation to generation, weaving through words what Lewis Gordon has referred to as "transcendental reality," that is: "the world by which and through which meaning is, in a word 'meaningful'" (164–65).

The problem, of course, arises when the meaningfulness of this world and its ontological-epistemological-spiritual-methodological-pedagogical base are transgressed and displaced; when the elders as ancestors lose their captive audiences, when those who have passed on are not replaced, when the shared and collectivized are broken, and when, as Zenon argues, those in the community begin to assume an other's truth (García, *Territorios*). Without a doubt, the dictates of schooling, of Western "universal" knowledge and progress, and of today's individual-based inclusion of Afro-descendants by State are central factors that contribute to, push, and enable the transgressions, ruptures, and displacements. Together, all are constitutive mechanisms of modernity and its underside that is the coloniality of power, mechanisms that have long worked to advance, denigrate, and negate what the elders name as collective memory, ancestral philosophies and teaching, and existence as ancestral right. "To learn from the past means to look for valid proposals in the community's collective memory, to recuperate our sense of belonging and rights in order to continue being ourselves as community, family, as Afro-Ecuadorian peoples" (García, *Territorios* 158), because "The simple life of those that came before us, their particular ways of understanding wellbeing and

richness or wealth, are a mirror so that the new generations can measure that value of their interior being and the greatness of their ancestral philosophies" (Zenon qtd. in Garcia, *Territorios* 16). A resistance to and a working against the modern/colonial matrices and mechanisms of power define such a proposal as a project. Yet resistance is not the only descriptive force. Also and more critically involved are the pro-positive insurgent dynamisms of re-creation and re-existence that collective memory and its "riting" and writing work to engender and bring forth.<sup>5</sup>

With "riting" we refer to the acting and enacting of collective memory, to the practices—past and, especially, present—that not only give ancestral teachings a special place and space, but that also, through this acting and enacting, position tradition-based words as humanizing forces of collective re-creation and re-existence. Such riting brings to mind Gordon's call for incantations: "With incantation we evoke, call forth, and sometimes invoke—bring forth, summon or conjure—special forces. We sing—and often chant—magical words" (Gordon 164). The writing down of these words is indicative of a new practice of riting that, in Ecuador, responds to the exigencies of the present times.

*Today's putting on paper of collective memory, of ancestral teachings, has two vertients. The first is what we call "el encargo generacional" (the generacional responsibility). Those of my generation listened to our elders narrating, telling, explaining; our hearts and our minds were ready to learn through oral transmission the knowledges and wisdom they imparted. Our generacional encargo, then, was to listen and to learn. But that has now changed precisely because of the second vertient, the "brecha generacional" (the generacional gap), where the willingness to learn listening no longer continues, the fault, in part, of the schools that have come to replace the elders.*

*The ancestral mandate to learn by oral tradition went as far as us—our generation. As such, we who still carry this "encargo" have decided to change the method, to put the ancestral mandates in written word so that they can get to this new generation that is not interested in learning by listening, or in giving audience to "los saberes" (the knowledges).*

But we have also made a backup of the oral memory; the Fondo Documental, which we continue together to build and promote, keeps these memories in oral word as a parallel support so that one can return to the recorded voice of the ancestors; the voice is preserved.<sup>6</sup> This is a way, in a moment of crisis, to resort to or adopt another strategy or tool, another medium, which is writing, as a way to maintain this voice and enable a listening and learning from it. The oral backup verifies that what is written really does belong to the ancestor.<sup>7</sup>

*These are the two vertients that come together to give reason to writing oral memory and oral traditions; it is a reason that works to challenge the history and coloniality of power: this subjugation that schooling signifies for our youth and children. We assume this decision with caution and with much in-house reflection, knowing that by putting it in writing means that it is no longer oral tradition per se, although this is where it comes from. All this—the word of memory and the written word—is something still new to the community. There are still not many of us writing this memory and, for this reason, it still needs much reflection casa adentro.*

However, we are clear of writing's strategic use. If writing has been the principal medium to impart knowledge that is not our own, why not use it now to disseminate our

own knowledge? Of course the bottom line here is to make clear the criterion that this is neither individual knowledge nor the words of a single author, but rather that of the collective reproduced in the memory of the elders.

*In this way, the reproduction of the memory of the elders in written form is not a product or result of the reflections of the individual author that records them. The elders themselves are clear about this and, as such, demand that their words be written as they are said, as they are transmitted. If one respects the words of the elders, then one should not try and translate or rephrase them into standardized form. Nor should one attempt to give them meaning, interpret them, or change their focus, because in so doing one often loses or obscures all that is underneath. "Say it as I say it," the elders caution. "This is how I want people to hear what I am saying in ten years, which means that you are my voice, you are my generation." This does not just mean simply writing down what they say, transcribing; it means contemplating each word, each phrase, the order of words, listening to the silences and to what is done with sound. This is a labor that is not easy, particularly when one assumes its in-house significance as ancestral responsibility. One has to have lived and seen this in context in order to put it in written words. Oral tradition, then, understood *casa adentro*, is complex and respectful; those of us who respect this are those of us committed to this tradition.*

*The problem comes often when this material is used *casa afuera* as quotations or citations that simply support the idea of an individual author and do not support or give presence to the collective thought that the citations themselves signify, construct, and recall. One thing is to do an interview of someone in the community for a research project, for example, and another is a conversation about a historical event, a foundational myth or story, an ancestral practice; with each come distinct intentionalities, logics, rationalities, and responsibilities. Moreover, there are some things that cannot or should not be written if one is aware and respectful of the ancestor and of ancestral knowledge, and there are others that lose their force and significance when put on paper. For these reasons, the work with oral tradition is complicated and, even more importantly, entails, from the ancestral vision, an obedience to tradition.*

In all of this process, the personage of Abuelo Zenon, both literal (as García's long-deceased grandfather) and figurative (as an ancestral referent born in the sowing of collective memory), has come in recent years to play a central role.<sup>8</sup> Zenon is generally and increasingly understood *casa adentro* as the ancestor that brings Afro-Ecuadorian existence-based thought into one single voice, a voice that is *sparing, simple, and "propia" (of our own), without additions*. It is a voice that *always dismantles words that are not our own, words that Zenon uses as counterwords. When Zenon speaks, the people speak. Tradition and memory are talking.*

*The role of Zenon has much to do with collective memory, because when Zenon talks, I know what he is saying, I find meaning in it, and I find myself there but also my grandfather in the voice, the sayings, the proverbs. Collective memory is also this force with regard to which one says, "I know this; I know what he is talking about." Zenon is the voice I listened to, I don't know when or how many years ago, but I know I heard this voice before. This is important for what it says about the role of Zenon: folks can easily connect because it is their own voice; it is the voice of all of us. The role of Zenon is to bring together thought in a single collective voice.*

*Zenon is a way for groups to address collective memory. His assertion, for example, that schools were put in the communities not to teach us but to subjugate us serves as a charge for*

reflection, as food for thought, as a stimulus to think and rethink in a way that is our own. Folks can use Zenon and Zenon's phrases with total liberty, without the fear of reprisal, without the fear that someone will say they are copying or misquoting. It is a way to not cite what the academic intellectuals cite, and it is the pride in being able to say, "This is my personage, and I can talk from him." And, of course, there is another element as well: that no one can cite Zenon better than those from the community, because they can put in the tonality, the voice. Zenon works to bridge the differences within the communities, to lower the levels of confrontation among different ways of thinking and epistemic positionings. By attributing a thought or a saying to Zenon and not to one individual, collective memory and knowledge are repositioned and once again taken up.

Zenon thus plays a useful and important role that does not belong to any one person. It is a role that has been functioning in memory; Zenon is the black community's intellectual property. When Michael Handelsman is working with Zenon,<sup>9</sup> or when community leaders work with Zenon and say, "Listen, Zenon is now speaking," they are evoking memory and tradition; they are giving space for memory and tradition to talk, whether that talking be in oral form or written down.

The writing of Zenon, in this sense, interrupts while simultaneously contributing to what Richard Jackson described as black literature in Latin America. For Jackson, this literature can be defined within a humanist legacy and within the theoretical framework of *ethnopoetics*: "a term associated with oral tradition and with new forms of poetry created when oral and preliterate forms merge with new written or formal languages. . . . It is a human poetics . . . a poetics 'of the Other,' but it is also a poetics 'of our kind' and 'of who we are'" (Jackson xvi–xv). Latin American literature about blacks by blacks themselves is, as Jackson argues, clearly distinct from that written about blacks by non-black authors. Yet it is still typically understood and read within the Western academic frame that attributes authorship to an individual and that makes writing the medium and place from which literature is defined and from which authors speak.

For Handelsman, this is the difference and tension that Zenon marks with what has been constituted as Afro-literature in Ecuador and more generally in the Afro-Latin American diaspora. While authors like Nelson Estupiñán Bass speak from writing—from the privileged place of a literary artist that speaks for and about the necessities of the people, and from the individualism characteristic of the literary world—Zenon personifies orality and articulates community-based thought. "We that have planted in our hearts the sense of belonging to the community, do not just speak of the community, we suffer with the community, our pain is the pain of the community, we are the community," Zenon says (qtd. in García, *Territorios* 12). It is in this context that Handelsman asserts: "Far from considering [literary] artists as their principal representatives and advocates, the communities look within to assume the responsibility of their own construction as collective people" (111).

The fact that it is García who calls forth Zenon's thought and puts his teachings, evocations, and incantations to word is reflective and indicative of García's own ancestral role as guardian of the tradition. Through his community-based and oriented writings, community study-groups, workshops, and oral-tradition schools, and his more than half a century of dedication to listening to the elders and compiling their testimonies, narratives, stories, and life histories, García has worked to position and enable collective memory as an ancestral, sociopolitical, cultural, existential, and epistemic force. In these



processes of articulation and (w)riting, the lines between Zenon and García are blurred; both appeal to, and are constitutive of, the many elders and guardians of tradition whose words, teachings, and thought continue on in anonymity.

## The Present Ordered from State

What is the interplay of State with these issues of memory, ancestral tradition, and writing? And how does State in Ecuador today re-present and re-create the same tension previously described with regards to black literature? That is, how does the state's appointment of Afro individuals within high-up government institutions today position and enable a privileged space from which these state appointees, like the literary figures, speak for and about the necessities of the people from the individualism and intermediarism characteristic of State?

Here Zenon's words, written and interwoven with García's, once again articulate community-based thought as they make tense, unsettle, and call into question the past and present role of State and its contemporary practices of representative inclusion. Handelsman stresses, likewise, the communities' adherence to their own sense of community identity, over and above the representativity that might ensue from the appointees of the state (2011).

Zenon reminds us that African-origin peoples predate State, which is the imposed referent through which domination, subjugation, regulation, and exclusion have been proffered:

We cannot forget that our right to live in these territories is born in the historic reparation of the damage/harm that meant the dispersion of our African blood through America, dispersion that through the will of others we had to live these hundreds of years before the configuring of the states which now order/regulate us.

What we are today as people is what we never wanted to be, because what we are today does not depend solely on our will or desire to be. Today we are what the laws of the State direct and dictate that we will be. (qtd. in García, *Territorios* 67)

With the 2008 Constitution and its radical rethinking of society, law, and State, including the recognition of racism, reparation, affirmative action, collective rights, and aspects of indigenous and Afro life-visions (i.e. ancestral knowledges, collective well-being, and nature's rights), a new era of visibility and inclusionary politics was ushered in.<sup>10</sup> The interrogative that seems to naturally follow is: What happens when the historic concerns of African-origin people become part of—are assumed by and within—State?

The Afro-descendent political analyst and writer Jhon Antón Sánchez describes these new politics of visibility and inclusion positively as an opening of "cultural citizenship." Afro-Ecuadorians presently or formerly in government, including Oscar Chalá and Alexandra Ocles, recognize the advance as well as the complexities, difficulties, and contradictions of its present application.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is only García and Zenon who, through their thought, voices, and/in writing, make present the problematic inherent in the very idea and practice of State, preceding and current. For

both, such problematic is grounded in, among other concerns, the “dis-memory” that inclusion as a kind of new beginning engenders.

*This government of the Ecuadorian State, or any other government for that matter, does not want or know how to confront the historic debt it has with the Afro-Ecuadorian community. It does not know how because it does not know history or the perspective of the Afro community. It knows a national history where we Afros form a very small part, if at all, but supposedly we have done nothing, we have given nothing. And because they have not measured the debt as a contribution to a people that against its will had to give much work to this [state and national] construction, it is assumed that there is no debt, or need, for reparation. The state is not doing anything in this regard, and society and the community are not doing anything either. Only a few Afros agree on the necessity of reparation. The majority thinks they are being included and have an equality of opportunities. The Afro community as a whole is not thinking about reparation, and this seems to me to be a kind of historical dis-memory (desmemoria histórica) on our side.*<sup>12</sup>

This dis-memory works to reverse collective memory and to position it as a bygone tradition with little present-day relevance or significance. State thus becomes both representative and constitutive of the new beginning. Certainly for peoples historically kept outside the frame and practice of the nation-state, recognition, equality, citizenship, and inclusion have weighted meaning. Hope and the light ahead can easily shadow and obscure the road back. Of course, the problem here is not only that the elders and ancestral knowledge lose their contemporary role, but also that individual representation and rights begin to supersede (or make less necessary) the community as collective. Furthermore, *the politics of inclusion itself work to leave behind, to undo, our black mind, our “negritud.”*<sup>13</sup> Dis-memory, in this sense, is a strategy of power—a re-coloniality of sorts—that weakens the very elements upon which a collective black identity, memory, and existence were built. Recalled is Frantz Fanon’s assertion (re-taken up in Gordon) that affirmation within the system depends on the system’s denial of ever having illegitimately excluded.<sup>14</sup>

Inclusion is, without a doubt, functional to the new plurinational and intercultural Ecuadorian State in its progressive positioning and construction. However, it is not necessarily transformative of State’s historical relation (or non-relation) with African descendants. The problem, of course, is not that there are now Afro-Ecuadorians in, and part of, State. Rather, the problem is the fact that *it is a representation that is always subject to the vision of the state. They are designates of the state, not put there by the community. It is an inclusion that does not touch power.*<sup>15</sup>

Besides the problematic of dis-memory and representative inclusion, García and Zenon bring to the fore another related concern of the present ordered from State: the denial, negation, and usurpation of ancestral rights, in which territory—as existence and life—remains fundamental. Territory in the Afro-Pacific is central to the equation of memory and living: “We understand that without territory culture cannot be born, and without culture identity cannot grow or flourish” (García, *Territorios* 15). Territory situates, grounds, evokes, and recalls memory, the ancestors, collective consciousness, and the struggles of and for life, freedom, and humanity. Moreover, it ties all together.

*It is frequently that we hear the elders say that when the states were not, the ancestral philosophies and mandates of the people of African origin settled in these territories, ordered our way of living. This reflection has a historical root: we cannot forget that the first family*

trees of African origin arrived to live in this region between 1560 and 1760. As such, the ancestral mandates were first, well before the formation and laws of the states. The communities recuperated their ancestral right of their forms of life and ways of being in a time when the state did not exist. That is why the elders speak of a greater right that was born in-house, before the other rights were born. That is the ancestral right to territory.

As Zenon says:

The configuration of a territory for life was for us always the *Gran Comarca Territorial del Pacífico* [Great Territorial Comarca of the Pacific], that is the land that the ambition of others brought us to. [It is] where we anchored the love for the land lost, that which remained on the other side of the sea. This, hundreds of years before . . . the States that now order us. (qtd. in García, *Territorios* 44)

[As such] of all the ancestral rights . . . the right to collective territory is the one that is easiest to recognize. The former enslaved that won this right arrived to these lands against their will. To recognize the ancestral right over the territories that they occupy is the minimum that the States can do to repair this historic injustice. (qtd. in García and Walsh 352)

García's writing and thinking with Zenon about territory and territoriality as ancestral right and about the deterritorialization supported and proffered today by State (in complicity with extractivist interests) are fundamental in understanding not only the ancestral and the collective as present-day signifiers that walk with the past, but also the problem of State itself. In this sense, the writing and written words are pedagogically political and politically pedagogical in a decolonial way.<sup>16</sup>

This is made particularly evident in García's book *Territorios, Territorialidad y Desterritorialización*, subtitled as a pedagogical exercise for reflection about ancestral territories. This text brings together the narratives and testimonies of a long list of elders, community-based members, and youth from the north of Esmeraldas about the palm-oil industry and palm-oil cultivation and its devastating effects on Afro communities. Here, as in all of his texts, García does not name himself as author but as compiler, editor, and worker of the process. The "authorship" is in the collective, something that the Western world has a difficult time fathoming. Similarly, the proposition or objective goes beyond the individual reader. It is conceived in a praxical sense: to generate thought and reflection and push engagement and action across and among individuals out-of-house as well as in-house as a way to position the ancestral, build solidarities, and strengthen the collective.

Zenon and García make this clear in the Introduction, as represented in the following passages:

Surely others can be seeing only from their shore that which is affecting and destroying us. But from the shore or riverbank of the communities of African origin, that which affects us has to be said as we feel it and narrated in the way that we see it. (Zenon, 16)

The narrations about the philosophies of the elders [made by the witnesses here] . . . recuperate the category of proposals, of suggestions for all the social actors that have something to do with the management of the environment in this region. The philosophies about the solidarity-based use of natural resources need to be seen as a teaching offered by the cultural particularity of the Afro-Ecuadorian communities of the territory-region of the north of Esmeraldas. All of this . . . is a clear questioning of the present. Above all the present that is ordered from State, where the appropriation of great extensions of the mother mountain are permitted for a few “without respecting the right of those who have less.” (García, 16–17)

The deterritorialization and the social dispersion that we live in these . . . communities, in these territories of the north of Esmeraldas, are the product of a social and political injustice that all of us have the obligation to get back to, to re-think again, above all those who have the power to make decisions. (Zenon, 17)

The notion of “the ancestral” is central here. *The guardians of tradition share the opinion that what gives a determined collective territorial space the category of “ancestral” are the particular ways that its resources are used, taken advantage of, and managed. The elders are sure that we—the ancestral peoples of African origin and the indigenous peoples—are the very essence of these territories. These territories are spaces for life. We use the resources that they have to guarantee collective well-being.*

*The ancestors teach that the ancestral territories are constructed for social, cultural, and spiritual control that includes the just distribution of [natural] resources as part of an economic ethic; for that reason they have to be collective and community spaces. The construction of an ancestral territory is born in the history of the people that reclaim ancestry and has to be understood as ancestral collective memory about the cultural occupation of these physical surroundings. The occupation has to be proven by the collective memory of the people; without historical memory there is no ancestry. And this goes beyond the laws of the state.*

*Today in the ancestral territories the biggest threat is what the elders call deterritorialization, understood as the loss of the ancestral right<sup>17</sup> and the negation by State of the legal recognition to live in these territorial spaces. The state deterritorializes our communities—that is to say it negates the recognition of our right to the territory where we have always lived. The loss of ancestral right to territory makes it impossible for the communities to connect with the new social proposals that are announced in the Constitution and collective rights.*

Despite the Constitution, collective rights, and the representative inclusion of Afro-descendants, more than 27,000 hectares of land in the north of Esmeraldas had been sold or concessioned to palm-oil cultivators as of 2012; 15,000 of these are in the collectively titled ancestral territory of the Cayapas-Santiago Commune. During the present government of Rafael Correa, more credit has been given to palming companies for more hectares of Afro ancestral lands than ever before in history. Of course, the spread of palm cultivation and the loss of ancestral lands have to be understood in the broader scenario of the regionalization of the Colombian conflict. The active presence of Colombian paramilitaries, hit squads, and narcotraffickers and their growing control of both palming and mining produces a situation of violence, displacement, and deterritorialization that State has not stopped but rather enabled.<sup>18</sup>

*When the state legitimizes the sale of ancestral territories, when it gives concessions for mining and land to palm-oil cultivators, the message that the Afro-Ecuadorian people are given is that these lands are wastelands, that they do not have owners, and for that reason they can be appropriated and used by external actors. In this sense the illegality is part of the state itself.*

## (In)Conclusion

In this context and reality, the struggles to rite and write collective memory are not simply about maintaining tradition; they are about the continuance of Afro existence itself, an existence that, as Zenon and García argue, is shaped and defined by the ancestral making of a territory for, and as, life. Territory grounds and situates memory and existence as life-based processes constructed and constituted by African-origin peoples. For this reason and taken together, territory, memory, and existence are decolonial practices that have not only gone against or resisted state ordering, but that, more importantly, have endeavored to build and create ways of being, knowing, and doing otherwise, despite State. The threat to such practices and creations comes, at least in part, again from State, one today made much more complicated with its progressive discourse, its representative inclusion, and its incorporation of laws and rights. The problem is the extent of this threat, which, as Zenon and García contend, puts the future of Afro-existence itself in more peril now than in any other time in history:

When a community loses its ancestral territory, when the mountain stops being the “mother of God” for the families of African origin, when the water of the rivers stops being the fountain of life for tangible beings and the refuge of the intangible, then the spirit of the ancestors crosses the sea and looks for the land of the mother continent in which to rest. (qtd. in Walsh, *Interculturalidad, Estado, Sociedad* 223)

The people of the north of Esmeraldas have always dreamed of leaving a territory for our descendants so that they can live in peace as we have done for so many years. Now that this right over this territory is taken away, we will have to leave as inheritance the testimonies of this injustice so that the motive for resistance does not die in the new generations. (Zenon qtd. in García, *Territorios* 172) [translation by Walsh]

(“Los pueblos negros del norte de Esmeraldas, siempre soñábamos con dejar a nuestros herederos un territorio para que vivan en paz como nosotros mismos hemos vivido por tantos años, ahora que nos quita el derecho sobre este territorio, tendremos que dejarles como herencia los testimonios de esa injusticia, para que en las nuevas generaciones no muera el motivo para la Resistencia”)

Unfortunately, this is the lived reality that is increasingly giving, in the north of Esmeraldas and in the Gran Comarca of the territory-region of the Afro-Pacific, the reason and motive to the riting and writing of collective memory today. *Zenon once said that all letters are not good, and writing is just that: letters.* As such and in closing, we both ask: Is this what collective memory will soon become—letters on a page emptied of ancestral and life-built significance? Or, rather, will letters and their (w)riting become another way to strengthen the bulwark against dis-memory, enabling what Je-

rome Branche has termed “a *malunga* ethics” that “creates and takes part in structures of memory and alterity in critical tension with the dominant narratives and official histories” (44)? An ethics and practice—of decolonial sorts—that does not (re)order collective memory to fit the structures of literature and writing, but that instead alters what we have known as literature and writing and their relation with oral tradition; a writing and riting that works, as Montaña argues, “to re-live intentional histories and ignite clarities with the force of 100 (and more) tomorrows” (7). Such is the challenge today, *casa adentro* and *casa afuera*, that we face in Ecuador, and possibly elsewhere in the Afro-Latin American diaspora.

## Notes

1. The designation as “peoples” is significant in that it recognizes the historical-ancestral collective status of African descendants, a status initially afforded to indigenous peoples in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (1989).
2. The translations from Spanish to English of García and Zenon are by Walsh.
3. See for example Catherine Walsh and Juan García, “El pensar del emergente movimiento afroecuatoriano. Reflexiones (des)de un proceso” and Juan García and Catherine Walsh, “Derechos, territorialidad ancestral y el pueblo afroesmeraldeño.”
4. This region forms part of what the communities refer to as the *Gran Comarca*, the ancestral Afro-Pacific territory-region that begins in the south of Panama and continues to the province of Esmeraldas in Ecuador, a territory-region that shares history, kinship, and familial relations. *The borders were born to fragment the totality of the community of African origin of this territory-region. But while the borderline has become a state mandate that the community must respect, in practice it is only a “raya” (line) that the people—literally and figuratively—cross over daily.*
5. I use *re-existence* here in the sense that Adolfo Albán has defined it, as the “mechanisms that human groups implement as a strategy of visibilizing and questioning the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization, procuring the redefining and resignifying of life in conditions of dignity and self-determination, while at the same time confronting the biopolitic that controls, dominates and mercantilizes subjects and nature” (85–86).
6. This reference is to the Fondo Documental Afro-Andino, the Afro-Andean Archive or Document Fund, a collaboration between *Procesos de Comunidades Negras* and the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, established in 2002 when García entrusted to the University an archive of over three-thousand hours of oral testimonies and narratives and more than ten-thousand photographs, collected by himself and other Afro-Ecuadorian intellectual-activists beginning in the 1970s. Since 2002, García and Walsh have worked together and collaboratively with a team that has included Edizon León, Sonia Viveros, Adolfo Albán, Freddy Cevallos, Enrique Abad, Diana Ávila, Lucy Santacruz, and others in preparing these materials for public use, disseminating the materials in communities through workshops, publications, and multimedia projects, and adding to the collection.
7. Concrete examples of this writing of oral tradition can be found in the texts published by the Fondo Documental Afro-Andino, including *Papá Roncón: Historia de vida* (Juan García Salazar, comp., second edition, 2011), *Cuentos de animales en la tradición oral del Valle del Chota* (Juan García Salazar, comp., 2003).
8. *This idea of sowing is something that always attracted my attention. Once I asked, “Is it true that*

*black folk brought seeds in their head from Africa to here?" And they answered me: "Yes, yes, in the head, but inside not outside because maybe their hair was cut off due to the lice, inside in the cranium, these were the seeds that were planted, and many of these seeds were sown first in the heads and later on the earth." In a workshop, someone said that maybe Zenon is a modern sower, but what we do know is that he was witness to the first sowings and knows what was sown.*

9. The reference here is to Michael Handelsman's text "Nelson Estupiñán Bass en contexto," in which he establishes what García refers to as a respectful dialogue and thinking with Zenon as collective memory.
10. See Catherine Walsh, "Afro and Indigenous Life-Visions in/and Politics: (De)colonial Perspectives in Bolivia and Ecuador" and Catherine Walsh, *Interculturalidad, Estado, Sociedad: Luchas (de)coloniales de nuestra época*.
11. See ALAI, "Entrevista a Oscar Chalá. Ecuador: Camino a la autodefinición" and Jean Muteba Rahier, "Interview with María Alexandra Ocles Padilla," respectively.
12. These words were also published in Catherine Walsh, "Afro In/Exclusion, Resistance, and the 'Progressive' State: (De)Colonial Struggles, Questions, and Reflections" 29.
13. *Ibid.*
14. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.
15. *Ibid.*, 30.
16. Recalled here is the slave pedagogy poignantly described by Stephan Nathan Haymes in "Pedagogy and the Philosophical Anthropology of African-American Slave Culture." For an elaboration of decolonial pedagogy, see Catherine Walsh, "Introducción, Lo pedagógico y lo decolonial: Entretejiendo caminos" and "Decolonial Pedagogies Walking and Asking. Notes to Paulo Freire from Abya Yala."
17. *Ancestral right, as we the black communities of this territory-region of the Pacific understand it, is above all rightness and reason: reason that has as its witness a history that many of us know and understand. For this reason our elders insist that "reason does not lose force," something that the younger generations redefine in saying, "Right and reason cause of force they are not." Seen from the philosophy of being of the African origins that live in this region, this old refrain shows us the level of trust that our ancestors had in the nature of justice—justice that we the new generations are obliged to re-think, above all, after all the injustice we have lived.*
18. See Roa, "El desborde de la violencia."

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