



Fellowships as Commons: Governance, Refusal, and Community Archives in Brazil

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Fellowships as Commons: Governance, Refusal, and Community Archives in Brazil

Abstract: This article develops fellowship-as-commons as a transdisciplinary research methodology grounded in Afro-Brazilian community archives and Black Atlantic knowledge networks. Drawing on long-term engagement with the Zumví Photographic Archive in Salvador, Bahia, terreiro-based memory practices and the transnational trajectories of community research fellows, it argues that the central challenge in participatory research is not participation itself but the terms and structures through which knowledge circulation is held and redistributed. Latin American scholarship on transdisciplinarity emphasizes dialogue and co-production, while fellowships, grants, mobility and publication structures often remain individually controlled, reproducing extractive relations. Fellowship-as-commons reframes these resources as shared research infrastructure, in which decisions about mobility, authorship, visibility and knowledge sharing are negotiated through community-centered protocols rather than academic default. Situated within traditions of Investigación-Acción Participativa, decolonial epistemic struggle and Lélia Gonzalez's concept of Amefricanidade, the article shows how community archives function as commons through constraint, refusal and ethical boundary-making, particularly in religious contexts where visual ancestralities are governed rather than freely accessible. It argues that sustainability in transdisciplinary research depends on the material redistribution of academic resources and on shared terms for deciding whose knowledge circulates, not on intention alone.

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Introduction

Alex Alberto dos Santos stood at the front of a seminar room at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina, presenting research from his community in Salvador, Bahia. The audience of faculty, undergraduates, graduate students, and institutional affiliates was more accustomed to hearing about Afro-Brazilian communities than from them. Alex was not asked to translate his experience into any academic idioms to be taken more seriously; he spoke in his own register about the archival work he had carried out with elders, artists, and religious groups in his neighborhood. This academic visibility stands in stark contrast to the physical precarity Alex navigates in Salvador. In Brazil, Blackness remains under constant threat of suffocation in both physical and social spaces. For Alex and others, engaging the archive is not an abstract academic exercise. It is an urgent strategy for survival against the systemic erasure and environmental racism that disproportionately impact Black and LGBTQIA+ residents in Bahia's social peripheries. By 2026 this movement from local archival work into scholarly circulation had grown beyond a single presentation. In July 2026, Alex and other Brazilian community researchers will present papers on their archival knowledge at the eighteenth Congress of the Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA) in Salvador, the city where most of the events described here took place.

These events follow from an experimental rethinking of resources, authority, and decision-making within a transdisciplinary research process and a transnational community of praxis. A set of moderate graduate fellowships and Fulbright award, originally intended to support individual academic training, were repurposed to finance collective research labor, international mobility for Brazilian collaborators, and community-controlled publication. Rather than simply extracting knowledge from Afro-Brazilian communities and submitting it to the university as sole authorial output, these resources created conditions in which community researchers could circulate their own work transnationally, on their own terms.

These practices can be understood as fellowship-as-commons: a transdisciplinary research tool that treats funding, authorship, mobility, translation, and publication as shared resources rather than privately held academic capital. Unlike participatory or collaborative models that focus on inclusion within existing academic structures, fellowship-as-commons shifts attention to the rules and decisions that make participation consequential, namely who travels, who presents, who edits, who is translated, and whose work becomes legible in institutional settings. The article develops this through community archiving work in Bahia, including an early intervention with the Zumví Photographic Archive and later programs such as the Lélia Gonzalez Fellowship and the Black Feminists Taught Me campaign.

Across Latin America, transdisciplinary research has increasingly emphasized participation, dialogue, and the co-production of knowledge as correctives to extractive academic practice (Merçon, 2021; Merçon et al., 2018). Yet comparative studies show that high levels of participation do not necessarily translate into equitable outcomes or community control over how knowledge circulates (Hahn et al., 2023). What remains underdeveloped is the material question of who has access to the funding, travel, translation, publication, and institutional access through which participation becomes consequential.

My doctoral research on community visual archives in Afro-Brazilian working-class communities showed that extraction can persist even where researchers hold serious ethical commitments (Miles, 2025). Archives intensify the problem. Community memory may be documented through ethnography, photography, and oral history while the means to manage those memories are absorbed into institutions beyond community access or control. Fellowship-as-commons addresses this as an issue of terms, rules, and access rather than of goodwill alone.

In response, the Atlantic Archives initiative emerged as a practice-based intervention that treats archival labor itself as a commons rather than as raw material for academic output. Through training programs, fellowships, and community-run publications, the initiative supports marginalized Afro-Brazilian, diasporic, and Global South researchers in producing, editing, and circulating knowledge without requiring institutional affiliation or academic credentialing. This work is grounded in long-term relationships with community archivists, photographers, religious leaders, and organizers, and informed by decolonial Latin American traditions that understand knowledge as collective, situated, and born of struggle. Atlantic Archives is the practical case through which this article examines fellowship-as-commons, and the section that follows situates that case within commons scholarship.

The Commons Beyond Land: Knowledge, Mobility, and the Pathways of Research

Commons scholarship grew from the study of natural resources: pastures, fisheries, forests, and irrigation systems, together with the institutions that communities build to govern them (Ostrom, 1990). That work established that shared resources need not collapse into ruin, provided the people who use them hold the authority to set and enforce their own rules. Latin American political ecology extended the analysis to land, water, and territory, situating the commons within histories of colonial dispossession and ongoing struggles for autonomy (Gudynas, 2011; Escobar, 2018). Far less attention has gone to the commons that are not material at all, namely the resources through which knowledge is produced, credited,

and made to circulate. This article works in that less-developed register, drawing together three strands of commons thinking that are rarely read side by side.

Recent work frames decolonial transdisciplinarity as a question of who controls decisions about resources, topics, and the uses of knowledge (Zonta et al., 2023), and sets out principles for sharing authority across the research relationship (Reed et al., 2023). Fellowship-as-commons extends that conversation from the design of participation to the material structure that makes participation consequential.

Hess and Ostrom (2007) describe knowledge as a shared resource vulnerable to enclosure through intellectual property, overpricing, and the privatization of scholarship, and they show that research libraries, open-access publishing, and scholarly communities are the sites where that commons is either defended or lost. Their framework moves the commons from the field to the archive and the journal, which is where this study also begins. Its limit, for present purposes, is that it concentrates on access. It asks how existing knowledge can be kept open, rather than how the resources that decide whose knowledge enters the record in the first place, among them funding, mobility, and authorship, are themselves held and distributed.

Nikolaeva et al. (2019) propose the idea of commoning mobility, arguing that the capacity to move is not a neutral technical good but a political resource shaped by scarcity and the question of who decides. For transnational research the point is concrete rather than figurative. The ability to obtain a visa, board an international flight, register for academic conferences, and present one's work abroad is exactly the resource that academic fellowships distribute, and they distribute it almost always to the more credentialed researcher rather than to the lesser connected community members whose knowledge is under study. Reading fellowships through the mobility commons brings into view a resource that participatory research seldom recognizes as one.

Finally, how can commons be understood as more than a category of goods. De Angelis (2017) understands commons as social systems, fields of relation through which communities reproduce themselves and which capital repeatedly attempts to capture. He observes that this capture often proceeds through vocabulary, with terms such as *participation* and *governance* absorbing the practice of commoning into managerial routine. That observation shapes the argument advanced here. Fellowship-as-commons is concerned less with governance as a procedural ideal than with the material question De Angelis keeps in focus: who holds the resources that reproduce a research relationship, and on what terms those resources are redistributed.

Two claims follow from reading research infrastructure in this way, and the literature supports both. The first is that participation does not by itself prevent uneven extraction. Comparative work on transdisciplinary research in Latin America finds that high levels of participation regularly coexist with gaps between intended and

perceived benefit, particularly where institutional agendas set the terms of engagement (Hahn et al., 2023). Participatory traditions have made a version of this argument for decades, holding that inclusion without a shift in power leaves extractive relations intact (Fals-Borda, 1987), and decolonial critique adds that not all knowledge is meant to be rendered legible to dominant institutions (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). The second claim is that the pathways of academic research operate as enclosures. Funding, mobility, authorship, and publication are held individually, by the scholar and the institution, even inside projects designed to be collaborative. Naming these resources as a commons, rather than as private academic capital, is the conceptual move this article makes.

The intervention is anchored in a specifically Black Atlantic intellectual tradition. Lélia Gonzalez's concept of *Amefricanidade* holds that Black knowledge in the Americas is transnational, vernacular, and resistant to disciplinary enclosure (Gonzalez, 1988). Gonzalez's concept constitutes a hemispheric framework that recognizes the interconnected political and cultural struggles of the African diaspora across the Americas. It systematically decenters Eurocentric epistemologies by validating the transnational, vernacular, and embodied knowledge systems forged through historical resistance and cultural marronage. Set beside the commons literature, *Amefricanidade* expands beyond epistemology. If Black Atlantic knowledge already moves across borders and across linguistic registers, then the funding, translation, and publication systems that determine whether that knowledge is credited must be able to move with it. Fellowship-as-commons is a name for treating those systems as shared resources, redistributed through negotiated terms rather than retained as individual property, and judged by whether community researchers keep authority over how their knowledge circulates.

In practice, fellowship-as-commons operated through three linked moves, each beginning from resources the author held individually. First, the author's own fellowship and graduate stipend — resources allocated for individual academic training — were redirected to cover stipends, mobility, equipment, and visa processing for community researchers so that they could carry out archival work and present internationally. Second, editorial and publishing capacity was built outside the university press, allowing community authors to shape the framing, translation, and dissemination of their own work. Third, long-standing institutional relationships were used to open classrooms, public programs, and conferences to community researchers while leaving control over content and authorship with them.

These moves carried risks that later sections examine in detail, among them personal financial exposure and the friction between academic and community timelines. Their cumulative effect is to relocate participation from the design of research to the terms on which its material and symbolic resources are held. Treating fellowships as

commons rather than as credentials is what allows sustainability to be pursued through redistribution rather than through inclusion alone.

Research Design and Methodology

This article draws on a practice-based research process I directed between 2018 and 2026, linking Atlantic Archives (a practitioner-led initiative supporting Afro-Brazilian, diasporic, and Global South community researchers, which I founded before entering the academy) with the Zumví Photographic Archive in Salvador, Bahia, terreiro-based memory practices, and allied community archive projects across the Black Atlantic. I came to this work first as a practitioner and only later as a scholar. Before entering the academy, I worked in and around philanthropy and community organizing, and fellowship-as-commons began there, as a set of practical decisions about how grant money, mobility, and authorship might be handled differently. It became a method in retrospect, through documentation and reflection, rather than a hypothesis carried into the field. I therefore treat the initiative itself as the object of analysis and read its programmatic details as primary sources, in keeping with a participatory-research tradition that locates knowledge in organized practice rather than apart from it (Fals-Borda, 1987).

Participants. Throughout this article, participants refer to two linked but distinct groups. The first comprises community researchers and archivists: fellows, photographers, cultural workers, religious leaders, and community organizers, based primarily in Salvador. The second comprises university-affiliated researchers, including the author, who held formal access to grants, fellowships, and institutional platforms. The distinction is analytically central, because fellowship-as-commons operates on the boundary between the two groups. It concerns what happens when resources that institutions assign to the second group are redirected to support the first. Where a claim turns on the difference between them, for instance the observation that some participants engaged the work opportunistically, the relevant group is specified rather than left to inference.

Sources and evidence. The evidentiary base is both documentary and ethnographic. It includes fieldnotes from repeated visits and workshops over seven years; internal program documents, among them the Léila Gonzalez fellowship's budget (Atlantic Archives, 2023a) and its three-week travel agenda (Atlantic Archives, 2023b); disbursement records, stipend schedules, and visa and travel documentation; partner contracts, including the 2024 Black Women Radicals delegation agreement for the AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) International Forum in Bangkok (Black Women Radicals and Atlantic Archives, 2023); the fiscal-sponsor correspondence that outlined how funds were received and disbursed (The Imperative Fund, 2022); editorial and translation workflows from the journal *From Below* (formerly *Kora*); and public-event and exhibition materials. To these I add the

post-fellowship trajectories of community researchers who presented or published through the initiative. Across four funding cycles between 2018 and 2026, the initiative redistributed approximately 80% of its grant and fellowship income to community researchers, supporting 15 fellows, 10 international presentations, and two publications. The Lélia Gonzalez fellowship alone moved \$30,000 through fiscal sponsorship to cover visas, flights, stipends, and translation for five participants.

Administering shared resources. I must explicitly acknowledge my positionality in this process. Leveraging a U.S. dollar-denominated fellowship against the Brazilian Real was a deliberate mechanism to exploit Global North geopolitical and financial asymmetries for local community benefit. The redistribution operated through two registers at once. Where funds came from grants and fellowships, formal accounting was required, so those resources moved through fiscal sponsorship and documented administrative systems. Alongside this ran a more informal economy of mutual aid and personal contribution, in which the author covered costs directly and resources circulated through relationships of trust rather than through paperwork. In the Lélia Gonzalez fellowship's first year, the formal portion came from donations gathered from strategic donors in the United States and routed through a fiscal sponsor, an arrangement that allowed funds to be received, accounted for, and disbursed to non-institutional participants without requiring each one to hold an academic appointment or grant. This methodology necessitates confronting the geopolitical asymmetry inherent in Global North research funding. Operating with U.S.-backed fellowships and an exchange rate averaging five Brazilian Real to one U.S. dollar, this economic disparity could easily have reinforced traditional imperial power hierarchies. Instead, the *fellowship-as-commons* framework deliberately leveraged this currency advantage to redirect resources, ensuring that academic capital generated economic stability for local knowledge producers. Within those constraints, allocations and priorities were negotiated with community partners. Documented categories of expenditure included passport and visa support, international flights, local transport, meals and lodging, equipment, translation, and an individual travel stipend set, in that cycle, at 3,000 to 5,000 per fellow. The 2024 AWID delegation followed a comparable logic. Delegation members travelled, all expenses paid, from Salvador to Bangkok as paid international correspondents, with interviewing, photography, translation, and authorship written into the agreement rather than absorbed as volunteer labor.

Assessing sustainability. The use of sustainability isn't the continuation of funding. I use the term to mean the persistence of relationships, skills, and frameworks beyond any single cycle, and I assess it through observable indicators: whether community researchers continued archival or editorial work once funds ended; whether collaborations recurred without restarting from zero; whether fellows received and negotiated later invitations on their own terms; and whether publication and

translation capacity outlived the grant that seeded it. This is an adaptation rather than an invention. It extends participatory-research scholarship that already distinguishes intended from perceived participation, and that treats asymmetry and unfinished outcomes as constitutive features of collaborative work rather than as failures of it (Hahn et al., 2023; Streck, 2021). The adaptation shifts the unit of assessment from a project's outputs to the durability of its relationships. By this measure, an unfinished journal that trained and connected its contributors can be more sustainable than a completed report that left no capacity behind.

To demonstrate this methodology in practice, the following sections analyze how the Zumví Photographic Archive negotiates material decay, how terreiro archives deploy refusal as a protective protocol, and how the journal *From Below* redistributes the labor of transnational authorship. The terreiro analysis also yields the article's most directly transferable contribution: a set of five protocols for handling sacred material under conditions of refusal, offered for adaptation by researchers working in comparable contexts.

The Zumví Archive: Contesting Postcolonial Entropy Through Constraint

The Zumví Photographic Archive in Salvador, Bahia, emerged as a heritage project responding to the material precarity of Black memory. It was co-founded in 1990 by the photographer Lázaro Roberto, with Aldemar Marques and Raimundo Monteiro, three Black men from Salvador's peripheries who had come of age under military dictatorship, and Lázaro has stewarded it since. Zumví began with an urgent problem shared by many Afro-Brazilian cultural producers: photographic negatives, ephemera, and prints documenting decades of Black religious, cultural, and political life were deteriorating under conditions of heat, humidity, and limited storage. The archive originated from a desire to preserve culture and from the concrete need to keep lived histories from disappearing under a condition I conceptualize as *postcolonial entropy*: the accelerated deterioration of memory systems in postcolonial contexts shaped by racialized neglect and uneven institutional investment across the Americas.

This decay, first understood as a passive byproduct of climate, is more importantly an active condition of governance. Mbembe's account of necropolitics describes how states administer some populations through calculated abandonment rather than direct violence (Mbembe, 2003), and the selective neglect of Afro-Brazilian heritage institutions follows that logic. Stoler's concept of imperial debris calls out the same persistence from another angle, tracing how the material afterlives of colonial structures continue to determine whose histories are conserved (Stoler, 2008). Postcolonial entropy is related to but distinct from these concepts. Where necropolitics describes the administration of populations and imperial debris attends to the ruins colonialism leaves behind, postcolonial entropy names a temporal and systemic process: the accelerating loss of memory when the institutions that would

slow that loss are withheld along racial lines. It locates the political question in who is positioned to arrest the rate of decay. The heat and humidity in Lázaro's studio are the local, material form those afterlives take in the present. Brazil abolished slavery in 1888, the last country in the Americas to do so, and without land, reparation, or public provision for the formerly enslaved and their descendants. The heritage institutions that the state later built carried that exclusion forward, treating Afro-Brazilian religious, cultural, and political life as folklore rather than as a record worth conserving. Zumví was founded in 1990, in the first years after the military dictatorship and the 1988 Constitution, the very moment when the unified Black movement it documents was most active and least preserved by official archives. Its negatives remain in Lázaro's home in Fazenda Grande do Retiro because no public, climate-controlled institution ever took responsibility for them, so the heat and humidity that consume the negatives are the physical form of that abandonment.

This philosophy of visual sovereignty is explicitly articulated by Lázaro Roberto. Recognizing photography as a weapon against cultural erasure, he states: "When the government says Black people have no history, we can show them thousands of images that say otherwise. This is why we cannot let these photographs disappear." (Roberto, interview with author, [December, 2019], Salvador)

Before theoretical abstraction, postcolonial entropy must be understood as a visceral, physical environment. Inside Lázaro's improvised studio, the stifling heat presses against the walls, the air thick with mold and the sharp, acrid smell of deteriorating photographic chemicals. Fieldwork in Lázaro's home studio recorded high ambient heat and humidity, visible mold on storage materials, and the odor of decomposing film stock, conditions documented across repeated visits between 2019 and 2022 (Fieldnotes). Postcolonial entropy should therefore be understood not only as material decay but as a political condition produced by chronic neglect, in which Black memory systems are excluded from public systems of care.

Zumví's archive documents Afro-religious ceremonies, carnival bloco rehearsals, community meetings, domestic labor, funerary rituals, and everyday moments of Afro-Brazilian life rarely captured in official state or institutional archives. Its significance lies not only in what it contains but in how decisions are made around the images. How collections and images are contextualized and when they are circulated are decided through long-standing relationships of trust between Lázaro and the communities he has photographed over decades. The images and documents in the collections are treated as relational objects embedded in ongoing social obligations (Caswell and Cifor, 2016).

Zumví challenges participatory research frameworks that equate participation with visibility or consent alone. Its practice shows that community archives can operate

as commons through restraint, exclusion, and ethical boundary-making (Flinn, 2011). Some images can circulate widely; others require context; others should not move at all. These limits are part of the archive's social and ethical life.

My engagement with Zumví did not begin as a research project but as a relationship. Over seven years of collaboration I worked alongside Lázaro to support the digitization of fragile materials and to build pathways for public presentation that did not violate religious or ethical boundaries. The work blurred the distinctions between ethnography, archival labor, and community organizing. While observing a living archive, I was also taking part in shared archival work under conditions of constraint.

I offer this as an operative example of fellowship-as-commons. Graduate resources and fellowships were redirected to support digitization equipment, training workshops for young community members, and the international networking that sustained Zumví's work. One concrete instance was the first cohort of Mochileiro Archivist, in which Lázaro was paid to train young community archivists in analogue photographic practice, archival care, and the political meaning of his collection. Rather than positioning Zumví as a case study for academic analysis alone, these resources supported its emergence as a transnational knowledge actor able to enter conversations on Afro-diasporic memory, photography, and Global South life without academic mediation.

Circulation introduced new tensions which forced a recognition that archives are not neutral repositories but contested commons whose rules must remain responsive to the communities they serve. Such practices resonate with Latin American critiques of extractivist knowledge regimes, which hold that ethical research often requires limits rather than maximal transparency (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012; Escobar, 2018). Zumví's archive operates as a commons through constraint, where sustainability depends as much on careful decisions about what is withheld as on what is made visible. The archive works at the intersection of visual anthropology, religious studies, community memory work, and political struggle, without collapsing these into a single disciplinary logic. Its durability rests on preservation of the work and on the continual renegotiation of trust, boundaries, and resource allocation.

Situating Zumví within a fellowship-as-commons framework shows that sustainability in participatory research develops through relational accountability and the redistribution of resources in ways that allow community archives to keep their own terms within transnational publics, moving Zumví from an object of study to a method that reorients transdisciplinary research around lived practices of care and negotiated responsibility.

Other memory systems operate under different limits, particularly within religious communities where the circulation of knowledge is inseparable from ritual life. To extend the argument beyond photographic archives, the next section turns to terreiro-based archival practice as a distinct but related form of the commons, where

memory is stabilized through documentation and also regulated through visual ancestralities, religious law, and collective accountability.

Terreiros as Archival Commons: Refusal and the Governance of Sacred Knowledge

Archival work within terreiros — the temple communities of Afro-Brazilian religions, particularly Candomblé — is governed by religious law and ritual seniority. What may be remembered in public and what must stay restricted are not the researcher's decisions; they belong to those whose initiation status gives them the authority to make them. The community, not the archive, decides who may speak on its behalf. These rules are rarely written down, yet they are enforced rigorously through social and spiritual consequence. Terreiro archives therefore complicate any commons framework that equates a shared resource with an open one.

Beyond questions of access and restriction, terreiro archives are shaped by what I have elsewhere called *visual ancestralities*: modes of memory transmission in which images do not simply represent the past but take part in an ongoing ancestral presence. Visual ancestralities describe a practical way of knowing that governs what can be archived, digitized, shown, or withheld. Within Candomblé epistemologies, photographs, songs, and ritual objects are not static representations but relational materials that function as conduits for axé (vital force), so their circulation carries ethical and spiritual consequences and digital exposure can constitute spiritual violation rather than mere sharing. Consequently, digital exposure does not simply "share" the culture; it risks spiritual violation, changing the very ontological function of what the archive is asked to do.

A vivid illustration of this dynamic emerged through the work of Adamo, an Atlantic Archives fellow and community researcher whose project worked with the Zuela de Êrê archive connected to the terreiro of Mãe Elisa, a Candomblé elder and religious leader whose community has treated song, food knowledge, plant knowledge, and children's cultural education as forms of memory work. His fellowship focused on documenting these practices while preparing selected materials for public exhibition. The materials seemed suitable for exhibition because they showed care, learning, and intergenerational transmission.

During exhibition planning, the question was not which images were strongest or clearest but which materials could leave the terreiro context without creating spiritual, social, or representational harm. In correspondence with Adamo (July 2020), we agreed that the appropriate Ekedis — the initiated women charged with ritual care within the terreiro — had to be consulted before any final public presentation, and that when Mãe Elisa and her daughters saw the work in the gallery, they should feel

informed and respected by it. This was not a curatorial preference. Because the Candomblé archive occupied a central place in the exhibition, its treatment would shape how the entire project was understood.

One proposed element tested these limits directly. Adamo suggested that children from the terreiro perform one of the archived songs during the opening program. The proposal led to an extended conversation with Mãe Elisa, who declined. Her refusal marked a distinction between preserving a sacred song as part of an archive and relocating it into a secular exhibition space. The song could be remembered and protected without becoming a public performance. The ethical decision was not to expand access but to maintain the proper context for sacred practice.

Mãe Elisa explained her refusal through the logic of ritual nourishment rather than access. As she put it, "...there is no Orixá that is better or stronger than another, but there is one that is more nourished. Orixá is sustained through proper (ritual) feeding and attention, and performing a sacred song as gallery entertainment is not nourishment... it spends the sacred without feeding it." (interview with author, August 2021).

What sustains the sacred is proper ritual attention, not exposure; to relocate the song into a gallery would spend it without feeding it. Withholding the song was therefore an act of nourishment, not restriction.

This episode, and the wider terreiro work to which it belongs, produced a set of protocols that the project applied as rules of engagement. I abstract these from the practice rather than presenting them as the community's own codification. I set them down here provisionally, aware that writing rarely-codified, orally-transmitted norms into a numbered list is itself the kind of move toward institutional legibility this article treats with caution. They are offered as an adaptable orientation for researchers working under comparable conditions, not as a fixed key, and not as a substitute for the relationships that give them force.

1. Authority over disclosure rests with ritual seniority. The decision to show, withhold, or contextualize sacred material belongs to the relevant elders and ritual officeholders, including the Ekedis, and not to the researcher or the fellow.
2. Preservation and circulation require separate consent. Holding a song, image, or object in an archive does not authorize its public display, performance, or translation; each act of circulation is negotiated on its own terms.
3. The default for ritual material is restriction, and visibility is the exception. Materials are made public only after consultation, and some circulate only under specific ritual or educational conditions.
4. Refusal is binding and is recorded as part of the method. When a community declines, the work proceeds by preserving the material without showing it, by

showing it only with context, or by keeping it present through its absence, which can include a decision not to digitize at all.

5. Resources buy time, not access. Fellowship support is used to slow the process so that consultation, refusal, and revision can take place, and materials are never extracted into university repositories or circulated against community terms.

These rules clarify the practice of *visual ancestralities*. The archive remained tied to ritual relationships and spiritual consequence because the fellowship assets made extended preparation possible, but they did not override the community's terms, allowing the work to slow down enough for consultation. Conventional archival frameworks, including many participatory models, assume that digitization stabilizes memory and expands access. Terreiro-based practice reveals a different logic where digitization may preserve materials, but it does not neutralize their obligations, and in some cases digital circulation intensifies the risk rather than reducing it.

These choices show that sustainability in community archives cannot be measured by durability or visibility alone. It must also be measured by fidelity to the conditions that allow memory to endure without violation. Engaging terreiro archives required methodological refusal of this kind. These decisions reinforce Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's insistence that decolonial research must engage epistemic conflict rather than seek harmonious inclusion, and that not all knowledge is meant to be translated or made legible to dominant institutions (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012). In this context, fellowship-as-commons functioned as a way of underwriting time and presence rather than purchasing access, sustaining local practices that remained wholly under religious rules and community terms.

Epistemic Reciprocity: Transnational Authorship in *From Below*

The trajectories discussed in this section evidence of how redirected fellowship resources changed the terms under which community researchers entered public and scholarly circulation. The clearest example is *From Below*, a transnational community journal first developed under the name The Kora Journal.

Kora began as a Black Atlantic media residency linking writers, artists, and community researchers across Brazil, Ghana, and the southern United States. The residency supported people working outside traditional academic and media institutions as they developed essays, interviews, visual work, translation practices, and public-facing editorial projects. From Below grew from that process and gave the residency a public form: a journal where contributors could publish under their own names and enter Black Atlantic conversations without being filtered through a university department, a mainstream magazine, or the dissertation alone. For many

contributors the stakes were also developmental. They were first-generation college students who needed different kinds of support with academic writing and professional networking, and the fellowship provided that alongside the financial backing to move through their degrees more securely. They left able to say they had been part of a Fulbright-supported project, presented their work at universities, and helped build archival institutions — lines of experience and affiliation they had often felt unqualified even to pursue, and access to intellectual spaces that had previously been closed to them.

From Below was originally meant to appear in the dissertation as a critical object of evidence alongside Zumví, terreiro-based memory practice, and the fellowship projects. It was not ready in time, and that delay is part of the problem the article theorizes. The slow work of editing, translation, design, trust-building, and contributor support did not fit the calendar of dissertation approval. A year later the journal will be presented at BRASA, returning a missing object to the scholarly conversation and showing the friction between academic timelines and community-led publication.

It is best understood as a Black Atlantic counterpublic rather than a program output. Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics describes the spaces in which subordinated groups create and circulate their own identities (Fraser, 1990). *From Below* performs this work through writing, translation, visual design, and editorial collaboration. It creates a public in which contributors do not appear only as sources in someone else's analysis. They enter the university and conference circuit with me, not behind me, and with greater control over how their lives, memories, and political commitments are framed.

Fellowship-as-commons is therefore about more than who receives funds. *From Below* interrupts conventional academic patterns by moving fellows and collaborators into the work of authorship: they choose the story, develop the argument, work through revision, and negotiate translation. As a result, publication becomes part of the research method rather than a final report about it.

The first dispatch, *Black Women and Power*, demonstrates the method in practice. It presents *From Below* as a transnational community journal with contributors from Brazil, Ghana, and the United States, edited by the author with Jaimee Swift as guest editor, and describes itself as a grassroots arts and literature project for nontraditional writers, first-generation college students, and people whose stories are excluded from mainstream media and academic space. The journal's form is part of its argument. It uses essays, visual work, bilingual text, archival fragments, and public-facing design to make room for writers who would be treated as subject but not as theorists of Black Atlantic life.

Alex Alberto Santos's essay, 'Between Two Families: The Struggle of a Domestic Worker for Survival and the Dreams of Their Children', gives the clearest example

of this shift. Writing from his own family archive, Alex centres his mother, Iraildes Bispo da Cruz, and uses her life to examine domestic work, motherhood, education, and survival in Salvador. The essay then moves beyond family testimony by bringing in Milca Martins, president of the Domestic Workers Union of Bahia, to connect Iraildes's experience to a longer struggle for labor rights.

The force of the piece comes from how it combines family memory and political analysis together. Alex writes as a son, then turns the archive of his mother's life outward to examine the structure of domestic work in Bahia. Iraildes anchors an argument about labor, education, Black womanhood, and the cost of caring for one family while separated from one's own; her voice carries the analysis rather than illustrating it.

Alex frames his archival labor through marronage: "I'm focusing on a perspective of marronage and creating ways to virtually bring our brothers and sisters closer and welcome them into our homes that, empowered by our African-derived religions, are quilombos that gather our ancestral knowledge and cultures and keep them safe."

The bilingual form of *From Below* deepens this point, and its editorial mechanics are themselves part of the argument. The journal does not translate Portuguese into English for institutional readers and then move on. It sets the languages beside one another and preserves the syntax of the original in translation rather than smoothing it into standard academic English. These editorial decisions enact the article's claim about Amefricanidade at the level of the page because the language of the fellows is one of the places where analysis happens.

From Below also illustrates the limits of the method. The publication process required more time than a standard academic schedule allows. Some pieces needed substantial editorial support and translation created delays and unevenness. The point was not to turn fellows into professional academics but to create a space where community researchers and first-time authors could enter transnational conversations with their names, stories, and analysis intact.

Limits, Frictions, and Failures: What Fellowship-as-Commons Cannot Solve

Fellowship-as-commons can change how resources circulate within transdisciplinary research, but it cannot dissolve the structural constraints that shape knowledge production in the Americas. Many of its limits become visible precisely because resources are redirected rather than privately absorbed. These frictions are themselves evidence. They mark the points where academic timelines collide with community obligations, where funding rules outpace the relationships they are meant to support, and unequal access to the resources that make participation possible.

Streck (2021) notes that transdisciplinary research in Latin America is marked by asymmetry and unfinished outcomes. These frictions are defining features of the "extractive knowledge pipeline" endemic to area studies. In this cycle, the neoliberal university encourages researchers to extract valuable cultural insights from marginalized communities to advance their own careers, while leaving the material realities of the studied communities entirely unchanged. That contradiction cannot be solved by good intentions.

The clearest limit appeared in *From Below*. I had intended to include the journal in my dissertation as a major object of evidence, but it was still unfinished when the dissertation was approved. The delay came from the same commitments the journal was built to honor. Editing and translating bilingual work, designing it, and supporting first-time authors through it all take longer than a dissertation calendar allows, and that slowness was the point rather than a failure of it. The dissertation required closure; the journal required more time, because the work was not simply to produce a finished issue but to build the conditions under which contributors could recognize the publication as their own. That unfinished status is part of the argument. When the labor of editing, translating, and supporting first-time authors depends too heavily on one person or a small informal network, the same asymmetries that fellowship-as-commons tries to contest return inside the project itself.

A second limit concerns exhaustion. Redirecting graduate stipends and fellowship resources toward collective work required extreme personal financial sacrifice and long periods of uncertainty. In the Lélia Gonzalez fellowship's first year, when all resources came from one-off donations, the stipend amounts could not be set in advance, since they depended on what fundraising brought in. Where donations fell short, I covered the difference personally so that fellows were paid as promised regardless of the shortfall. Travel compounded the burden. Bringing community researchers to the United States required navigating a hostile architecture of Global North border control. Assembling documentation for complex Q-1 and J-1 visa categories, preparing fellows for consular interviews, and managing fiscal sponsorships laid bare the severe geopolitical asymmetries that dictate academic mobility. The method exposed how transnational solidarity remains heavily policed by state surveillance and financial bureaucracies, and how much community-engaged research depends on unpaid coordination. Around all of this accumulated the ordinary administrative labor of budgets, receipts, visa letters, travel logistics, contracts, translation, and partner communication. Some of it was necessary for accountability. Some of it became invisible labor. The method exposed how much community-engaged research depends on unpaid or underpaid coordination, especially when institutions celebrate collaboration but fund only the individual researcher.

A third limit emerged around institutional translation, even within supportive networks. The university and conference spaces we entered were generally aligned with the work and opened doors because of existing relationships, yet alignment did not remove the labor of preparation. Community researchers still needed support of many kinds: help shaping a bio and a presentation, translation, the paperwork of travel, and a sense of how academic events actually unfold. Hosts needed the reverse — an explanation of why a community researcher might speak through family memory, neighborhood practice, or religious life rather than through a conventional academic paper. The limit was not hostility from institutions but the extra work of making community-based knowledge legible without forcing it to become something else.

Fellowship-as-commons also revealed the difficulty of sustaining shared responsibility because not every participant entered the work with the same understanding of obligation. Some community researchers treated access to travel, payment, publication, or institutional space as an opportunity without fully grasping the longer collective commitments attached to it. This does not invalidate the method, but instead, it shows that shared resources require clear, repeated communication, and boundaries.

Finally, fellowship-as-commons revealed the fragility of transnational solidarity itself. Shared histories of racialisation and exclusion created real connections across Brazil, the United States, Ghana, and other sites of the Black Atlantic, yet those connections were uneven. The same passport that opened one border closed another; the language that granted one fellow access left another waiting on translation; familiarity with how universities work advantaged some and not others. Who could travel, who could publish, and whose work was recognized turned on these inequalities as much as on shared commitment. The method made these asymmetries harder to ignore.

De Angelis's warning that capital recaptures commoning through its own vocabulary applies inside the initiative as much as outside it. When some participants treated the fellowship resources as individual opportunity rather than collective obligation, the vocabulary of shared work masked an extractive expectation, reproducing the very relation the method set out to contest. These limits suggest that fellowship-as-commons should not be understood as a solution to extractive research. It is a method for making extraction visible, negotiable, and sometimes interruptible. Its value lies in its capacity to reorganize relations long enough for other practices of knowledge production to emerge, be tested, and where necessary be refused.

Conclusion: Toward Shared Terms of Knowledge Circulation

Fellowship-as-commons reframes the central problem of participatory research. The difficulty is not whether communities participate but who decides how the resources behind participation — funding, mobility, authorship, translation, and refusal — are held and redistributed.

Within Latin American debates on transdisciplinarity and the commons, the argument makes three contributions. The first extends the commons question beyond land, data, and archival materials to the academic resources that determine whether community knowledge can travel. Where funding, mobility, and editorial support remain privately held by the researcher, participatory methods still reproduce extractive outcomes; redistribution has to reach the material conditions that make authorship and circulation possible.

The second is that community researchers interpret their own archives rather than supplying material for someone else's. Alex Alberto Santos's essay in *From Below* shows this directly: his mother's life travels into the public record through his own analysis of domestic work, education, and Black womanhood in Bahia, not as testimony framed by another scholar. Fellowship-as-commons names the effort that makes such authorship possible, redirecting resources toward writing, translation, and circulation.

The third is that community archives are not neutral repositories waiting to be opened. In *Zumví*, images move through relationships of trust built over decades; in *terreiros*, memory is regulated by ritual seniority and the right to refuse exposure; in *From Below*, publication is the slow work of helping first-time authors enter public conversation on their own terms. By the measure of sustainability advanced here, these archives endure less through visibility than through their capacity to govern what circulates and what stays protected.

This is not a universal model. It emerged from specific Afro-Brazilian histories and Black Atlantic solidarities, and its value lies in adaptation rather than replication. The question is not whether every researcher can reproduce this initiative, but whether researchers can examine the resources they already hold and ask how those might be redirected toward shared authorship, community-defined circulation, and longer-lasting capacity.

The limits are part of the argument. Fellowship-as-commons makes asymmetry more visible rather than removing it, revealing how much labor separates inclusion from authorship, and how much it takes for a research subject answering interview questions to become a community researcher entering a journal or conference with their analysis intact. Refusal, delay, and unfinished outcomes are not always failures; sometimes they signal that the work answers to more than an academic calendar.

These findings speak to several questions raised for transdisciplinary commons research. The initiative opened pathways for community work to continue by building editorial and translation capacity that outlived any single grant; it

strengthened pluralistic institutions by routing resources through community associations and partners such as the Domestic Workers Union of Bahia rather than through the university alone; and it built capacity on both sides, equipping fellows to author and present their own work while requiring academic partners to rethink how resources are held.

As transdisciplinary research in Latin America continues to grapple with legitimacy, relevance, and justice, participatory scholarship requires more than methods of inclusion. It requires material commitments to shared resources and a willingness to accept limits. Meaningful solidarity can no longer be measured by what the Global North studies, but by the material support, shared authorship, and publishing infrastructure it redistributes. Academic institutions cannot simply observe the Black Atlantic; they must surrender their monopoly on its resources to support the futures Afro-Brazilian communities are already building for themselves.

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