

¡A Quemar los Años Viejos!

Generational and Transnational Reflections on Ecuador's End-of-Year Celebrations

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Introduction

End-of-year festivities are inherently double-facing events. They look backward to move forward, encouraging us as participants to draw connections between our actions, our self-concepts and identities, and our relationships with those closest to us over the passage of time. These reflections and connections are socioculturally and physically embedded in our celebrations with friends and family. But what happens when we move away from the deeply emplaced and embedded contexts in which we first celebrated these events? How does it look to revise and maintain these connections across physical and affective space, as so many immigrants do, especially when larger communities that practice those selfsame rituals are absent or distant?

This article seeks to explore some of these questions in relation to *año viejo* festivities from Ecuador, specifically grounded in the authors' and their families' own experiences with the burning of *año viejo* effigies. Our work here seeks to combine a historic and contemporary overview of this tradition as practiced in Ecuador (particularly in the city of Guayaquil) with autoethnographic research on later transnational adaptations of such practices by immigrants from Guayaquil to the United States. Historically, *año viejo* festivities in Guayaquil are popularly associated with a variety of potential origins: from traditional Andean indigenous practices relating to seasonal change or similar pagan ritual origins from ancient Europe¹; to possible relations to effigy-burning rituals still practiced in Valencia², Spain; and even to the practice of burning old clothes stuffed with hay in the aftermath of a yellow-fever outbreak³. Regardless of the actual origin, most researchers agree that they are popular, urban rituals commonly associated with working classes, and that they carry deep symbolic significance as rites of renewal and new beginnings.⁴

¹ Xavier Andrade, 'Política y Vandalismo Institucionalizado en Ecuador: La Práctica de los "Años Viejos"', in *Los Años Viejos*, ed. by María Pía Vera (FONSAL, 2007), pp. 97–116.

² Yaneth Jiménez Mayorga, 'La quema del Año Viejo, un ritual de purificación', *Radio Nacional de Colombia*, 31 December 2022 <<https://www.radionacional.co/cultura/tradiciones/ano-viejo-donde-nace-y-que-significa-este-ritual>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

³ 'La quema del año viejo, tradición ecuatoriana', *La Hora*, 31 December 2017 <<https://www.lahora.com.ec/secciones/la-quema-del-ano-viejo-tradicion-ecuatoriana/#:~:text=La%20quemadel%20a%C3%B1o%20viejo%20en%20Ecuador%20es%20una%20tradic%C3%B3n,humor%2C%20picard%C3%ADa%20y%20mucha%20emotividad>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

⁴ Andrade, 'Política y Vandalismo Institucionalizado', p. 6.

This article will briefly explain and explore the practice in both Ecuadorian and US contexts. The focus will be on sharing some insights and representative images from four semi-structured interviews with family members about the practice of creating and burning años viejos, alongside our own reflections on our exposure to and experience with año viejo festivities. In doing so, we hope to contribute, in our own small way, to the strong emerging tradition of autoethnographic cultural documentation and reflection in Ecuador and across Latin America more broadly.⁵

⁵ *Los Años Viejos*, ed. by María Pía Vera (FONSAL, 2007); Gabriela Eljuri Jaramillo, 'El Ritual del Año Viejo en Queens: Identidad Cultural de los Migrantes Ecuatorianos', *Artesanías de América*, 62(2006), pp. 139–158; and José Pereira Valarezo, *La fiesta popular tradicional del Ecuador* (Fondo Editorial Ministerio de Cultura del Ecuador, 2009), for example.

Origins of Practice

Quemar el año viejo literally translates as 'burning the old year', and the old year in this case refers to an effigy created specifically to be burned on New Year's Eve. In its most basic form, an effigy (referred to as an *año viejo*) is made from old clothing stuffed with hay or newspapers, with a papier-mâché head usually purchased separately. The effigy is made in the lead-up to 31 December and burned at that point in time. The traditional face of these años viejos is that of an old man, signifying the year dying and being burned up. Bonfires, stacked with flammable accelerants and fireworks, are prepared in the city streets and the effigies are then set to burn. The spectacle from the burning effigies and flammable additions quickly becomes quite impressive, and the skies are suffused with a reddish haze.

As with many popular festivals, sacred and profane motivations in the tradition's practice seem to meld together, reflected in the various topics that effigies can depict: while the old man signifying the old year made with old clothes and newspapers is considered the 'traditional' *año viejo* effigy, effigies depicting divisive political figures and more elaborate constructions of different figures also have a long history associated with the practice. *Año viejo* burning is not the only end-of-year celebration, but rather takes place alongside a constellation of other practices meant to usher in the new year and put the old one to rest. For example, a last will and testament is often composed and read out, eulogising the old man's death. At the recitation, someone—usually a man—dresses up and acts the part of the old man's widow, with humour interjected in both the over-the-top performance of grief and their reactions to the meandering and oftentimes meaningless bequeathments assigned to them in the testament. These recitations and performances often used to occur across various people's houses within their neighbourhoods, with widows going from door to door in advance of the burning of the *años viejos* later on in the night. In recent years, this door-to-door aspect has been outlawed due to safety concerns. Various other end-of-year practices common across Latin America—from traveling with suitcases around the block to guarantee travel in the next year, to wearing yellow underwear for luck—are also often performed alongside the burning of *años viejos*, but *años viejos* are largely recognised for their unique origin in and association with Ecuador.

The origins of the practice are debated and unclear, but signal some recurring themes and facts. Several cite Spanish colonial influences and point out parallels to Valencia's own *Fallas* celebrations, which also include

effigy-burning (the titular *Fallas*) and firework displays over several days.⁶ The first documented instances of the *año viejo* tradition seem to have taken place in the late 19th century in Guayaquil.⁷ Some tie its first known instances to the year immediately following a huge fire that devastated the city, and point to related practices of burning effigies that occurred a few decades earlier following a yellow-fever outbreak in the city. Though it may not be possible to ever definitively detail the exact origins of the *año viejo* celebrations, the practice—and cultural research into its various impacts—remains prominent to this day.

Modern-Day Practice

In modern-day Ecuador, the practice of burning *año viejo* effigies continues, though with some notable changes, and some differing contexts. The most obvious of these changes is the increased regulations around where and how *años viejos* can be set ablaze.⁸ Cities like Guayaquil restrict the burning of effigies specifically to concrete-paved streets and gravel sidewalks and driveways and prohibit the use of explosives in the effigy burns. Violation penalties include administrative 'sanctions' imposed by the mayoral office of the city of Guayaquil and even possible carceral detainment. While these restrictions exist on paper, their enforcement and respect by the general populace varies greatly, which is in keeping with the reality of this celebratory ritual as one that originated within the working-class populace. In many ways, it relies on a public and ostentatious disregard for the authorities and routine safety regulations⁹ in order to send the old year off with a bang (literally). Both larger-scale (at the level of the city or neighbourhood) and smaller-scale (at the level of individual families) celebrations around the burning of these effigies continue to this day.

Current research and coverage on *años viejos* focus on various different cultural,¹⁰ environmental, and tourism development¹¹ angles for the spectacle. Environmental concerns centre largely around air quality issues arising from the mass burning not just of the effigies,¹² but of explosives, accelerants, and fireworks piled up with them. Regulations like the ones described above were in part influenced by such concerns. Tourist development angles propose—and have sometimes seen success in implementing—various ways to both centralise and publicise this cultural practice. This has been achieved through the creation of ongoing exhibits up to two weeks before the new year to view the *años viejos*, associated competitions, and 'routes' and walking tours that take participants through various different neighbourhoods displaying their representative giant effigies. It should be clear, then, that modern-day practice within the country of burning *años viejos* is alive and well. Researchers take various angles and lenses of interpretation—from such varied fields as environmental studies, tourism studies, anthropological studies, and more.

There is less established scholarship on the practice of burning *años viejos* within the US by Ecuadorian immigrants. Existing focal points include the neighbourhood cultural year-end celebrations practiced in Queens, New York, where a significant Ecuadorian immigrant community exists.¹³ This study focuses on the concepts of cultural and national identity and memory

⁶ Ángel Emilio Hidalgo, 'Años viejos. Origen, transición y permanencia de una fiesta popular ecuatoriana', in *Los Años Viejos*, ed. by María Pía Vera (FONSAL, 2007), pp. 31–49.

⁷ Martha Flores, 'La fiesta de Inocentes y Año Viejo. Una síntesis de costumbres desvanecidas', in *Los Años Viejos*, ed. by María Pía Vera (FONSAL, 2007), pp. 51–75.

⁸ 'Municipio recuerda a la ciudadanía los lugares prohibidos para la quema de años viejos', *Alcaldía de Guayaquil*, 29 December 2023 <<https://www.guayaquil.gob.ec/ordenanza-establece-lugares-prohibidos-quema-anos-viejos/>> [accessed 1 May 2024].

⁹ Andrade, 'Política y Vandalismo Institucionalizado'.

¹⁰ Juana Cordova Pozo, 'El Año Viejo: Un Medía de Expresión Popular', *Artesanías de América*, 51(2001), pp. 5–30.

¹¹ Carlos Alcivar Trejo and others, 'La Ruta de los Años Viejos, una Propuesta para el Desarrollo de Tradiciones y Cultura Turística Sostenible en los Guayaquileños', *TURyDES*, 8.18(2015), pp. 1–22.

¹² Andrea Rodríguez Guerra and Nicolás Cuví, 'Contaminación del Aire y Justicia Ambiental en Quito, Ecuador', *Fronteiras: Journal of Social, Technological, and Environmental Science*, 8.3(2019), pp. 13–46, doi: 10.21664/2238-8869.2019v8p13.p13-46.

¹³ Eljuri Jaramillo, 'El Ritual del Año Viejo en Queens: Identidad Cultural de los Migrantes Ecuatorianos', pp. 139 - 158.

for these Ecuadorian Americans in Queens from a cultural anthropological perspective.¹⁴ It also examines ideas of ritual significance and adopts methodologies from Homi K. Bhabha on national identity formation from the margins.¹⁵ Much of the article focuses on descriptions of typical end-of-year celebration in Queens with the historical context and the aid of some pictures, along with an analysis of the significance of such practices for the maintenance and evolution of cultural identity. One element in the article with which we resonate—given our own focus on firsthand accounts of *año viejo* experiences—is the inclusion of excerpted direct fragments from the humorous and often incisive last wills and testaments of the dying year mentioned above.

We have chosen to provide this context for two different reasons. First, we want to point out the already rich and burgeoning tradition of exploring such rituals and cultural festivities that exists within the country and the larger sphere of Latin America—a tradition that we humbly position ourselves in with our autoethnographic work here. Second, we note that the apparent focus of much related scholarship, while focused very productively on cultural and historical research on the origins, methods, and consequences of *año viejo* celebrations, might also benefit from the addition of more directly (auto)ethnographic methods of collecting and reflecting upon the individual experiences and descriptions of *año viejo* rituals.

Methodology and Methods

Inspired by the anthropological and cultural emic perspectives of researchers in Ecuador and the possibilities of autoethnographic methodologies to delve into specific responses and recollections from individuals about these festival experiences with *años viejos*, our main data collection consisted of conducting semi-structured verbal interviews with two of each of the authors' close relatives and a thematic analysis through an inductive framework based on the responses gathered. We hope to offer a small-scale case study on individual *año viejo* experiences from Guayaquil. The interviews conducted by the authors were with first-generation, generation one-and-a-half, and second-generation immigrants from the coastal Ecuadorian province of Guayas (and mainly Guayaquil within it). The interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on the interviewee's language preference. Specifically, Karen's interview was conducted in Spanish, Wilma's interview was conducted mainly in English with a couple of explanations in Spanish, and Chamán and Morris's interviews were conducted in English.

The authors themselves are also ethnically and culturally Ecuadorian, each having one parent who grew up in Guayaquil, Ecuador. To this end, a section of the article includes our own reflections on what the *año viejo* practice means to us as second-generation Ecuadorian immigrants and cultural rhetorical scholars with a vested interest in exploring identity formation through languaging practices. To collect these reflections, we have reflected both individually and with each other using a modified version of the same interview guide we used to conduct our family interviews.

¹⁴ Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, 9th edn (McGraw Hill, 2003), p. 237.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation'; in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (Routledge, 1990), pp. 291–322.

During the course of our interviews with family members and each other, we at times relied on the use of images our family members had taken of their own *año viejo* experiences in order to prompt a discussion about their memories of particular effigies and the burning of them. We have included both images and descriptions of effigies, in the order of their occurrence in the interviews. Where possible, we have included the images directly to help readers both envision the effigies and better imagine the visceral experience of witnessing their creation and incineration. Our interviews were conducted with the aid of an interview question guide to draw participants through some of the different topics at hand.

Ethics considerations

Interviewees were provided with an informed consent information sheet prior to the start of their interviews and were also given the interview questions guide ahead of time. The sheet explained the purpose of the interview and the different options and measures that would be taken to protect their privacy to their level of comfort (the option of providing pseudonyms, safe storage of the digital transcription and recording files for the article, procedures for disposing of these files in a timely manner after the article was published, etc.). At the start of each interview, consent was affirmed verbally on a recording before continuing. While the interviewees gave their consent for the use of their first names, we requested that they also provide a pseudonym for use here, and have used these throughout.

Interviews

Our interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide of questions, which was provided to the participants ahead of time as well as being accessible during the interview for reference whenever needed. The interviews were conducted in late April and early May 2024, and were tape recorded and transcribed with the assistance of auto-transcription services through Zoom video call recording and then checked and corrected by hand by the interviewers. The total length of all the interviews combined was 115 minutes and 56 seconds, with the average length standing at around 28 minutes and 59 seconds. We asked all the participants to block out an hour of time just in case it was needed and disclosed this estimated length on the informed consent sheet. Following our interview guide, we asked four participants to reflect on their experiences with *año viejo* celebrations both in different geographical contexts (in Guayaquil and in the US) and in comparison to other end-of-year rituals and practices. We also asked them to consider their own making of *años viejos* and participation in their burning. Lastly, we asked them to think about their own practices of recounting and reflecting upon their *año viejo* experiences, if applicable.

Interview 1: Wilma

Wilma grew up in Guayaquil in the 1960s and 1970s, the eldest of a family with four siblings, including Chamán, who was also interviewed here (see Interview 2). She moved to the US to attend graduate school in the 1980s

and 1990s, became a citizen, and has lived and worked in the country ever since. She has a wealth of memories to draw on from her childhood related to the end-of-year celebrations, which she has consistently described in the most enthusiastic terms as one of the celebrations she most looks forward to in the calendar year.

'It's kind of nostalgic'

In her earliest memories of her childhood, Wilma associated the *años viejos* with 'fun' above all else, and not specifically with the end of the year. She was entranced by the 'imagination that they [fellow inhabitants of Quayaquil] can use to make the different *monigotes*, or effigies', and found the associated performances of the widows and the reading of the last wills and testaments to be wildly entertaining. As she grew older, she started to associate the end of the year, and as a result these *año viejo* celebrations, with the passage of time and progress made toward goals. She remembers seeing many different kinds of political figures and artists depicted growing up, even as early as the 1960s, especially if they were particularly controversial or well-known. As she got older and moved to the US, she began to associate the end of the year more with the continued health of her family and looks back on the *año viejo* celebrations with nostalgia, 'because I don't get to celebrate it as I used to'. That being said, she recognises that 'there are little things here and there of people that are usually from my same background that remind me or that try to imitate in another scale', including her younger brother Chamán.

'More fun than Christmas'

Describing the experience of making effigies growing up, Wilma positioned herself as a participant and a helper, but not as a planner behind the creation of the *años viejos*. She said that this role was always taken up by another of her younger brothers, which Chamán also echoed in his own description of his experience. While, in her household, there was not as much emphasis on the competition aspect of making effigies at that point, she did note that once you began making an effigy, you needed to finish it; otherwise, it was bad luck to end the year with. In her recollections, Wilma often returns to the fun that she associated with the celebrations and the way that it allowed her whole family to collaborate on an activity at this time of the year. In her stories about different end-of-year memories, the *años viejos* loomed large as both a 'unique' and fun family bonding experience each year, and she maintained that it was 'always more fun than Christmas', to say nothing of the New Year's Eve celebrations she has been a part of since moving to the US. 'Here it's, what, a party? A big dinner, a big continuation of the food that you have on Christmas?', Wilma pointed out, saying that drinking champagne and watching the ball drop in Times Square could not come close to the spectacle and full community fun that *año viejo* celebrations provided.

'At least we can keep on telling the story'

In reflecting on her experiences of viewing versions of the ritual in the US, Wilma acknowledges that there are some ways in which the experience is safer, but that makes it different from the spectacle that it used to be. At the same time, she is often concerned, even on private property in fire pits, that 'other people that do not know about this custom may actually call the police'. She also worries at times that those same people may dismiss this as a 'third-world' practice that is 'not what you do in civilised places'. Nonetheless, she believes that it is important to tell and share stories about this unique celebration, especially for those later generations who did not grow up with it in Ecuador.

Interview 2: Chamán

Chamán was born in Guayaquil in the early 1970s, the youngest of four siblings. As such, his memories and experiences of *año viejo* celebrations are a little different from Wilma's, despite growing up in the same household. He later moved to the US for his medical residency, became a citizen, and has lived and worked in the country as a doctor ever since, mainly throughout the same state.

An 'absolutely traditional' Ecuadorian celebration

To Chamán, the *año viejo* celebration is an 'absolutely traditional' and quint-essentially Ecuadorian tradition. As a young child, he saw it as the 'end of a cycle' wrapping up the year. As he grew older, he recognised it as a form of almost 'magical' thinking, a way to be able to move past the year's events by 'put[ting] it to die'. 'Whatever happened in the year, good or bad, ended', he explained. While Chamán recognised and even occasionally participated in other end-of-year traditions (such as taking suitcases around the block), he explained that the creation and burning of *años viejos* is 'the only one that I personally have feelings and I'm attached to...', to the point of continuing its practice in the US 'to try to transmit that' to his US-born children.

Three types of *año viejo*

Chamán explained that he thought of effigies as falling into three different categories. The first one, which he grew up making, was the 'more traditional' *año viejo*, as described in the introductory section. He mainly created these *años viejos* with an older sibling who was particularly devoted to making them. Chamán would help make a traditional effigy of an old man representing the old year from old stuffed clothes, with a broom or stick used to attach the head.

As a young adult in the early and mid-1990s, Chamán noticed a shift in the creation of these effigies. 'That primitive stuffed person became a much more elaborate character', he noted. Figures of politicians, athletes, and other characters became more common. While these figures were still created at home, they made use of wooden frames and more papier-mâché techniques across the whole figure.

The last category of *años viejos* are those made for sale, from the 2000s onward. These could be simpler or very large artisanal works put together by artists and whole neighbourhoods, the so-called *gigantes* or giants that are displayed publicly for days in advance of the new year celebrations. Some examples of these kinds of effigies can be seen in Figure 1, which showcases some effigies bought on a more recent trip back to Ecuador for the new year with Chamán's children and their cousins.

'So you burn something that you love, or something that you hate'

Discussing effigies created in the US, Chamán said that it is 'a little bit more safe' since it happens on private property (he has a fire pit for barbecuing that he uses for the effigies) and does not involve the use of accelerants, though not quite as fun. He largely tries to stay true to the traditional exercise of using as many found materials as possible, but may buy other materials such as wood or construction paper depending on the idea that he comes up with for that year's effigy. For instance, he explained how for a recent year they made a leg sticking out from a football uniform with two of his children's jersey numbers on it, because both children had undergone corrective surgeries on their knees that year (see Figure 2). He used an old cleat for the foot at the bottom. A couple of years prior, they made a giant effigy of a syringe to represent the discovery of the COVID-19 vaccine (see Figure 3).

Interview 3: Karen

Karen was born in Ecuador and immigrated to South Florida in March 2000. She lived in Ecuador for over 20 years and always celebrated *año viejo* festivities. This interview was conducted in Spanish. For the original quotes, see the footnotes.

Año viejo: Then and now

December 31 meant being with family. Growing up in the 1980s, Karen's family would gather and create piles of *años viejos*, fill them with *petardos* (explosives), and set them on fire. Her favourite memory is from after the burning. The family would get together and eat a traditional Ecuadorian dinner. After the feast, the celebration continued. 'As Latinos, we love to dance. We would dance until the sunrise. Then, at six in the morning, it was tradition to eat *ceviche* so we could keep on dancing.'¹⁶ (*Ceviche* is a traditional Ecuadorian dish made with fish or shellfish marinated in citrus juice.) As she presently resides in the US, the meaning of New Year's Eve has changed for her. She no longer creates or burns *años viejos*. Video calls to Ecuador are her new tradition and she now experiences the burning practice second-hand.

Año viejo creation and purchasing

As a young child, Karen and her older brother would create *años viejos* using worn-out clothes. Arms and legs were sewn shut and stuffed with



Figure 1: Young children pictured with various different pop culture character effigies, from a petite Hello Kitty to a large intimidating Pennywise clown.



Figures 2 and 3: Effigy of a syringe and knee injury effigy (without the attached cleat).

¹⁶ 'Como a los latinos nos encanta bailar, bailamos hasta el amanecer. Y a las seis de la mañana, era la tradición de comer el ceviche para seguir bailando.'

asserin (sawdust) and more clothes. Papier-mâché heads were then eventually glued on. 'My brother and I always made them together when we were young. We fought, but we had fun. We always ended up with an *año viejo* [that we had made together]'.¹⁷ Years later, she started collecting lumber to create a skeleton for her *año viejo*. She created a frame, which she compared to a child's stickperson drawing. Using a combination of cardboard and cornstarch mixed with water, she created a sturdier surface on the frame and the effigy stood up on its own. Her brother was the designated painter and would make them look as 'human' as possible. Even if her *año viejo* was finished, she walked around with a headless effigy and asked for donations which guaranteed her some money for the new year celebration. These are traditions she no longer practices in the US, but she said that next time she visits she wants to create a traditional *año viejo* from scratch.

In 2011, Karen brought her two daughters to Ecuador for New Year's Eve. This is the only time that she recalls ever buying an *año viejo*. Because this was the first time they had been exposed to the tradition in person, Karen wanted to take her children downtown to buy *años viejos* (see Figures 4 and 5). For Karen and her children, a good *año viejo* was something that represented their interests. If Karen were to buy one in the future, she said she would buy something related to Disney.

Memory practices and looking forward

To this day, she continues telling her children and husband about the *año viejo* tradition. Aside from burning *años viejos*, Karen shared stories about her superstitious mother, who would always eat twelve grapes (symbolic of good luck) and then run around the block with an empty suitcase (symbolic of a year of travel), all while wearing yellow underwear—but not before bathing with sugar water.

Every year, without fail, she calls family in Ecuador to celebrate from afar. In the next few years, Karen hopes to return with her five children and relive her childhood with them. She dreams of celebrating the new year by burning *años viejos*, eating *relleno* (stuffing), and dancing until the sun rises to be met with a bowl of *ceviche*.

Interview 4: Morris

Morris was born in Guayaquil to two Ecuadorian parents. He was raised in the city until he was about five years old, when he moved to South Florida with his mother. For him, *año viejo* is about being with family and the adrenaline rush of the annual burning.

Establishing tradition

'Growing up, it was always just tradition'. As a nation, Ecuador looks forward to December. The work mentality shifts and slows down; *años viejos* are the new priority. Other Ecuadorians dedicate their lives to it by creating *años viejos* all year long. Morris's most fond memories are of time spent



Figures 4 and 5: Karen's daughter and niece with años viejos (top); The same años viejos burning 2011-2012 (bottom).

¹⁷ 'Eso siempre lo hacía con mi hermano, el [tío]. Cuando éramos pequeños, los construimos los dos [...] siempre nos divertimos aunque también nos peleamos. Pero terminamos con un muñeco para el año viejo.'

with family and searching for the perfect *año viejo*. When looking for the perfect *año viejo*, Morris says that people consider uniqueness or cost above all else. 'If you wanna pick something unique/fun, and something that you will get the best price for'. Families also visit downtown Guayaquil to see building-height *años viejos*, built for competitions with cash prizes. These and others are influenced by that year's popular culture to gain traction and ensure sales.

The rush of burning

On the night of 31 December 2013, Morris recalls neighbourhoods coming together and piling their *años viejos* together for eventual burning (see figure 6). Once the time to burn came around, everyone made a hole in their *año viejo* and stuffed it with explosives. Morris recalls the *años viejos* being covered in gasoline, stuffed with *camaretas* (sticks of gunpowder), and set on fire around 11:30 pm. *Camaretas* have been illegal in Ecuador for the past decade due to an increase in safety precautions. They are still found on street corners, however, and officers simply look the other way.

He witnessed piles of *años viejos* at every half mile, and huge burning flames were seen all around (see Figure 7). 'It's an adrenaline rush [...] You're releasing endorphins while also doing something that's not really permitted [...] so, whoever came up with this, nailed it.' Piles of *años viejos* burn in unison around Ecuador. Morris describes the act of burning these figurines as a form of anarchy considering the legal parameters in place constantly being broken. Chaos ensues; *camaretas* are thrown into the flames; small flammable rockets fly out of the piles; and the fires grow.

Other practices and storytelling

As soon as the clock strikes twelve, everyone in the vicinity becomes elated and says '*¡feliz año!*' to one another to welcome the new year. If Morris's family planned on eating twelve grapes at midnight (symbolic of good luck), he would take part to fuel their good luck and keep the peace. He also witnessed neighbours running with suitcases around his block in Guayaquil. To keep the tradition alive transnationally, he calls his family back home every year to see the *año viejo* practices through a video call. Still, a physical detachment from Ecuador challenges cultural continuity for transnational Ecuadorians. Morris shares stories of his New Year's Eve experiences in Ecuador with friends around December. 'As an Ecuadorian, I think this is something we are all really proud of'. To burn *años viejos* is to show Ecuadorian pride and embrace decades of cultural history. Sharing stories from across the globe is just one way of keeping this tradition alive transitionally.

Self-reflections

In keeping with the autoethnographic methodologies informing this research,¹⁸ our reflections below are written in the first person. In these brief reflections, we each consider what the end of the year means to us as Ecuadorians; which, if any, practices resonate with us; our previous expe-



Figure 6: Año viejos situated in a pile before burning on the evening of 31 December 2013.



Figure 7: Año viejos burning in 2013–2014, with other fires in the distance.

periences with traditional *año viejo* practices; and the implications of researching an ingrained cultural practice while being physically detached from our familial homeland.

¹⁸ Heewon Chang, 'Collecting Self-Observational and Self-Reflective Data', in *Autoethnography as Method*, pp. 89–102.

Gabriela's self-reflections

I grew up on stories about the *años viejos*, told mainly by my mother, especially around the holidays and the chaos that surrounded them. When she saw people in the US getting so excited to watch the ball drop in Times Square and drink their tiny plastic flutes of champagne, she would often chuckle and shake her head. 'This is nothing', she would say. 'Let me tell you about the *viudas* (widows). Let me tell you about the *años viejos*!'. And I would listen with rapt attention and absorb every little detail about not just the practice, but the players in these stories—my family. From across time and space, they would delight me with their joyous celebrations at the end of the year. I often find the constant activity at each end-of-year to be overwhelming. But when I hear about these practices, they help me keep it in perspective, ground me in the moment, and simply let go of what has come before and what will come after. I have never really told stories to people about the *año viejo* unless they already knew about it from their own experience; but I am very happy and honoured to be changing that now, in this way.

Sophia's self-reflections

Speaking Spanish allows me to stay connected with my Ecuadorian heritage and family. Even though I'm not with family on new year's, I follow in my mom's footsteps and jump on video calls when possible to watch the practice from a distance. I'll never forget the New Year's Eve I spent in Ecuador. It was the last time I had visited. At eleven years old, I was still fine-tuning my Spanish. It wasn't my first time visiting, but now I can actively recall my time spent there. I begged mom to let me get my own *año viejo*. As we walked around the tents of *años viejos* in downtown Guayaquil, I spotted the one: Barney the dinosaur. Growing up, I loved the show, and this was the only Barney I had come across—it was unique. Mom got it for a great price. I was so happy. She didn't let me put any explosives in it, though; *tío* handled that. My family was notorious for not taking pictures; we often lived in the moment. Coming across our *año viejo* pictures from Ecuador was incredible. Looking at the images sparked some lost memories. It reconnected me to events from my childhood.

Parting Thoughts

There is some irony in reflecting on practices that are meant to signal the end of an era by literally burning it out of existence. As we can begin to see through this small selection of interviews, the fun and generally carefree nature of *año viejo* celebrations is what so many seem to be drawn to. Yet just as we learned from Wilma that leaving an effigy unfinished is bad luck, the tradition of scholarship that has emerged around this practice signals both a current need and an interest in exploring it more deeply—just perhaps not too early in the morning on the day after the parties themselves.

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