



Laryssa Machada, et al., “ORIGEM”: Queering Indigeneity through Participatory (Audio)visual Methods in Northeastern Brazil,’ *New Area Studies* 4:1 (2024).

‘ORIGEM’: Queering Indigeneity through Participatory (Audio)visual Methods in Northeastern Brazil

Laryssa Machada, Antônio Vital Neto Pankararu, Bia Pankararu, Fykyá Pankararu, Paulo Pepe and Thea Pitman

Abstract

‘ORIGEM’ (2020) was a queer kind of research project from its inception. Its original funding was for research impact, yet no formal research project came before it. Instead, academics based at the University of Leeds (Paulo Pepe and Thea Pitman) used a modest pot of impact funding to support the work of two emerging artists (Laryssa Machada and Antônio Vital Neto Pankararu) with personal contacts in Queer Indigenous circles in Northeastern Brazil who set out to creatively honour and reflect on their relationships within those communities through digital photographic portraits and short video interviews. The UK-based researchers remained in the UK throughout the process, leaving the artists free to travel between the communities involved (the Pankararu community at Brejo dos Padres in southern Pernambuco, and the Tupinambá community at Olivença de Ilhéus in Southern Bahia) and explore the topic as they saw fit. Since then, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the results were circulated online via a website and promoted on social media, and, with the post-pandemic return to offline encounters, they were also exhibited at the Bolivia International Digital Art Fair in Cochabamba in September 2022. The present article seeks to showcase the project and the work that came out of it, interpreting it as a form of decolonial research using participatory, creative methodologies (arts-based Participatory Action Research), and to explore the perspectives of a cross-section of those involved in the project – the artists, their friends and relatives who agreed to be interviewed and photographed (including most notably Fykyá and Bia Pankararu)



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and the academics too – as they engaged in the original project and its subsequent exhibitions. In so doing, it seeks to reveal the deep learning to be derived from the project without shying away from any tensions that this form of working can engender.

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All those involved in the ‘ORIGEM’ project in any role and who participated in the bringing into being of this article, regardless of whether that included writing sections, responding to questions or reading drafts, are acknowledged, in alphabetical order by last surname, as co-authors of this article. This corresponds to an expanded



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understanding of ‘shared authorship’ outlined in Castelden *et al.* (2010) where the appropriacy of crediting someone as an author rather than simply listing them as a contributor in the acknowledgements is determined based on ‘the quality of the ideas contributed, not the actual writing of those ideas’, and the sharing of authorship is seen as an important means of ‘validating and acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge both within the academy and the community’ (26).

It is also the case that no attempt has been made to speak with a unified voice, so it is fair to acknowledge here that the voice structuring the article is that of the corresponding author (Thea Pitman), and the voices of other authors are identified as such where appropriate. All authors are referred to throughout by their first names, in part to facilitate differentiation between the three Pankararu authors, and in part to break with the normative and alienating naming-practices of academia and thus to better reflect the nature of the relationships between the authors.

In terms of structure, the article starts by narrating the serendipitous inception of the project. It then explores the nature of Participatory Action Research with a specific focus on arts-based PAR and what decolonising PAR might mean, before moving on to analyse the ‘ORIGEM’ project in light of this. In particular, it focuses on the nature of the relationships between the academics and the artists and between the artists and the participants. By way of a coda, it reflects on more recent, but equally serendipitous, developments in relation to the project.

‘Transe’: Serendipity and the Dreaming Up of a (Research) Project

The project started, as so many do, as the result of chance encounters, both in Brazil and at the University of Leeds. I had met Laryssa and Antônio in January 2018 on my first trip to the Pankararu community in Brejo dos Padres, southern Pernambuco, where I had been invited to stay with Dr Maria das Dores de Oliveira’s family by her and her husband, Sebastián Gerlic, director of the NGO Thydêwá. I was, at that point, involved in two other research projects in collaboration with the NGO, the research network ‘Sumak Kawsay and the Sustainable Development Agenda’ that I led with colleagues in Brazil, Colombia and the UK, and the ‘Arte Eletrônica Indígena’ [Indigenous Electronic Art] project that Thydêwá led and I studied. Laryssa and



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Antônio were involved in a separate project led by Thydêwá entitled ‘Memória Viva’ [Living Memory] that proposed to use digital (audio-)visual technologies to encourage and document better inter-generational relationships in Indigenous communities in the North East.

Laryssa was about 25 at the time, a self-taught photographer and filmmaker employed by Thydêwá to facilitate the work of the project. Antônio was a bit younger, a student at the Federal University of São Carlos in São Paulo state, and a participant in the project. He was also a self-taught photographer with a strong interest in documenting his community through quirky black-and-white images of things such as a broken chair, a close-up of heavy waxy leaves, a pile of garbage, or the dust around people’s feet as they danced a toré¹ that he posted on an Instagram account called ‘heytonninho’. I was impressed by the quality of their work and inspired by the contact that I had with them during that trip. I went on to exhibit some of Laryssa’s work with Thydêwá on the ‘Memória Viva’ project as part of the ‘Digital Natives’ exhibition that I curated as part of Leeds International Festival 2018 – indeed, one of the images has been on public display at the University of Leeds ever since. I coincided with both Laryssa and Antônio again when I was doing research at the opening for the Arte Eletrônica Indígena exhibition in Salvador da Bahia in August 2018 (Pitman, 2021) and in early 2019 I went on to facilitate Antônio’s participation in a Radio 4 podcast entitled ‘Art under Bolsonaro’.

In academic year 2019-20, Paulo Pepe was an early career researcher working as a temporary Lecturer in Portuguese at the University of Leeds, with a strong research profile in the field of Gender and Queer Studies, particularly with a focus on Brazil. As a result of a conversation in the corridor where I discovered that he was planning to host an international conference entitled ‘Queering Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies’ in Leeds in June 2020, we hatched a plan to apply for a small amount of funding (c.£2,000) from the University of Leeds Cultural Institute’s IGNITE fund for impact and engagement that would enable Laryssa and Antônio to work creatively together in order to be able to show and discuss their work at that conference, as well as in

¹ A toré is a type of ritual song and dance practiced by the Indigenous peoples of Northeastern Brazil (see Reesink [2000] for more detail).



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the Leeds ¡Vamos! Festival of ‘Latin’ culture. Laryssa and Antônio agreed to our invitation to collaborate. This would, we hoped, allow the four of us to start to develop a shared research agenda in order to take the project forward and find more substantial funding. Nonetheless, it bears saying that my role here was mainly as ‘matchmaker’ and, in terms of academic research, the gender and queer studies agenda was much more Paulo’s area of expertise. Separate applications to other small funds were also planned to enable Paulo to travel to Brazil to meet with Laryssa and Antônio at some point during the project and to fund travel of the two artists to the UK for the conference and festival.

The IGNITE fund application was successful. The project, that I confess to having drafted rather quickly and with only modest editorial input from Paulo and Laryssa, was entitled ‘*Transe*: Representing Ethno-sexual Intersectionalities in North-Eastern Brazil’ and it proposed to use a co-creative research process of dialogue between researchers and artists to address a timely and under-researched topic.² This is what I wrote in the application:

Context: The North-East is where the colonisation of Brazil first began and where the African slave trade was most intense – as such it is also where the dynamics of *mestiçagem*, of racial and cultural hybridity, have been most marked. And yet, while ethnic identities are inherently mixed, the long history of contact between Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples with dominant, European-origin, staunchly Christian, culture, has resulted in the repression of expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality within these communities. LGBTQI identities remain, as a result, largely taboo.

Project: In recent years, however, the younger generations have started to open up on the topic and the myriad different ways of being ‘ethno-sexual’.³ The *Transe* (trance, in English) project, is designed to encourage such self-

² Indeed, recent news coverage in English indicates that the project is still very timely: see Garcia (2022), Amazônia Real (2022), Stone (2022) and Miranda (2020).

³ I was not at all comfortable with the somewhat fetishising overtones of the term ‘ethno-sexual’ that I borrowed from Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s work, hence the scare quotes.



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expression through the medium of photography, opening a door to the exploration of complex, liminal and often provisional identities, and offering the possibility of more allusive approaches to a difficult topic via the motif of the trance, the ability to be other.

Methodology: [The topic will be explored by means of] a programme of artistic creation undertaken by the artists and co-designed in discussion with researchers. The artists will also experiment with Augmented Reality technologies (eg. Artivive, <https://artivive.com/> – free tool for artists) in order to engage with the new dimensions and approaches to the topic offered by such media.

While the project was not awarded funding till 19 December 2019, we managed to move heaven and earth to transfer funds to Brazil and the ‘programme of artistic creation’ took place as planned in late January/early February 2020. I was the main point of liaison with Laryssa and Antônio during this phase. Although Paulo and I had planned to apply for an award to allow him to travel to Brazil to participate in some of the creative process and hence engage in ‘research’, we had never managed to get round to it. We thus planned for Paulo’s role to kick in later on, during the conference, and to use the project as a way of opening up a space for dialogue between the four of us around future avenues of research and cooperation, in a potentially decolonising inversion of traditional academic research process. However, the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably led to the cancellation of both the conference and the festival in Leeds, and the internal award scheme that had been submitted to bring Laryssa and Antônio to Leeds that summer was suspended indefinitely. We were lucky, indeed, to be able to divert the remaining IGNITE funding for the project’s exhibition in Leeds to the development of a website to avoid that being frozen by the University too. During this period, Paulo also left Leeds and from Summer 2020 until Spring 2023 he had no input into the project. While this did not impact on the production of the artworks, nor on plans to disseminate them online or in person once the pandemic was over, it has raised ethical issues of its own in terms of taking the project forward without him since his field of expertise was absolutely integral to its conception. I will return to this in due course.



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Decolonising Arts-Based Participatory Action Research

Before moving on to explore how the project worked in practice, I want to address the question of methodology. As will be evident already, the academics on the project proposed to work in collaboration with the artists, and the artists with their friends and relatives in the relevant communities, in order to address the chosen topic. While this approach does not provide a direct link between participants and academics, it nonetheless can be seen to fall within the parameters of participatory research, or Participatory Action Research (PAR) as it is often referred to. Furthermore, as is often but not always the case with PAR, the means of engagement with participants is arts-based: the project centred on digital portraiture to creatively promote Indigenous LGBTQIA+ visibility, understanding and empathy in their communities and the wider world, alongside video interviews to open a dialogue on the lived experiences and hopes for the future of the participants.

While much has been written in the last two decades on the need to decolonise research and research methodologies, particularly since the publication of Māori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methods: Research and Indigenous Peoples* in 1999, Participatory Action Research occupies a very particular place in any toolkit of decolonising methods. This is at least in part because it is, in itself, a ‘methodology of the South’ or better still ‘a methodology of the Majority World’, and one with a long history to boot, having started in the 1970s in Latin America with Paulo Freire’s ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ and Orlando Fals Borda’s ‘Action Research’ (Lenette, 2022: 22).⁴ Furthermore, the point of PAR is a holistic decolonisation of Western academic practice ‘that actively seeks to transform colonial and Eurocentric research practices based on hegemonic Western epistemologies’ (Seppälä et al., 2021: 6-7). This is most clearly seen in the following four ‘guidelines for field research and scientific reporting within PAR’ given by Fals Borda (1995):

⁴ See also Joanne Rappaport’s *Cowards Don’t Make History: Orlando Fals Borda and the Origins of Participatory Action Research* (2020) for a detailed study of the activist origins of Fals Borda’s work, and Marco Raúl Mejía Jiménez’s edited anthology *Investigar desde el Sur: Epistemologías, metodologías y cartografías emergentes* (2022) for a good overview of this field from a Latin American perspective.



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- Do not monopolize your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. That is, fill in the distance between subject and object;
- Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests, but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them;
- Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organizations; and
- Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals.

In summary, then, ‘PAR is an excellent tool to realize the transgressive potential of research that challenges the inherently western academy because of its roots, values, and practices’ that promote ‘self-determination, inclusivity, transparency, interdependence, and more equitable and democratic knowledge co-production processes’ (Lenette, 2022: 27). Nonetheless, as Caroline Lenette points out, PAR has been much co-opted by Western academia since its inception, such that its decolonial roots and radical agenda have been too often erased in favour of a potentially condescending, colonising agenda of ‘giving voice’ to others who are assumed to have none. A decolonial reboot, she argues, might draw explicitly on feminist, antiracist, intersectional (and, I would add, queer) political agendas, push harder at the boundaries of ‘western academic norms about what are considered “good” or “acceptable” ways of producing knowledge’, and entail a further attempt to shift towards ‘person-focused and collaborative principles and subjective, affective, cultural, and creative ways of knowing’ (2022: 25).⁵

⁵ This shift would, indeed, get us back to the essence of Fals Borda’s understanding of PAR: as Joanne Rappaport summarises, ‘what set [Fals Borda’s particular brand of action research] apart was its



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With respect to Lenette’s identification of ‘subjective, affective, cultural, and creative ways of knowing’ as sitting at the heart of decolonial PAR, Tiina Seppälä, Melanie Sarantou and Satu Miettinen argue that arts-based methods have a special role to play in decolonising participatory research because of their potential for ‘contesting hierarchies in research, increasing multivocality, and developing new and more transparent forms of participatory research’ (2021: 2). They also reiterate the value that Linda Tuhiwai Smith places on creative processes that enable ‘people to rise above their own circumstances, to dream new visions and to hold on to old ones’ (2012: 159), arguing that ‘arts-based and creative methods, if used in the right way, can help create avenues for envisioning alternative futures and working towards social change’ (2021:11). Nonetheless, like Lenette, Seppälä *et al.* are also aware of the pitfalls. Arts-based PAR is not always a solution – done badly, it can also ‘create new kinds of hierarchies, power imbalances and ethical concerns; at worst, it can (re)colonize’ (2021: 12).

So what does ‘good’ decolonising arts-based Participatory Action Research look like? In summary, and drawing on the work of a wide range of scholars, Lenette proposes the following non-exhaustive principles for PAR projects in specifically Indigenous contexts:

1. An ethos of mutuality, power-sharing, and reciprocity
2. Commitment to truth-telling, justice-seeking, and self-determination
3. Centering local, spiritual, and relational knowledge of co-researchers
4. Prioritizing culture and community
5. Developing a common understanding of participation
6. Aligning research aims and outcomes with community priorities and needs
7. An explicit commitment to unpacking and addressing tensions linked to power dynamics through trust, relationship-building, and long-term commitment
8. Community-led consultations with the highest degree of autonomy

profound creativity’ and its combination of ‘the imaginative capacity of researchers’ with the ‘simultaneous stimulation of creative thinking among peasant participants’ (2020: 55).



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9. Disrupting established notions of ‘experts’ and ‘expertise’ and ‘evidence’
10. A commitment to deep listening (or listening with intent), learning, and offering support
11. Engaging in collaborative knowledge translation using culturally safe methods, and
12. Co-researchers keeping scholars and practitioners accountable (2022: 28)

In what follows, I propose to assess the ‘Transe’ project in its transition to becoming the ‘ORIGEM’ project, against some of the above criteria for decolonial PAR. In particular, I will focus on the nature of the relationship between the academics and the artists, as well as on that between the artists and the participants.

‘ORIGEM’ – How to Decolonise a (Participatory Action) Research Project

The Relationship between the academics and the artists

As soon as funding for the ‘Transe’ project was approved, I quickly apologised for having thrown the application together rather quickly and clumsily at my end to meet the funding deadline, and Laryssa and Antônio started to look over the original application with a critical eye, thinking through both the kind of discourse I had used and the pragmatics of what would be involved. They quickly suggested editing out any awkward references to ‘ethno-sexuality’, changing the expression ‘the myriad different ways of being “ethno-sexual”’ to ‘the myriad different sexualities, from different worldviews’. They also suggested dropping the AR dimension that I had been playing around with when coming up with the original title, designed to attract the attention of the Leeds-based assessors, in favour of layering the original digital photographs with Indigenous graphics, as well as changing the title to ‘ORIGEM’ [origin], with no clunky subtitles. (See figs 1 & 2 for the first sample images that Laryssa and Antônio sent to Paulo and me so we could see what they had in mind).



Figs 1 & 2. First sample images, Brendo Tupinambá, 13 Jan 2020.

All these suggested changes were accepted with no push-back at all from the Leeds end – we understood, absolutely, that for the project to work, Laryssa and Antônio needed to make it their own, and that this process is inherent in a reinvigorated decolonising approach to PAR. Laryssa and Antônio’s rationale for their way of approaching the topic is most eloquently expressed in the text that they ended up writing for the project website, spliced as it is by the voices of the friends they worked with. It is reproduced verbatim here, in the spirit of Fals Borda’s fourth guideline for PAR about avoiding ‘ponderous scientific style’ in favour of a form of writing that is ‘wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant’⁶:

“I kept thinking the way that those who came to torture my people think. that isn’t the way my people think. it felt like every day someone came

⁶ Nb. all original punctuation, capitalisation and layout has been respected. All translations from Portuguese are those of the corresponding author, checked by Laryssa for accuracy. The original Portuguese is available on the website: <https://origem.hotglue.me/>.



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and cut my wings, until the day came when I said:

I will live.

I really love the way the swallows fly free.”

léo pankararu

ORIGEM is a visual art project that portrays LGBTQIA + indigenous people > long before coloniality named them with these terms. the first case of homophobic violence in brazil – of which we have records – happened to a tupinambá man, called tibirá (which is also the tupi word for sexual ““dissidents””), in 1614, ordered by the catholic church.⁷

we are now in 2020 and it’s still necessary to push for the freedom to be what you are.

and to demand respect.

on the rocks at the top of the mountain, bia pankararu, her son otto and her girlfriend viviane, are tensed arrows of freedom in the bodies of warrior-women-who-love-other-women. under the ancient mango tree, beside the gurgling stream, we learn about the man-swallow and his flight to be able to love another man. with their feet firmly planted on the earth, they scrape clear mirror-spaces where living and ancestral bodies can live together, strong and united.

these images offer our eyes much more than simple representations. they are the sparks of the beginning of a profound change in the History of the hydroelectric dam that is colonisation. the colonisers tried to extinguish our language and our love, but in moonlit encounters these sparks ignite the movement to regenerate our existence and satisfy our desire to be ourselves.

it’s about creating a communal space so that other sisters can feel comfortable coming out: “I just want respect, I don't want anything more from people. people should judge us by how we behave, not by our sexual orientation, that’s what infuriates me.”

⁷ See Mott (1997: 135) for more detail.



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drawing on the photographs is a kind of ritual cure: “I wrap my body around the trunk of the cashew tree, because its bark is used to make a healing balm for those who have very deep wounds, right down to the bone”.

“the whites said this was wrong.
that we would go to hell. wow, I
was really scared of going to
hell.”

///

at the beginning of the 90s, the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its list of diseases, thus framing the stigma differently; but that did not immediately mean that society stopped seeing it as problem, where forms of gender and sexuality considered “dissident” [we use scare quotes here – after all, in the context of a colonised country, where native customs were systematically silenced and exterminated, what is “normal”?] are seen as unacceptable, abhorrent or immoral.

homosexuality and transsexuality, Western terms, have been transformed, over more than 500 years, into monstrosity, madness, disease – and this implies a whole range of forms of physical and psychological violence. these are conceptions that have unfortunately taken hold in all sorts of different places, from the big cities to the indigenous villages.

“there are many people who
don't understand, who don't want to open their minds to this.
but after we started
showing who we are,
we opened doors.”

in the period of the great navigations, colonisation by means of forced conversion to christianity deprived indigenous peoples of many things they had in common: mutual love, their mother tongues and the concept of equality between people –



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things that are still being repressed today. even now this exerts a negative influence on relationships, as many LGBTQIA+ people are forced to marry members of the opposite sex, or spend their lives in denial and frustration, just so they can fit into patterns that the above-mentioned social environment imposes.

in relation to questions of gender and sexuality, many indigenous people discover their real identities at a very young age, but, with no public acknowledgement of their existence, they struggle to really come to terms with their own identities. how many transsexuals/transvestites, lesbians, gays and bisexual people want to raise their own families within the space of their communities? how many want to build a home and live there, offering daily thanks to the spiritual forces for being indigenous?

the support that many receive from their immediate families is clear, and this is really significant at a time of such vulnerability;

each indigenous LGBTQIA+ person interviewed reported different experiences, but the need for dialogue and care for one’s mental health were recurring points. the constant questioning (their own and that of others) and the fear of being in the wrong are decisive in their search for self-knowledge in relation to these issues. “I didn’t bow my head. I went to seek knowledge. What will change your life is education”, concluded Edmar.

all of these issues are profoundly connected to their land, their culture, their connection with nature for their freedom to live a good life.

it’s about emerging from a state of invisibility both in terms of being indigenous and of being LGBTQIA+.

This statement really evidences the degree to which Laryssa and Antônio felt confident to make the project their own and indeed, it also demonstrates the fact that they were the real researchers in this equation, not Paulo and me. These are their research findings, found through creative practices and (auto)ethnographic, self-reflexive discussions in collaboration with their friends, and expressed in a plurivocal and poetic form that they chose for themselves, and that evidence genuine care for and commitment to their ‘subject(s)’. It is thus arguably the case that what might be perceived as weaknesses from an academic perspective – the lack of ‘academic research’, the lack of presence in the field and control over the project – was



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something that actually strengthened a sense of ownership and agency from Laryssa and Antônio’s perspective and made the project and its results so much more compelling.

When I asked Laryssa and Antônio most recently for their reflections on how the project had gone, it was striking that they didn’t even remember the ‘original’ academic project and very much spoke of it as ‘their’ project.⁸ As Laryssa said, ‘I honestly don’t remember exactly what the question was, but we wanted to tell real stories based on intimacy and belonging, and that also touched on questions of spirituality and gender/sexuality, but the main point was to connect with the lives of people living in freedom: living freely in their territories, loving whom they choose and being who they are.’ And in Antônio’s words, ‘Since we conceived this project, we have sought to depict beauty and resistance. To trace trajectories, where we portray each one of the people involved with colour and care. [...] I learnt that being LGBTQIA+ in Brazil is really tough in many different ways, especially in the face of an authoritarian government such as our previous administration. But this hasn’t extinguished us in all our diversity. We came up with the name ORIGEM because we were thinking about the story of the Indigenous man, Tibira, who was the first victim of homophobia in Brazil. And the fact that the name is all in capital letters is a way of remembering him as someone who was a giant.’

Both also felt that the power dynamics of the project had been reasonably equitable: ‘I think the relationship was pretty smooth. I never got to know or have contact with Paulo. With you, I think we managed to talk well’, Laryssa told me; and in Antônio’s opinion, ‘It was a really well-balanced job. We had a lot of autonomy. There was no tension on either side’. Despite my exhortations to be critical in this regard, they both perhaps did not feel that they could be if they also hoped that current plans to get more funding to exhibit the project in the UK would come to fruition. Nonetheless, despite the frustrations of the long period during the pandemic when nothing much

⁸ There isn’t even a sense here that they were deliberately reappropriating the project and erasing its academic origins to make it their own. The way they spoke about it, the funding that we academics provided simply came along at the right time to allow them to do something that they might perhaps have done anyway.



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was happening, and despite the fact that wrestling with the financial side of any project where funds are minimal and also have to be transferred from a UK academic institution to overseas collaborators always causes tensions, the fact that we are still in touch and making plans to take the project forward speaks well of the way we handled our different positionalities.

The Relationship between the Artists and the Participants

The first thing to say about the relationship between artists and participants is that there is no clear dividing line between these two categories – Antônio, most notably, was both one of the artists and the subject of one of the portraits. Furthermore, in terms of the way the project was conducted in the field, the absence of UK-based academics was undoubtedly helpful in terms of removing the presence of an awkward ‘foreign gaze’ during the photography sessions and allowing for the project to proceed as a process of self and community care among friends rather than as one of extractivist inquiry. As Laryssa commented, ‘I really think that the project worked very well. [...] I think the images were taken with care and attention, and that resulted in respectful and intimate portraits’, and Antônio backed this up saying, ‘It worked very well because everyone collaborated very well in the sessions.’ The fun that was had taking the photographs is clear to see in the ‘spare’ images of Antônio (Figs. 3-6) even if most of the final portraits selected opted for a greater degree of sobriety (Figs. 7-12).⁹

⁹ As Laryssa noted, the photography sessions were very informal and highly collaborative. They were more about spending time together rather than a photographer directing people to pose for the camera, and she felt that the results evidenced their collectively identifying a ‘place of strength, of plenitude in your existence, and a certain seriousness when thinking about that place; they are images of respect for our history, and of dignity too; of finding a place from which to build future memories’.



Figs 3-6. A selection of the images that Laryssa took of Antônio.



Figs 7 & 8. The final selected image that Laryssa took of Antônio, and that image with the layer of graphics provided by Antônio.



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For the purposes of writing this article, Laryssa sought feedback from two of the participants – activist and cultural producer Bia Pankararu and performance artist Fykyá Pankararu – about their experience of the project.¹⁰ While they were aware that the funds came from a UK university, all their contact on the project was with Laryssa and Antônio, and they participated because of their trust in those relationships and their desire for greater visibility for the Indigenous LGBTQIA+ community. As Bia commented, ‘I was invited by Antônio, one of the organisers, to collaborate in the production of materials, and yes, when I was invited to participate and during participation, it was made clear to me that it was funded by a university in the United Kingdom. I think it’s important to strengthen and build on any movement that raises debate around LGBT issues and helps fly the LGBT flag, especially when it involves our [Indigenous] relatives. I found the whole proposal very interesting and just felt really honoured to collaborate with all these people and their stories of power. For me there were only advantages to my participation.’

Fykyá responded in some considerable detail, as follows: ‘I found out about the ORIGEM project through Laryssa Machada and Antônio Vital Pankararu; I heard that they were documenting LGBT+ Indigenous people in the Pankararu Indigenous territory in the Sertão of Pernambuco in order to make a photographic record and create a mini documentary about each LGBT+ Indigenous person who was interested in giving an interview [...] I decided to participate in this project because I’m an LGBT+ Indigenous person, belonging to the Pankararu ethnicity, and I’ve noticed in the media the absence of stories told from the perspective of people like us and our lived reality, with our relationship to the environment and to contemporary society.’

For Fykyá, the benefits of participating were:

¹⁰ Indigenous preferences for the way their names should be written vary considerably from person to person and over time. Bia Pankararu was identified as Beatriz and Fykyá Pankararu as Leonardo in the context of the project.



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- To make a document that will be available indefinitely and from different locations and that will allow future generations to connect and understand their history of struggle and resistance.
- To connect with other people who experience the same reality as me, joining forces against the erasure of our histories and existences.
- To deconstruct misconceptions about what it means nowadays to be an LGBT+ Indigenous person, both in relation to our communities and to wider society.
- To share the story of Tibira, the first LGBT+ Indigenous person, a Tupinambá man who in 1614 became the first martyr of this struggle and resistance within his territory in Maranhão state.
- To be able to exhibit this work about the history, struggle and resistance of the people who were interviewed for the ORIGEM project in other locations, allowing other people to discover and connect with the history and experience of these people [...].’

Bia and Fykyá were both very positive about the way relationships on the project were handled. Fykyá commented, ‘I feel that the way the project was created and transformed over time took me into consideration in terms of the way I would be represented as an LGBT+ Indigenous person and contemporary artist.’ And Bia responded, ‘Yes, I felt really listened to, respected and welcomed throughout the process. I would have liked the project to have had more time and resources for its execution and especially for the works to be shown in the Indigenous villages involved.’ Both have also been very happy for the results of the project to be circulated and exhibited internationally by the project team, and have also used them for their own purposes: Bia said, ‘I loved all the photos and materials made and even today I use some of them as promotional photos on my profiles, my work, my portfolio, and on social networks.’ And in Fykyá’s opinion, ‘The final result was very good: all the materials were used for different purposes, from prints, circulation on social networks, and in physical spaces during exhibitions, and at all times they had very positive effects, so yes, I liked it!’



Figs. 9 & 10. Edmar and Leonardo Pankararu.



Figs. 11 & 12. Beatriz Pankararu.

Nonetheless, not all participants have had such a positive relationship to the project, with one subsequently asking for her portrait not to be exhibited in relation to it, more because of concerns about the dangers of visibility rather than any particularly difficult interpersonal relationship with the project team. This request was of course immediately acted on, as Antônio noted: ‘Everyone gave their consent when their photos were taken, but it’s worth noting that when one of the participants no longer wants to have their image included, we immediately remove it to avoid causing them any problems and so that we can also continue with the project.’ Laryssa also reflected in some detail on this point: ‘I think that permission is something very important, particularly in relation to the History of Photography where so much of its process was colonialist and invasive in nature (people were pictured without names, without



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even knowing that their photographs were being circulated). But I think that, in this case, the point is to always respect the wishes of the person being photographed and, in the future, we will get written consent too.’

In these comments on the way they dealt with issues of consent, Antônio and Laryssa are quite clear about their own ethical principles with respect to the project participants. They also reveal the fact that consent was obtained orally as a condition of participation but that this was an informal process. When Laryssa and I discussed whether more formal ‘written’ protocols might be appropriate in future work, she was quite clear that no amount of ethical review conducted by academic institutions nor tick-box forms given to participants to fill in to give consent would have actually changed their core ethical values and practice in relation to the project participants, even if they might agree to document consent more formally next time round. Again, this speaks highly of their instinctively decolonising approach to PAR, where they evidenced ‘a commitment to deep listening [...], learning, and offering support’ and a determination for all involved in the project to remain ‘accountable’, in Lenette’s terms. From an academic perspective, I found this sure-footed approach to ethical issues from Laryssa and Antônio both helpful and instructive.

Conclusion

So, did we manage to successfully decolonise arts-based PAR with the ‘ORIGEM’ project? I think the materials generated by the project present such powerful, self-possessed portraits that they really speak for themselves and return a resounding ‘yes’ in response to that question. I would also hope that the evidence presented here of the nature of the relationships between different role-holders on the project, the flexibility with respect to the development of the project and the way it is presented to the world on the website, as well as ongoing care and accountability with respect to all involved, leave the reader convinced that the project was successful in these terms. Our collaboration does not, of course, miraculously erase all hierarchies, power imbalances or ethical concerns, but we have at least reflected on these issues, addressed them as best we can, and worked together on a project of which we are all very proud.



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Coda: From ‘Retratos Invisibles’ to ‘Liquid Gender’

Barely had Laryssa and Antônio returned to their homes after their trip to Olivença de Ilheús, to work with friends in the Tupinambá community there, than the COVID-19 pandemic took hold and the world ground to a halt. Instead of exhibiting the results of the project in Leeds in Summer 2020, the remaining funds were sent to Laryssa and Antônio to design a website to host a selection of the images and videos, plus the curatorial text reproduced earlier,¹¹ and the individual results were shared with the participants to use as they saw fit. Some, like Bia, have used them on social media, and the project was also promoted by certain key social media channels (Mídia Indígena on Instagram, for example).

Laryssa and I stayed in touch as events to exhibit the work were first postponed for a year, then completely cancelled. Eventually I managed to organise for the website to function as a virtual exhibition for the Society for Latin American Studies’ online-only annual conference in 2021, and then in Autumn 2022, I was given the opportunity to exhibit some of the work, alongside another portraiture project that the NGO Thydêwá had worked on documenting the lives and aspirations of Indigenous women, at the Bolivia International Digital Art (BIDA) Fair at the mARTadero cultural centre in Cochabamba. Because this was a digital art fair we were encouraged by the artist who was guest curating the exhibition, pioneering Bolivian-American digital artist Lucia Grossberger Morales, to enhance the interactive dimension of our materials – digital photographs with layers of graphics were not enough to count as distinctively ‘digital’! Generously, she suggested helping out to create an Augmented Reality complement to the project which would allow members of the public to scan the image on the wall with their phones, using an app called Artivive – the same app I had in mind when dreaming up the original ‘Transe’ project – and they would then

¹¹ The ‘ORIGEM’ website (<https://origem.hotglue.me/>) is designed in a way that both queers and decolonises normative approaches to web design: it eschews making the page fit neatly the width of any browser, thus forcing the reader to scroll to the right rather than only scroll down to find more material; it also leaves the English version of the curatorial text to be the last thing a reader would find (it’s located in the bottom right-hand corner of the page). Furthermore, it resists the temptation to provide the images in neat pairs, simply opting to provide a selection of the best images, whether the original photograph or the version with Indigenous graphics overlaid.

see it slowly fade from the image on the wall to the other version of the image, either with or without the graphics provided by Antônio depending on which version was on the wall in front of them. This would, we hoped, perhaps encourage the viewer to think in terms of the questions of visibility as they pertain to Indigenous LGBTQIA+ people, and we thus chose to call the exhibition ‘Retratos Invisibles’ [Invisible Portraits].¹² With a bit more funding, I was also able to take Laryssa and Fykyá along for the exhibition opening, together with the director of the NGO Thydêwá, Sebastián Gerlic.



Fig. 13. Laryssa presenting images from the ‘ORIGEM’ project as part of the ‘Retratos Invisibles’ exhibition on the opening night of the Bolivia International Digital Art Fair, mARTadero, Cochabamba, 21 September 2022.

¹² The website for the exhibition is available at <https://aei.art.br/bolivia/>.



Fig. 14. Visitors to the ‘Retratos Invisibles’ exhibition using the Artivive app on their phones to access the AR content.

Through another twist of fate, the proposal for a special issue of *New Area Studies* dedicated to ‘Indigeneity, Community and Participatory Practice: Methods, Concepts and Perspectives from the Global South’ dropped into my email inbox in March 2023. It looked like the perfect opportunity to write something more substantial about the ‘ORIGEM’ project and I put in a proposal. This very quickly revealed that Paulo was now working at the University of East Anglia where two of the guest editors of the special issue are located, and so we got back in touch. Furthermore, Paulo kindly put me in touch with the chief curator at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art at UEA, Tania Moore, whom he knew was planning an exhibition for 2024 dedicated to taking a decolonial approach to the representation of Indigenous and Afro-descendent gender and sexuality. The result is the very happy inclusion of ‘ORIGEM’ in the ‘Liquid Gender’ exhibition (17 February-4 August 2024), together with a revamp of Lucia’s AR complement to the images. It has also provoked a raft of funding applications to support the exhibition and discussion about others that would support the project



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going forward, because, as Laryssa, most recently noted in her response to my questions, ‘we want to keep on developing the project’.



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Author Biographies

Laryssa Machada is a self-taught visual artist, photographer and filmmaker whose work explores decolonising rituals and new ways of envisioning the future, with a particular focus on LGBTQIA+ and Indigenous people, and people of colour, as well as our relationship with nature. Her solo work has been exhibited at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art and her work with Thydêwá has been exhibited at various locations in Brazil and the UK. She identifies as *parda* (Afro-Indigenous) and bisexual. She is from the South of Brazil, and has lived in the Northeast for the last 6 years.

Antônio Vital Neto Pankararu studied education at the Federal University of São Carlos, São Paulo state, and is a self-taught photographer, artist, writer, rapper and YouTuber from the Pankararu Indigenous Territory of Brejo dos Padres in the Pernambucan Sertão. In 2018 he was involved in the *Memória Viva* [Living Memory] and *Arte Eletrônica Indígena* [Indigenous Electronic Art] projects, both run by the NGO Thydêwá, and was also interviewed in 2019 by BBC Sounds for a programme entitled ‘Brazilian Art under Bolsonaro’. He can currently be found on Instagram @oribamusic and his drawings are on Tumblr @xilobisco.

Bia Pankararu is 30 years old, and is from Tacaratu, in the Pernambucan Sertão. She is a member of the Pankararu Indigenous people and lives in Aldeia Agreste where she plays an active role in local community leadership. She has been a cultural producer since adolescence, coordinating social projects focusing on the music and memory of her people. She originally trained as a nurse and worked for seven years in the Pankararu Indigenous health team. Nowadays, she works on cultural and audiovisual projects. Most notably, she is the scriptwriter, producer and main protagonist of the film *Rama Pankararu* (2022).

Fykyá Pankararu is a 24-year-old LGBTQIA+ Indigenous person who belongs to the Pankararu people of the Pernambucan Sertão. They are a singer, composer, performer, cultural producer and ceramist, as well as an activist for Indigenous, LGBT+ and environmental causes. Fykyá lives in the Pankararu Indigenous Territory at Brejo dos Padres, and seeks to express through art the experience of the Pankararu people both



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inside and outside of their territory, and to create debates around, and decolonial strategies for, the co-existence of human beings in relation to nature. Their most recent performance work has been a single-person show at the 2023 Contemporary Indigenous Music Festival in São Paulo. The word ‘fikyá’ means chameleon in the Pankararu language.

Paulo Pepe is a Lecturer in Humanities at the University of East Anglia and his research interests bridge the shared concerns and histories of the Global South, with a particular focus on questions of identity, including gender, sex, sexuality, race and ethnicity, in order to examine how different platforms (social, cultural and technological) can be used to expand and challenge normative understandings of identity. His research is interdisciplinary by nature, bridging cultural studies, media, performance, visual arts, history of sexuality, queer theory, gender studies, post-structuralism and critical theory. He is a white, foreign, queer man from a working-class background working within an arguably high-status university in the Global North.

Thea Pitman is Professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Leeds with research specialisms in digital culture studies, Indigenous and decolonial studies. She is a middle-aged, white, English, cis-het woman from a middle-class background working within an arguably prestigious university in the Global North. She recognises the considerable power differentials between herself and others involved in the project and wrote the original project not in order to further her own research career or even specific research interests but in order to create opportunities for others whose lives and careers she wanted to support. She has enjoyed working on the project tremendously.



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