**The Evergreen State College**

**Graduate Program on the Environment**

### Thesis Prospectus

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**STUDENT AGREEMENT:**

**SIGNATURE: \_\_\_Elizabeth Torres\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE:\_\_December 10, 2021\_**

**FACULTY READER APPROVAL:**

**SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**MES DIRECTOR APPROVAL:**

**SIGNATURE:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

1. Provide the working title of your thesis[[1]](#endnote-1).

Returning to Birth Ceremonies & Honoring Our Ecologies

1. In 250 words or less, summarize the key background information needed to understand your research problem and question.

Conception, pregnancy, birth, post-partum and creation of life altogether are not regarded as sacred ceremonies in colonial paradigms, instead coloniality has ascribed procedures that manipulate creators of life. Colonialism and modern lifestyles have withdrawn us from our innate connection to the land and our personal ceremonies, as a colonial agenda of creating disembodiment and disempowerment. This disconnection has led to parallel violence taking place upon Mother Earth and individuals that grow and birth life. The concept of obstetric violence makes a connection with gender-based violence, whereby gender-based violence is rooted in colonial paradigms of power and control – in which masculinity is constructed against femininity and revolves around violence as a function of power that polices female sexuality. Further scholarship on ecofeminism (Gaard, 2015; Klemmer & McNamara, 2020) highlights the parallel violence taking place upon the feminine and Mother Earth.

While indigenous cultures have regarded birth as something sacred that warrants ceremony and celebration of life, western medicine has highly medicalized it. Birth in western medicine is treated like an illness or something to be feared, as opposed to an empowering moment for an individual growing and birthing life. Therefore, a return to traditional birthing practices which honor, support, and empower creators of life through ceremony will help break the cycle of violence and advocate respect for all life as sacred. Birth and creation are unpredictable, for this reason amongst others, it is important to have ceremonies that honor the sacred process and recognize life is a miracle.

1. State your research question(s).

How has colonization contributed to erasure of birthing ceremonies in my lineage?

How might revitalizing traditional birth practices contribute to positive outcomes in our environment?

1. Situate your research problem within the relevant literature. What is the theoretical and/or practical framework of your research problem?

The World Health Organization recognizes obstetric care is failing and in crisis globally and has been fighting the heavy medicalization of birth since 1985 (Borges, 2018). The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world yet holds some of the most alarming maternal death and cesarean statistics and they continue to rise. “Maternal mortality [has] more than doubled between 2000 and 2014, from 9.8 to 21.5 maternal deaths per 100000 live births…” (Lu, 2018, Pg.70 ). “…US health institutions and providers disclaim: bullying and coercion of pregnant women during birth by health care personnel, known as obstetric violence” (Diaz-Tello, 2016, Pg.1). Nevertheless, narratives worldwide detail acts of violence individuals are having to endure in the labor room. The term obstetric violence is defined as a crime consisting of , “…health- care staff’s appropriation of the body and reproductive processes of women expressed via dehumanizing treatment; abuse of the medicalization and pathologization of natural processes, which entails a loss of their autonomy and ability to make free decisions regarding their own bodies and sexuality, ultimately affecting women’s quality of life” (“Venezuela,” 2007) (Briceño Morales et al., 2018). Venezuela was the first country to create policy that details obstetric violence and seeks to eradicate it, Argentina and Mexico followed.

Coloniality (Balaton-Chrimes & Stead, 2017; Quijano, 2000; Rutazibwa, 2020; Walsh et al., 2018) is a structure of violence that impacts us globally, and disproportionally targets indigenous communities. “[O]bstetric and gynecological care is a type of violence often left out of the conversation about violence against women” (Borges, 2018, Pg. 830).. Nevertheless, decolonial work that unpacks violence paradigms helps us address gender-based violence and obstetric violence. Eradicating coloniality means envisioning a different world and helping co-create it. Colonialism is deeply rooted in paradigms of violence, power, and control; therefore, decolonial work comes about when we practice nonviolence and consciously generate the least amount of harm possible.

1. Explain the significance of this research problem. Why is this research important? What are the potential contributions of your work? How might your work advance scholarship?

For many years birth has been regarded as something sacred that warrants ceremony in indigenous cultures (Alarcón & Yolanda Nahuelcheo, 2008; Hirose López, 2018). Birthing bodies transmute life from the spirit realm into Earth (Hayward & Cidro, 2021). Like Mother Earth, wombs are creators of life. The womb is the first environment, the first ecology, the child inhabits - babies bloom from the womb into the world. If we seek to advocate for ecologies in the world, we must remember our first ecology (White, 1995). Communal and ecological care begins in the womb, honoring our first home, and expands to those in connection. “Birth outcomes influence many aspects of later life health and wellbeing” (Hamersma et al., 2018). Indigenous communities have long documented the healing power of ceremony(Lavoie, 2013). Colonialism has purposely attempted to erase ceremonial practices of birth by eradicated records of them.

I have spent a lot of time decolonizing the violence present in my life and given much thought to honoring the sacred life forms that share this world with me. I have analyzed my relationship to mother Earth and the ways I practice ceremony for creation. Regarding my birth story, I know my mother encountered much violence that day and almost died in labor. Like my mother, many birthing individuals have experienced obstetric violence; yet very little individuals talk about this, as they blindly trust a system that vows to care for them (Liese et al., 2021; Sadler et al., 2016).

In my quest to dig deeper in understanding the trauma encoded in my lineage and calling upon my ancestors on the spiritual healing journey, I learned my aunt (father’s sister) was a birth keeper and medicine woman for her village in Michoacan Mexico. When she migrated to the US she left her practices behind and began the process of assimilation. This thesis is a call to remembering and documenting the medicinal and healing ceremonies in our lineage. It is decolonial work that will document the narratives of birthing bodies in my lineage and teachings from my aunt through story narratives. By writing this thesis I hope to help combat the erasure of medicinal and healing ceremonies in my lineage, imposed by colonialism.

1. Summarize your study design[[2]](#endnote-2). If applicable, identify the key variables in your study. What is their relationship to each other? For example, which variables are you considering as independent (explanatory) and dependent (response)?

I will be conducting interviews of family members on their experience with conception, pregnancy, birth, and post-partum. Using these narratives, I seek to gain a deeper understanding of my family traditions, customs, and beliefs surrounding the process of birthing and honoring life. When interviewing my aunt, questions will dig deeper into what she looked for when preparing to help delivering a baby, as a medicine woman. Questions will build on learned knowledge through natural development of the conversation.

Table of Guiding Questions for Interviews

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| --- |
| * If I asked you to tell me your birth story what would you share?
* What do you most recall about birthing your child(ren)?
 |
| **Key Periods** | What do you recall about your body sensations & experiences during each period? Did you know what to expect? | How is health determined/ ensured during this time? | What are key herbal allies during this time? |
| Conception |  |  |  |
| Pregnancy |  |  |  |
| Birth |  |  |  |
| Post- Partum |  |  |  |
| Is there anything else that has not been shared that you would like to share about conception, pregnancy, birth, port-partum? |

1. Describe the data that will be the foundation of your thesis. Will you use existing data, or gather new data (or both)? Describe the process of acquiring or collecting data[[3]](#endnote-3).

I will be collecting interview data that explores narratives about birth within my family rather than sampling randomly from a population. My focus will be both unstructured and structured interviews, as well as observations. My aim is to gain a deeper understanding of my family’s traditions, customs, and beliefs surrounding the process of birthing and honoring life. Interviews with my aunt will be the foundation to my thesis, as she holds the most traditional ecological knowledge and experience in my family lineage. In addition, interviews with my mother will offer a direct perspective of birthing through western methods and the lasting imprints of that experience. Additional interviews within other relatives in my lineage will further elaborate on experiences of conception, pregnancy, birthing, and post-partum.

1. Summarize your methods of data analysis. If applicable, discuss specific techniques that you will use to understand the relationships between variables (e.g., interview coding, cost-benefit analysis, specific statistical analyses, spatial analysis) and the steps and tools (e.g., lab equipment, software) that you will take to complete your analyses.

Immediately after interviews I will do a summary write up of key themes/take-aways. Within 48 hours I will listen to interviews and take notes along with the recording. Once I have completed all interviews, I will review notes to identify overarching themes. Based on identified themes, I will revisit interviews to transcribe quotes that support themes. Next I will present family members with my thoughts and plan to use their quotes. I will request permission to share the selected section(s); their feedback on sharing identified quote(s); and inquire if they have additional comments. I am especially interested in exploring underlining themes within the interviews as to why traditional birthing practices/ceremonies are no longer practiced. Moreover, the ways in which traditional birthing practices/ceremonies integrated their everyday lives with their environment, honoring life, and healing. My aim is to gain a deeper understanding of my family’s traditions, customs, and beliefs surrounding the process of birthing and honoring l

1. Address the ethical issues[[4]](#endnote-4) raised by your thesis work. Include issues such as risks to anyone involved in the research, as well as specific people or groups that might benefit from or be harmed by your thesis work, perhaps depending on your results. List any specific reviews you must complete first (e.g., Human Subjects Review or Animal Use Protocol Form).

My research requires informed consent and will need to be mindful of potential triggers of emotional stress due to the nature of questions. Individuals will be given the option to opt-out at any given moment or to skip any questions they may like. This is a case study exploring birthing narratives/ oral histories within my family. For this case study I will complete the Institutional Review Board application process as well as the CITI certification.

Growing and birthing life, health records, and spirituality are very personal matters - it is important to carry out sharing this knowledge in a matter that is respectful of the individuals sharing their stories. Participants will be consulted with before any of their narratives are shared. Only the information they agree to release will be shared in the thesis. Their identity will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.

1. List specific research permits[[5]](#endnote-5) or permissions you need to obtain before you begin collecting data (e.g. landowner permissions, agency permits).

Nothing beyond IRB approval mentioned above.

1. Reflect on how your positionality as a researcher could affect your results and how you will account for this in the research process[[6]](#endnote-6).

Being raised as a first generation American has given me a completely different lifestyle than that of my elders and ancestors. I hold biases that were engrained in me through lived experience and exposure to American culture. Much of my work revolves around decolonizing, but it is important I recognize the ways coloniality manifests itself in my life. Moreover, my studies have led me to be hesitant of religious paradigms that operated under a colonizing agenda – This is honestly my biggest worry with this project, as my aunt is a practicing Catholic. While I was raised Catholic, I no longer participate in the religion voluntarily (only when required for family). I foresee this adding a layer of difficulty when analyzing birthing ceremonies in my lineage and knowing coloniality has impacted them. Analysis will require a fine balance between understanding what is Traditional Ecological Knowledge in my family and what practices have been ascribed through religion. Lastly, my interviews will be conducted in a different language, when transcribing them I will need to be very careful that the translation carries the same meaning.

1. Provide at least a rough estimate of the costs associated with conducting your research.  Provide details about each budget item so that the breakdown of the final cost is clear.

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| **Item** | **Cost** | **Description** |
| Recorder | $34.55 | Interview will be audio recorded only, option to take pictures with phone. |
| Herbal Gifts | $50.00 | In hopes of honoring people’s time: herbal blends of teas and bath salts will be made in ceremony and gifted to interviewees. |
| **Total** | **$84.55** |  |

1. Provide a detailed working outline of your thesis.

Positionality Statement & Dedication

* **Introduction**

My birth story (mom’s narrative of birthing me)

State of knowledge & Project significance and objectives

Thesis questions:

* How has colonization contributed to erasure of birthing ceremonies in my lineage?
* How might revitalizing traditional birth practices contribute to positive outcomes in our environment?
* **Literature Review**

Part I: Obstetric Violence & Gender Based Violence

 Notes: Colonization of birth perspectives; Medication; Birth Trauma; Post-partum Care

Part II: Ecofeminism

 Notes: Environmental Violence connection to Gender Based Violence

Part III: Traditional Ecological Knowledge & Indigenous Spiritual Ceremonies of Birth

Notes: Ecological ceremonies (presenting children to the sun, burying the placenta, remedies for “susto” /birth trauma, amongst others)

* **Methods**

I will conduct interviews as a case study of birth ceremonies in my lineage

* Conception
* Pregnancy
* Birth
* Post-partum
* Traditional Foods
* Ceremonies
* Medicine women narratives (interviews with my aunt)
* Familial oral histories
* **Results**

Traditional birth perspectives/practices in my lineage.

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| Themes I anticipate based on: my learnings from my upbringing & reading Red Medicine (P. 1, Gonzales, 2012) |
| * Womb Care | La Matriz
 | -The womb as an energetic field beyond being an organ known as a uterus (Braden, 2007) -Cultural traditions of womb massage (Pintado González, 2013)-Pre-natal care: Knowing/acknowledging that anything you do pre-delivery helps shape the baby-Cultural care (Alarcón & Yolanda Nahuelcheo, 2008)-Spiritual downloads as you connect to baby’s spirit ainnah & Afiyanti, 2019)-There’s no healing in intellect – the healing comes from spiritual inquiry & connection |
| * Birth as an altered state of conscious (vibration of ceremony): it is spiritual, physical, and emotional (Manookian et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2016)
 | -Pregnancy is an ideal time for healing (use pregnancy state to get closer to spirit) -Part of labor is listening to messages that are coming up (importance to baby during labor)-A lot of birth ceremony is healing work in general-Birthing experience (Rini, 2016)-What makes birth a ceremony: family coming together to celebrate life(Hayward & Cidro, 2021) vs hospitals limiting visitations -Delivering the placenta and placenta ceremonies (Burns, 2014) |
| * The importance of traditional foods and herbal allies in ceremony/life
 | \*Herbal allies as ancestors and guides \*A baby is pure spirit until they eat for the first time |
| * Post-partum | “La Cuarentena” (40 days of enclosure/rest)
 | -Closes the portal to the infinite (Waugh, 2011) -Birth opens the portal to the infinite -The importance of rest-Seeing babies as sacred| Birthing body is also sacred, it is creating and delivering life.-They are the most scared, they just arrived from the divine. Covering the baby’s umbilical cord (protection). |

* **Discussion**

Revisit Lit Review and conduct analyzes of findings: In what ways are western practices interrupting sacred practices of birth meant to connect us to the Earth? (P. Gonzales, 2020; P. C. Gonzales, 2008; Güémez, 2004; Lu, 2018; MacDorman et al., 2016)

* Quick summary of History of Birth: Coloniality of birth practices
	+ Clinical settings and protocols
	+ Accredited to be the father of gynecology, James Marion Sims
* Impact on indigenous communities: Western medicine has failed to recognize the value of indigenous birthing methods and implicit biases mean that indigenous women suffer from an even higher statistic of mother mortality and birth complications.
* **Conclusion**

Birth doesn’t stop being sacred no matter the location or interruptions. Ceremony is how we honor birth and life and return to equilibrium with Mother Earth. Ceremony is how we remember. Ceremony allows to process when traumatic things happen. Ceremony allows us to walk towards a care model that benefits the child, the parent(s), the environment, and beyond.

1. Provide a specific work plan and a timeline for each of the major tasks in the work plan. Be as realistic as you can, even though you will probably need to alter this schedule as you complete the tasks. Remember that faculty readers take time to return your drafts and that the final polishing and formatting of your thesis for binding will take longer than you ever imagined.

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| Advising style: Weekly meetings with advisor to ensure proper scope in focus and talk through roadblocks that arise / receive feedback on progress. |
| **Monthly Work Plan** |
| **Month** |  **Task(s)** | **Description** |
| December | \_\_ CITI training\_\_\_Submit IRB application \_\_ Lit Review | Complete training & submit IRB application. Submit Lit Review to advisor for feedback. |
| January | \_\_ Wait for IRB approval to conduct interviews\_\_ Work on background & introduction section\_\_ Outline methods section\_\_ Incorporate Lit Review Feedback | Finalize methods design and begin typing out section (think of a methodology that would create the best environment for individuals being interviewed to share). Work on background & introduction section to include specific lenses, positionality statement, key terms, personal bias. Review Lit Review feedback and incorporate suggested edits to section. |
| February | \_\_ Conduct interviews\_\_ Listen to and transcribe Interviews \_\_ Document/outline themes | Interview 7-10 family members on their oral histories. Immediately after interview do a summary write up of take-aways. Within 48 hours listen to interview and take notes along recordings. Once done with interview, review notes to identify themes. Identify and transcribe quotes from interviews that support themes. Ask family members for their feedback on sharing identified quotes and ask for permission to share the selected section. |
| March | \_\_Finalize Methods Section\_\_Results Section | Finalize methods section and turn in for advisor feedback. Draft results including coded themes of interviews. |
| April | \_\_ Discussion Section\_\_ Outline Conclusion Section\_\_ Incorporate Methods Section Feedback from Advisor. | Review methods feedback and incorporate suggested edits to section. Draft results and discussions section, turn into advisor for feedback. |
| May | \_\_ Conclusion Section\_\_ Final Edits | Review results and discussion feedback and incorporate suggested edits to section. Draft conclusion section and turn into advisor for feedback. Review all advisor feedback and incorporate to thesis. Ask undergrad colleagues to read and provide feedback/ grammar suggestions. Integrate final edits. |
| JUNE | \_\_ Print Thesis and bind\_\_ Thesis Visual \_\_ Thesis Presentation | Prepare to defend and present thesis |

1. Who, beyond your MES faculty reader, will support your thesis? Indicate support both within and outside of Evergreen. Be specific about who they are and in what capacity they will support your thesis. If you are working with an outside agency or expert, be specific about their expectations for your data analysis or publication of results.

My family will be a big support to my thesis, as it is a case study that involves oral histories of family members. In addition, I anticipate undergrad colleagues giving me peer reviewed feedback and potential grammar edit suggestions.

1. List the 3-5 most important references you have used to identify the specific questions and context of your topic, help with issues of research design and analysis, and/or provide a basis for interpretation. For each annotated reference, explain how your project specifically connects to the source by extending, challenging, or responding to the conclusions, methods, or implications. For any other sources cited in this document provide a complete bibliographic citation.

Author Patrisia Gonzales is a pivotal voice that documents the impacts of colonialism on birthing ceremonies and the culprit restrictions implemented in the medical field as customary protocols (P. C. Gonzales, 2008). Her scholarship has inspired me to better understand the birthing ceremonies in my lineage and colonialism’s erasure agenda.

My aunt will be the most importance oral history reference in my thesis as she is the keeper of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in my lineage.

The book Childbirth, Vulnerability and Law: Exploring issues of violence and control (Pickles & Herring, 2019) documents accounts of violence upon birthing bodies, taking place globally.

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1. You are not locked into this title; its purpose is to help you identify the main point or topic of your thesis at an early stage. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. You might discuss selection of case studies, sampling methods, experimental design, and/or specific hypotheses you will test. You should also address any specialized knowledge or skills that are necessary to complete the research. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. If you are planning to use existing data, explain the specific source, contact information, arrangement with collaborating agencies, and expectations about use of data and final products of your research. If you are planning to gather new data, describe specific methods, time, place, and equipment that will be required. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. If you’re not sure where to start, consult a ‘Code of Ethics’ or other similar document from an academic society in an applicable field of study. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. If you are collecting ANY samples or data, even observational data, on public lands (city, county, state and/or federal) it is your responsibility to find out the permit requirements BEFORE you collect data. Conducting research with tribal members/on tribal lands will have different and additional requirements. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Your *positionality as a researcher* refers to the fact that one’s “…beliefs, values systems, and moral stances are as fundamentally present and inseparable from the research process as [one]’s physical, virtual, or metaphorical presence when facilitating, participating and/or leading the research project…” (The Weingarten Blog 2017).

Alarcón, A. M., & Yolanda Nahuelcheo, S. (2008). Pregnancy, delivery, and post partum beliefs among mapuche women: Private conversations. *Chungara, Revista de Antropología Chilena*, *40*(2). https://doi.org/10.4067/S0717-73562008000200007

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White, R. A. (1995). Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society. *The Journal of Baha’i Studies*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-7.2.3(1995) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)