According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the term *subaltern* is defined as 'a person of inferior status', or 'a member of a marginalized or oppressed group' (OED, n.d.). While this term was originally popularised in Marxist theory by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to describe the exclusion of social classes from political representation, its meaning has since developed within postcolonial theory. As opposed to a mere indicator of social position as the OED implies, the subaltern has come to represent the systemic silencing and structural exclusion of people from global systems of power, knowledge production, and governance (Spivak, 1988; Smith, 1999). Yet, I mainly engaged with the meaning of the subaltern not through theoretically conceptualising it, but rather through my lived experiences during my fieldwork in Bogotá, Kennedy.

I have chosen to explore this meaning of the subaltern specifically, since it became fundamental to my fieldwork. During my first interaction with the community organisation Guaches y Guarichas, the subaltern or *subalternidad* was used an alternative for the term intersectionality. For this community, intersectionality was a concept imported from the Global North that did not encompass the lived realities of the people in Kennedy. In contrast to the notion of intersectionality, the subaltern did not simply refer to an overlapping of marginalised identities - such as race and class – but incorporated those whose voices are structurally excluded and therefore not heard *as a result of* their marginalisation. Thus, I originally understood the subaltern as a theoretical lens through which to analyse how historical processes not only oppress social groups but render their voices invisible within dominant discourses (Chatterjee, 2004).

Nevertheless, these academic debates did not fully reflect the experiences I encountered within Kennedy. Far from being passive victims of exclusion, members of Guaches y Guarichas actively contested marginalisation through both formal and informal strategies. They engaged in official channels of communication such as participating in round tables with local government officials, as well as requesting government funding and the expansion of their educational drug rehabilitation programmes. Moreover, the community also created their own spaces of dialogue and knowledge production, which were rooted in *educación popular*. This is a form of education that emerged in Latin America during the mid-20th century and has been widely linked to political activism (Walsh, 2010). Notable theorists such as Paulo Freire (1970) conceptualised *educación popular* as a process where students become active subjects in their own liberation rather than passive receivers of knowledge. These informal practices of *educacción*—a merging of education and action— opposes traditional approaches to education through encouraging collective reflection and empowering people to participate in social change.

This highlights that knowledge production should not only be recognised within formal institutional structures but also in the practices and experiences of marginalised groups. Although communities in Kennedy are largely excluded from dominant systems of power, they are far from powerless. Through *educacción*, Guaches y Guarichas not only challenge their marginalisation, but they actively produce knowledge that opposes mainstream discourse (Smith, 1999). Thus, while academic literature can frame the subaltern in terms of absence—of power, voice, and visibility—the communities in Kennedy demonstrated agency and resilience. As a result, my understanding of the subaltern changed from a static category of exclusion to a much more dynamic concept. The subaltern does not only refer to those who are excluded but should also be understood as those navigating and contesting this exclusion. This recognises the subaltern as active agents despite experiencing structural silencing and demonstrates a need to reevaluate how researchers view knowledge production in practice.

The change in my understanding of the subaltern also highlighted the ethical dilemmas surrounding its theoretical definition. By conceptualising the subaltern too holistically, this can risk homogenising

the differences in marginalisation and silencing that communities experience (Walsh, 2010). For example, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Colombia face very different historical and structural circumstances. Many Afro-Colombian communities experience legacies of slavery and economic exclusion rooted in postcolonial racial hierarchies (Hooker, 2005). Meanwhile, Indigenous communities face ongoing struggles linked to territorial dispossession and cultural erasure tied to colonial settler-state projects (Villasenor, 2014). Although both are epistemically silenced in dominant systems of power, the processes and manifestations of this silencing looks different for each group. However, even for the same community, the structures of marginalisation can change over time. For example, during the 20th century the Nasa people in the Cauca area experienced mass land dispossession and forced assimilation under national agricultural policies. In response to this, the Nasa initiated a legal battle and were granted legal recognition yet remained excluded from formal participation in decisions about resource and infrastructure projects (Villasenor, 2014). Even in the same place and for the same social group, the marginalisation of the subaltern is not linear but instead it is dynamic and context dependent. This makes it not just difficult, but problematic, to combine all forms of marginality under a single definition. Thus, this further demonstrates the need to engage with the subaltern not as a fixed identity but as a shifting, context-dependent concept.

In addition, my understanding of the subaltern changed not only how I viewed the work of organisations like Guaches y Guarichas, but also in how I engaged with them. I realised that our participatory methods of qualitative interviews and transect walks risked becoming extractive if they were not navigated with care. Our aim was to produce a video output from the data collection, but how could we ensure that our representation did not reduce the narratives in Kennedy to one of suffering or simplify the voices we had heard? Crucially, Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern cannot just 'be given voice' (Spivak, 1988, p271) through representation, as this can reinforce existing power dynamics. If the subaltern cannot speak in dominant knowledge systems, can researchers ever ethically give voice to them? I did not have an easy answer to these questions, and I had to sit the complexity and uncertainty I faced in trying to produce an ethical output as a researcher. I had to let go of my desire to produce definitive conclusions, both to these questions and in how I saw the subaltern as a concept.

This tension pushed me to reflect more deeply on what it means to ethically engage with communities that view themselves as subaltern. Instead of extracting information from Guaches y Guarichas, it was important that I shared information and my experiences as well. In the field, I tried to ensure that community members were genuinely co-producing knowledge with me instead of us selectively choosing stories that fit pre-existing frameworks. Consent and co-authorship were key in this context, and ethical research and practice became less about providing a formal platform and more about interrogating the structural mechanisms of silencing that the subaltern experienced. Previously, Guaches y Guarichas had interactions with researchers who only had intentions of asking them to define specific concepts and extract information for their own policy recommendations. Instead of repeating this, we tried to look at concepts and see them through our lived experiences and co-produce our meanings with Guaches y Guarichas. As opposed to merely asking questions in formally structured interviews, it was imperative that I contributed meaningfully to discussions and the interviews transformed into a conversational format between co-researchers. I came to see my research and video output as not trying to speak for marginalised voices under the guise of empowerment, but rather as a process of creating spaces for mutual listening and understanding.

Therefore, while the Oxford English Dictionary defines the subaltern as 'a person of lower status' (OED, n.d.), this fails to capture the lived realities of many communities and the ethical implications of such a definition. This narrow definition strips the term of its critical potential and reduces it to a

simplistic categorisation. In contrast, engaging with the subaltern as a dynamic and context-specific concept creates possibilities for rethinking representation and agency. The subaltern should not be simplified into a rigidly defined category but rather a concept that is informed by local histories and processes. Although the subaltern includes the structural silencing of marginalised groups, this does not mean that they are powerless. Thus, this view of the subaltern points to ethical research not just as neutral observation but as co-participating in a continuous struggle for epistemic justice.

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