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To cite this article: Amanda de Mello Calabria (2022) Life story, prostitution and activism: Challenges and possibilities of research in co-creation, *Global Public Health*, 17:10, 2512-2520, DOI: [10.1080/17441692.2021.2020317](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.2020317)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.2020317>



Published online: 02 Feb 2022.



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Life story, prostitution and activism: Challenges and possibilities of research in co-creation

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the process of writing, which I refer to here as ‘co-creation’, of the life story of Lourdes Barreto, co-founder of the Brazilian Movement of Prostitutes. I intertwine public history and oral history methodologies with a decolonising feminist epistemology. This theoretical framework made it possible to situate Lourdes’ narratives of prostitution in the North and Northeast of Brazil within the conceptual fields of agency and resistance. Lourdes guided the fieldwork and helped me redefine how I incorporated my presence into her daily life. In dialogue with her, I sought to conduct a participatory research project, in which authorities on distinct knowledges were also shared. I refer to the intersection of subjectivities and positionalities between investigator and collaborator as part of an intense process of co-creation, participation, and negotiation. Co-creation stimulated reflections on ethical and political issues throughout the research process with Lourdes; as the narrator, she was a participant in the process as opposed to an object to be analysed. Similarly, throughout the process of researching prostitution, as a researcher, I became an active member of the movement. The essay includes photographs of the process, alongside reflections on the challenges and particularities around the relationship between researcher and narrator.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 March 2021
Accepted 26 November 2021

KEYWORDS

Oral history; prostitution; feminism; decolonial studies; epistemology

I’m Lourdes Barreto, I’m from the state of Paraíba. I’m seventy-seven years old and I was born in the city Brejo de Areia. I lived in Campina Grande, I started to work in Campina Grande exercising sex work. I’ve been all over the Northeast. I know the entire Northeast. I worked in gold mining, in a dam, on a land vessel, I worked on the shore, I worked on the pier, I worked in nightclubs, in cabarets. I also worked with a truck driver on the roads, on a landship ... Wherever the client was, I had no difficulty getting to him.

I’m a willful whore. That tattoo is [my] identity. I got this tattoo at the Brazilian AIDS congress because I wanted to put a word that everyone likes, but they don’t dare to assume: I am a Whore.

Lourdes Barreto described herself as a whore, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, born in an underprivileged family in the state of Paraíba, Brazil. She co-founded the Brazilian movement of prostitutes alongside Gabriela Leite and is a pioneer in the fight and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Brazil. She is also the founder and coordinator of Gempac – Group of Women Prostitutes of the State of Pará – and currently a member of the National Council for Women’s Rights, member of the Plataforma Latinoamericana of Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects. The expression tattooed on her forearm demarcates the difference between

the identification as a woman and as a prostitute. *Before anything else*, she prefers to say, *I'm Puta/Whore*. (Figure 1).

Since its creation in 1987, the sex worker movement in Brazil has sought to deconstruct the derogatory and victimising representation of sex workers, inaugurating in the Brazilian political and cultural agenda a feminism that is inclusive, erotic, bold and affirmative (Leite, 1996; Prada, 2018). Lourdes is attentive to the derogatory representation of sex workers in society, concerned about not to be read as a poor woman, victimised and without choices, for whom prostitution is usually seen as the only economic way out. In our first interview, she emphasised: *I engaged in prostitution because I wanted to*.

I had been following the sex worker movement in Brazil since 2014, attentive to public debates, to the meanings of the use of the word 'puta'/'whore' to their fight against stigma and the self-determination of the movement. I came to see prostitution spaces as arenas of negotiations and sociability. I became interested in conducting a life story of Lourdes Barreto since she is not only the matriarch of the prostitute movement in Brazil, but also is still politically active. When Lourdes is narrating her own story, she is also narrating the trajectory of the movement and updating this social memory.

The encounter with Lourdes stimulated the writing of her life story based on what I called 'co-creation', a participative, sensitive, and dialogical research process. Lourdes and I experienced an intense process of negotiation around ways of doing research and in composing the meanings of her narrative. The goal of this article is not to present Lourdes' narrative of her life story, but the way in which this story was constructed. I focus on how the methodology was redefined, the negotiations, the meanings in dispute, and the positions that interfered in the process. In discussing the research methods, I concentrate on two main epistemological and political concerns: first, sex workers' demands to not be positioned only as objects of investigation and reduced to a rhetoric of victimisation; and second, discussions about the power relations in Western knowledge production, which often narrow and silence plural experiences of subjects and groups 'from the margins'. This is a broad and heterogeneous debate with multiple positions in the field of postcolonial,



Figure 1. Eu sou Puta. I am a Whore. Soy una Puta. Conference in Amsterdam, 2018.

decolonial, and non-Western feminist studies (Anzaldúa, 2016; Espinosa Miñoso, 2020; Haraway, 1988; Lugones, 2014; Mohanty, 2008; Spivak, 2003).

Lourdes has such a strong presence that, from early on, it was clear that I would not be conducting her life story alone. As a sex worker, Lourdes rebuked what she had come to expect from researchers that frequently considered her solely an object of research position and demanded my presence in her daily life and activism. Primarily oral history, my research later came to consider ethnographic writing and fieldwork also as fundamental. Lourdes preferred my company during her events and activities, so I could informally take notes rather than conduct oral history interviews. She considers fieldwork as a more pleasant way to research than the formal interviewing procedures. Moreover, Lourdes solicited my company in her regular activities not only because she appreciated my presence but because, from her perspective, conviviality would contribute to the writing of her life story.

Between 2018 and 2020, I travelled to the city of Belém, Northern Brazil, where Lourdes lives. I was included in her social networks (family, affective, and labour). I actively participated in Gempac meetings, festivities, and prevention work, the group founded by her in 1990. I visited pension houses, bars, and nightclubs, where sex work takes place. I accompanied Lourdes in her ordinary life. Together, we carried out typically feminine care activities (Hirata & Guimarães, 2012) – washing clothes, cooking, and taking care of her great-granddaughter. I accompanied her even when she was hospitalised for surgery. She introduced me to everyone as the person who would write her life story. I closely followed her political articulation with social movements, NGOs, public secretariats, and other instances of state. She advised and motivated me: *This is going to be important for the research; Are you recording?; Take note, this will work for you.*

This academic research resulted from a close relationship between women, in which I was entrusted with the place of a friend, granddaughter and confidant. Without wanting to crystallize the differences, because these must be read positionally, we were both women from the Global South, but I am a young middle-class Black researcher, and she is a poor non-white¹ elderly activist who is being researched. Our expectations, subjectivities and social markers of difference influenced our ways of thinking about the co-creation process.

I sought to anchor myself in theoretical and methodological frameworks of a more participatory nature to conduct a sensitive and critical research project that would question the asymmetries that permeate the relationships between researcher-researched (Patai, 2010). In this sense, oral history was a fundamental methodology for collecting narratives through valuing orality, validating memories and forgetfulness, and understanding selection as an act of narrating (Meihy & Holanda, 2020; Portelli, 2016). Public history, as a platform committed to processes of sharing authority and distinctive knowledge, was also central to this project (Frisch, 2016; Santhiago, 2016). Oral history and public history support the writing of an inclusive history regarding sensitive issues. Attentive to the demands inside and outside the university walls, they engage in the circulation of non-hegemonic views in present time narrative disputes (Almeida, 2018).

The decolonial feminist debates mobilised by authors such as María Lugones (2014), Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (1987), and Gloria Anzaldúa (2016) helped me to think about the subject and object positions within the research, particularly how such notions are permeated by coloniality. These perspectives also cast light on my social-political responsibility facing Lourdes' own discursive strategies and ways of interacting with academic research. Decolonial feminist debates fundamentally distanced me from what I did not want to reproduce: a feminist scholar reluctant to 'see' and rethink modes of discourse analysis, aligned with Western rationalism and scientific objectivity (Haraway, 1988); and therefore homogenises 'peripheral' women's plural experiences (Espinosa Miñoso, 2020; Mohanty, 2008). Ultimately, knowledge production in which the scholar is willing to speak for the 'other', without building sensitive listening regimes (Spivak, 2003).

The work of analysing and the work of narrating – The researched also works

In Ecléa Bosi's work 'Memória e Sociedade: lembranças de velhos' (1994) on the memory of the elderly in the city of São Paulo, she notes that elderlies' act of narrating required a deep dive into their memories: remembering, forgetting, selecting, organising, and narrating. The memories came with or without apparent emotion, with songs, images, or exalted or restrained gestures that helped the telling of the stories. In academic research, narrators are expected to share their memories. Sometimes difficult and intimate memories. The narratives are subjected to meticulous analysis, framing, and future publication. According to Ecléa, it is necessary to recognise that the narrators also work.

Lourdes, different from the narrators of Ecléa, is a renowned activist and is used to offering a public narrative in front of a camera and a recorder. She appreciates the act of remembering for audiences and skilfully does this in national and international meetings and interviews to newspapers, blogs, and magazines. Lourdes, at the age of 78, worked with me in the field of memories, imprinted her senses on social memories, and produced a particular meaning of her story, according to the debates and interests of the present time (Dosse, 2012). This is not exactly a purposeful manipulation of memory. Michael Pollak (1989) reminds us that individual memory is a point of view on collective memory, in the manner that the past account is always a selection and interpretation of the lived experience according to the individual's interests and expectations in the present time.

Lourdes and I had many informal conversations, recorder on and off, some of them detailed in my field diary and described in the research. I also conducted four oral history interviews. Many stories were told, sometimes with slippery concepts about the passage of time, sometimes silencing characters, and events. Throughout the process, Lourdes expressed many warnings and advice regarding the meanings of prostitution. She narrated her life trajectory and political performance within the sphere of human rights, health, gender, and sexuality, emphasising her pioneering activism in the fight against the AIDS epidemic. She told me how she faced adversities as a poor woman in the Brazilian Northeast between the years 1950-1990. She built her story with a strong sense of struggle, repeatedly highlighting how she never submitted to male domination. She carefully presented a positive view of sex work, dislocating the prostitution/suffering/victimisation semantic chain. Current feminist debates also appeared in her narrative, both appropriated and tensioned in a way that reflects the putafeminism challenges.²

Fifty years from now women will realise that a woman, in the twenty-first century who has been revolutionising since the twentieth century, was talking about history, about the relationship between values, dreaming of a fairer and more fraternal society, and told society that she was a whore. A whore woman that chose to be a whore. A whore is not different from other people, that has no difficulty taking her panties down and no difficulty lying in bed. How many years have I been a whore and in the sex worker movement? I think 56 years. In general, I had some problems like any other human being can have. Some complications, but I had more pleasure. I had more positive things than negative, otherwise, I wouldn't be here. I think that when you have everything negative you don't stay anywhere anymore. I learned to deal with human beings. Fragility,



Figure 2. Lourdes-narrator. Video frames of the interview, 1 August 2019.

dedication, companionship, respect, character; I put all of this together and stayed on this path that is better for me. (Figure 2).

The meaning attributed to her life story, as she would like it to be recognised and widely disseminated, required critical and focused analysis. The widespread stigmatising, 'common sense' visions of prostitution were central drivers to her emphasising positive aspects of sex work. Reminiscing about her work experiences in prostitution zones, most prominently the 'Quadrilátero do Amor' (red-light district) in Belém in the 1960s, she described pleasure and autonomy for women as central components of sex work. In doing so, she brought historical meanings disputes in the production of knowledge about prostitution to the forefront of our conversations. Lourdes taught me dangerous words and deviations that I should avoid: victimisation, objectification, and violence. Lourdes' authority was valued throughout the research process. Following Ecléa Bosi's thinking, Lourdes also worked.

At times her interests became a challenge, demanding negotiations over the production of meaning, as observed in how Lourdes remembered labour experiences in the gold mine regions during the 1980s. In this narrated episode and others Lourdes emphasised her agency and resistance over vulnerabilities, leaving out the marks of violence experienced in sex work. However, in collecting various sources about Lourdes, I had watched a video³ in which she exposed the vulnerabilities and violence reproduced by gold mine male workers. In this video, I realised that Lourdes narrated the vulnerabilities in sex work as a denunciation, paying attention to the stigma experienced by sex workers.

By noticing the different attributions of meaning to the same experience, I could not avoid analysing and discussing marks of vulnerability, as Lourdes' might have preferred. But the kind of representation Lourdes wished for led me to other concerns: How to analyse Lourdes when she is also active in the research? How far does her authority go in the narrative? What are the possibilities of negotiating the meanings of her story? (Figure 3).

As part of the effort to co-create the narrative meanings, I chose to watch the material with her and talk openly about the changes in the narrative, the reason for silencing some stories, and my interest in contextualising them. Lourdes, in turn, updated her narrative, as she was concerned about not to being seen as a dehumanised, objectified, and suffering subject. So the two senses,



Figure 3. Lourdes watching a part of the documentary produced by the Institute of Religious Studies about the first national meeting of sex workers in 1987. 29 April 2019.

vulnerability and autonomy, could co-exist in her life story. In her view, the violence experienced in sex work should emphasise her courage and resistance practices rather than suffering, which would be immediately understood as victimisation. Because of this, she underlined her pioneering and insistent way of producing life, resistance, and daring (Calabria & Almeida, 2020).

As a ‘paraibana’⁴ sex worker who started working as a teenager in the regions of the North and Northeast of Brazil, the contextualisation of Lourdes’ story is crucial to prevent stigmatising and stereotypical views of sex workers and ‘Northeastern’ women. There is a long tradition of construction and reproduction of discursive colonialisation inside and outside universities (Espinosa Miñoso, 2020), and within these discussions, it is imperative to understand Brazil’s internal colonialism (Casanova, 2007) and the existence of relationships of domination between its North/Northeast and Southeast regions. In this context, women born in the North and Northeast are often seen as sub-altern through the stereotypical viewpoints expressed in knowledge production systems in the Southeastern region. Many other marks influence this discussion, such as race and class categories, but there is a hegemonic and totalising view that differentiates ‘Southeast’ women, seen as educated, modern, and in control of their own bodies from the ‘other’ women in the Northeast and North who are seen as ignorant, poor, uneducated, and limited by traditions (Mohanty, 2008). This is especially true if they are sex workers, poor, and migrants. Lourdes was well aware and concerned about this, and these regional inequalities and prejudices are a source of debate within the prostitute movement as well. As an attempt to avoid fixing moral notions and classifications of gender, sex, and age from a colonial and victimising moral perspective (Lugones, 2014; Mohanty, 2008), I situated the complexity of Lourdes’ experiences in response to the precarious situations within their social, cultural, and historical contexts. I took care to evade victimizations, and emphasised her narratives about negotiation, autonomy, and courage (Calabria, 2020).

I return to the central idea here, as I emphasise: Lourdes is not reduced to an object of research, she is the protagonist of her own story. Not only the narrated experiences but the composition of Lourdes’ narrative are also effects of agency and affirmation. Confronted with social contingencies and material hardships throughout her life, Lourdes assumed a proud position to deal with these circumstances. Like a whore who speaks, she produces a story that is her own, one that extrapolates the common views on poor Brazilian women and subverts the hegemonic and binary perspectives through which ‘Western’ and ‘colonised’ women are defined. In reporting her experiences, Lourdes expanded other stories, produced key understandings of sex work, mobility, and agency through localised approaches, and showed that prostitution is also a place of creation and autonomy by way of actively using – and subverting – the existing sexual order (Piscitelli, 2005). I emphasise here Lourdes’ question to me about the meaning of sex work: *Why can’t I make this a good thing in my life?*

The dilemmas between researcher-researched, asymmetries, and inequalities

In a chapter titled ‘Who should eat the last piece of cake?’, Dahpne Patai (2010) presents the dilemmas of the relationship between researcher and the researched. She, a white and North American woman, collects and analyses narratives of different Brazilian women, some of whom are Black, poor, and working in undervalued jobs. Patai points out the asymmetries of class, race, nation, and the material inequalities evidenced in the circumstances of her research. She also emphasises the use of personal narratives. In particular, the expectations and feedback towards the person being interviewed.

Patai considers that research between and about women does not inhibit the reproduction of inequalities. Moved by social and political commitment to the interviewees, she proposes that researchers ethically rethink their actions, positions, and procedures. More than finding solutions, the author seeks to take responsibility for the research, and recognise the existing contradictions: the false proximity at the time of the interview; the narrator’s willingness to offer the researcher a story and the right to analyse and make it public; the narrator’s expectations created about the

interviewer; the work of transcription, analysis, and contextualisation of oral material; the obligations with the researched, the reviewing of the transcription, and the delivery of the material; and to compensate or not the interviewee financially, among other ethical and political issues.

Dilemmas like these also permeated my encounter with Lourdes. Some have already been mentioned, such as public debates about prostitution, the critical analysis of the representation of the sex workers and the affective relationship developed between Lourdes and I. I share other dilemmas here, understanding them not as resolved issues, but as attempts to question and to move beyond the colonialities' marks.

From the beginning, I tried to explain my goals clearly to Lourdes and, through our conviviality, to get closer to the meanings of her life story during fieldwork. I sought to foster the space for participation through dialogue, negotiation, and shared authority, valuing and respecting Lourdes' account and knowledge. In the interviews, I was attentive to what was repeated, interfering little. I interpreted the meanings of her story and reviewed the transcripts with her, reading aloud some excerpts. On the one hand, Lourdes was not very receptive to reviewing her words with me, which shows the limits of this co-creation process. She did not feel responsible for the narrative because, in her view, it was my project. On the other hand, some situations show Lourdes' direct intervention, such as the suggestion of places and themes for the interviews, the advice and warnings, and the invitations to events she considered fundamental for me to attend to learn about her story.

By accompanying her in political events, actions, and Gempac's meetings with researchers, health technicians, students, and social workers, I was able to understand what it meant to be a political whore – meaning smart, bold, and articulate, a term also expressed in the definition of 'puta politics', proposed by Laura Murray (2015). I also managed to understand the meaning of both Gempac's actions and what Lourdes meant to the community around the organisation, which increased the value of the memories of prostitution in the 'Quadrilátero do Amor', so evoked in her narrative. Moreover, I better understood the debate about the internal colonialism experienced by people born in the North and Northeast of Brazil, about local cultural representations and how they are reproduced stereotypically in the other regions of Brazil.

Lourdes and other sex workers are suspicious of researchers that often seek them out, collect their narratives and disappear, leaving them without any knowledge of where their voices have been included and how the material has been used. At the beginning of the project, I felt uncomfortable 'using' Lourdes' narrative and was also very aware of Lourdes and other members of Gempac's hesitancy of researchers, given the long legacy of people who had conducted research with them and disappeared.

I sought to foster an exchange by actively getting involved in the actions of the social movement. I participated in Gempac's activities and events, distributed condoms in the prostitution zone, wrote projects, and helped cover their ordinary necessities. I continue to be engaged in the movements' activities today. I sought to support Lourdes by offering Uber rides, coffee, cigarettes, snacks, and beers. I gave gifts and received many gifts from Lourdes, besides her also securing accommodation for my participation in the national sex worker meetings. The contributions and the way of compensating for this type of work are not always done with money, although I do not discard this possibility. This is a much broader debate, as in conducting research with prostitutes, the interviews often happen during working hours, therefore taking part in one means not working and 'losing' money. This fact needs to be recognised, as do alternative forms of contribution susceptible of negotiation with interviewees. I faced my relationship with Lourdes, materially and symbolically, as an exchange and a two-way street. I found this to be a fruitful way to address the hesitations felt by Lourdes and other sex workers.

Finally, disseminating research presents additional means to contribute back to interviewees and their causes. I organised a Lourdes Barreto Collection that I shared with the movement and made it publicly available through the Laboratory of Oral History and Images at the Fluminense Federal University. In this sense, the main contribution offered has been the knowledge production

recognised by both the social movement and the university. I sought to produce a public history that broadens the trajectory of Lourdes and that of the sex worker movement. The research, through its political engagement, offers an instrument in the battle of narratives in society about prostitution that can be appropriated by the very protagonists of this story. My hope is that it contributes to sex workers being increasingly heard, valued, and respected.

Final considerations

I do not intend to exhaust the debate about the ethical and political concerns and procedures of the research process, nor is this a new reflection in the academic environment and feminist discussions. I recognise that not all forms of research allow proximity between researcher and the researched and that it is not always possible for the researched to participate actively or to conduct a process of ‘co-creation’.

That said, if I study groups or subjects who have long been absent from the writing of history, whether they are social movements, Black women, poor, from the ‘third world’ or marked by social vulnerability, the marks of coloniality are inevitably present in academic productive relations. Therefore, the commitment must be to recognise the ethical and political marks and to take the asymmetries and distinct interests in research as a starting point for multivocal knowledge. In my view, this is only possible by making use of sensitive and dialogical methodologies and an epistemological shift, which recognises the coloniality present in Western academic production, and from which we are not exempt. Who is researching whom? What are the positions and status of the subject and object? Thinking with Gayatri Spivak: can the subaltern speak? Can the sex worker speak? Are we in fact dislocating or reconstructing our listening regimes to understand her debates and claims? This reflection leads us to numerous questions, which does not mean that we are able to answer them properly.

Here, I shared a co-created research path, while recognising the limitations implied. I tried to follow Patai’s path by assuming the real asymmetries between researcher and researched, knowing that the researched also raises expectations about my work, deposits confidence, and exposes herself. I tried to foster participation, negotiation, and reciprocity, building sensitive listening regimes so that a sex workers’ narrative, which hegemonic listening and knowledge production spaces continually exclude, could be heard. Finally, I recognise that the path towards a decolonisation of knowledge and its research practices is still a long one. The horizon, following a commitment to what Almeida (2018) refers to as ‘the public history that we want’, should be delineated by the encounter between these two kinds of knowledge – university and social movement, building a bridge together for the diffusion of multifaceted knowledges in society.

Notes

1. About racial identification, Lourdes said in the interview: *I can’t speak as a Black person, because I, even in today’s society, consider myself white. Which she isn’t. It’s yellow, I don’t know what the hell it is.* ‘Yellow’ here indicates Lourdes’ non-identification with whiteness, which makes sense if we consider the prejudice experienced by northeastern and northern women in Brazil.
2. The term putafeminista was coined in Latin America and is used by different sex workers. In Brazil, Monique Prada, an activist sex worker, launched the book ‘Putafeminista’ (2018). In her consideration, Putafeminism makes possible advancements in sex workers’ struggles of based on their specific demands, while ‘it can be seen as a possibility to rethink the whole structure of prostitution, identifying and combating the existing oppressions in it’ (2018, p. 37). Argentine activist, Georgina Orellano, also uses the term, which demonstrates the circularity of the ‘putafeminista’ notion among sex workers.
3. The video dates from the 1990s with the title ‘Bar Cascatinha’. It is located in the Davida’s archive, in the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ). Davida’s archive gathers documents of different natures that record the trajectory of the movement of prostitutes in Brazil. The archive is preserved and disseminated by Coletivo Puta Davida and is available for consultation.

4. Paraibana refers to a woman born in the state of Paraíba in Northeastern Brazil. However, the term is used in a derogatory way in some regions of Brazil. Lourdes proudly presents herself as Paraibana, reinverting the hegemonic cultural meaning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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