



Together for the Solidary Care of Life: A Proposal for Environmental Popular Education in Dialogue with Community Feminisms

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Author's Declaration

The authors declare that they have participated in the entire scientific process of this research, including conceptualization, methodology, writing, and editing. They also declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest concerning the authorship and publication of this article.

Abstract

This article presents reflections derived from the popular praxis carried out by urban women at the Titiribiblioteca Community Library with children and neighbors in Commune 8 of Ibagué. This proposal is centered on promoting, through arts and grassroots research, the restoration of the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed, an ecosystem heavily degraded as it receives over 70% of the city's rainwater and sewage. Drawing from environmental popular education, we delve into the Think-Act approach of 2021 named "Together for the Solidary Care of Life" to highlight and identify the strides made from the epistemological and political perspectives of community feminisms.

Keywords: art; community organization; women; care for life; environment.

Juntas pelo cuidado solidário da vida: uma proposta de educação popular ambiental em diálogo com os feminismos comunitários

Resumo

Este artigo expõe as reflexões derivadas da prática popular que nós, mulheres urbanas, desenvolvemos na "Titiribiblioteca Comunitária" com crianças e vizinhas na comuna 8 de Ibagué. Uma proposta focada em promover, através das artes e da pesquisa popular, a recuperação da microbacia Hato de la Virgen, um ecossistema altamente degradado, por receber mais de 70% das águas pluviais e do esgoto da cidade. A partir da educação popular ambiental, nos arriscamos a apresentar o Pensar-Fazer do ano 2021 chamado "Juntas pelo Cuidado Solidário da Vida", para nomear e identificar os avanços empreendidos nas perspectivas epistemológicas e políticas dos feminismos comunitários.

Palavras-chave: arte; organização comunitária; mulheres; cuidado da vida; ambiente.

Introduction

In November 2017, a grassroots research process was born, encompassing the Arts and Literature from an environmental perspective for understanding and transforming reality in the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed in Commune 8 of Ibagué. Due to uninterrupted work, and despite limited institutional support, especially from the local government, the methodological proposal of the Titiribiblioteca Community Library has been acknowledged. Through it, it has been possible to consolidate platforms of artistic and citizen participation that recognize widespread and ancestral knowledge, cultural practices, and demands that require attention to the environmental needs in the intervention stretch of 1,520 meters of the mentioned micro-watershed. This article highlights how the memory of the community process's praxis can be kept alive, generally showcasing the achievements, challenges, difficulties faced, and our reflective actions within a feminist political commitment.

Pedagogical and Research Approach

Like every collective commitment, the experience of the Titiribiblioteca Community Library carries with it an episteme that guides its actions. For this reason, we position ourselves within the South-South Epistemologies, challenging the dominant and colonialist dynamics of knowledge production and vindicating the dialogue of knowledge and practices from peripheral-popular sectors. From here, plural forms of knowledge emerge, which can be consolidated into collective life projects.

The Titiribiblioteca Community Library is a pedagogical strategy through which reading promotion and animation, puppetry, and grassroots research are encouraged. It promotes the recognition of local identities and links with the territory. At the same time, it problematizes reality from an environmental dimension and creates spaces for dialogue, participation, and interaction among social actors. This approach aims to contribute to understanding contexts and making collective efforts to environmentalize the ecosystem-culture relationship, in line with the pedagogical principles of popular education outlined by Pino (2016).

In this experience, there exists a political intentionality which, in the words of guide Marly Tafur (2022), is expressed as:

The deep conviction to transform an unjust and inequitable reality and to problematize the human crisis from an environmental perspective in the local context. Recognizing that our actions should be filled with idea-process-creations-connections, with people from the community and other contexts, generating articulations and linking the language and methodologies of art and culture for transformation.

It has been deemed significant to delve into grassroots research, puppet theater, and reading mediation to propose an alternative for “environmentalization,” a term coined by Noguera (2000). This approach allowed us to address the environmental dimension through aesthetic experiences that provide, in their most complex and changing sense, the ethical relationship—in this case, with the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed. In this context,

Ethics needs to be broadened. Religion first evolved as an ethic from human to human, then democracy as an ethic from human to society. Still, an ethical relationship between humans and the environment remains to be developed. The relationship with the earth has been economical and one-sided [...]. The evolution of consciousness requires that being through which consciousness acts in the universe. It requires that it adopt a position of responsibility and care (Noguera, 2004).

Likewise, we move beyond the stereotype of art as mere recreation or entertainment and recognize its power to satirize, deform, and problematize reality, reflect it like a mirror, identify roles of social actors, heal, and invite dreams of change (Chalmers, 2003). In the Titiribiblioteca Community, these dreams stem from the political intent to promote ethical and aesthetic cultural values of dignified appropriation with ecosystems. This intent is also evident in exploring all possibilities offered by puppets, literature, theater, communication, and grassroots research.

Drawing from the principles of grassroots education that advocate for understanding social contexts from a historical, dialectical, dialogical, sensitive, and appreciative perspective of the knowledge and wisdom of the participating population, we have been able to solidify the identification of four analytical categories proposed by Diana Hoyos (2019), the lead researcher. These categories encompass the intricate social reality surrounding the Hato de la Virgen and propose alternatives that permeate transformative endeavors. These categories are The Creative, The Home, The Community, The Micro-watershed, and The City.

Throughout 2021, within the realm of The Creative, the personal dimension is identified as the primary sphere for recognition and social transformation. Consequently, it was proposed to involve youth in artistic processes as a response to the limited participation of this demographic in the artistic-environmental training workshops of the Titiribiblioteca Comunitaria. Thanks to the support of the National Cultural Concertation Program of the Ministry of Culture via the “Germán Uribe” Foundation, a theater production was established. This production narrates the collective memory of the settlement of the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed, reconstructed from the oral accounts of its founders. Thus, a call for participation was

launched for an inaugural community theater group composed exclusively of women. The group was directed by a man and was named the “Violet Memory Collective.”

In this group, two young individuals from the community took part. To everyone’s surprise, several other diverse women from Ibagué also expressed interest in joining the initiative. The Creative category, which drew participants from various neighborhoods, reinforced the notion of perceiving the environmental conflicts of the micro-watershed as a citywide concern. Thanks to this creative process, it was possible to introduce an aesthetic language that beckoned the local inhabitants to rekindle their curiosity about the history of the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed.

The Home as a second scale of analysis that moves from the personal to the familial realm continued with the adaptation and maintenance of urban gardens for women. Together, we organized gardening ‘gatherings’ to support the care of plants on roofs, terraces, and patios where life is sown. This time, it took much work to maintain the process due to the lack of supplies and technical support to address plant diseases or concerns about their growth. Throughout the year, we awaited the Environmental Education Citizen Project - PROCEDA - to support this initiative from households. One of the significant lessons learned was to make commitments independent of other institutions and to avoid expectations about unapproved matters. It is crucial to highlight the living memory of peasant, indigenous, Afro, and caregiver women who have maintained their gardens despite the challenges and engage and energize community spaces.

The Community, a category that addresses the socialization, sharing, and relationship of families in the neighborhoods, was made possible by the development of mass events. These were filled with art, spirituality and showcased the cultural richness in the city, thanks to the memory and wisdom of the diverse communities inhabiting the urban context.

The Microbasin aims to address the relationship with the various actors that live and influence the urban territory crossed by the Hato de la Virgen stream. The micro basin acknowledges the inseparable bond between the stream and its inhabitants and calls for the attention of multiple needs presented by the Community to the local government institutions with roles within the Socio-environmental Management Plan. Despite the four meetings promoted in the initiative (created in the process) named the Network for the Recovery of the Hato de la Virgen Microbasin, where structural needs of the sector were addressed, and the delivery of the Annual Action Plan to the Community was demanded, it was not possible to receive concrete responses. The only tangible actions have been palliative measures in cleaning campaigns and the unclogging of a sewer.

Furthermore, the need for more planning by the local government was once again evident, along with the challenging stance of institutional entities when the organized community demands attention to their needs. In some cases, the process has been perceived as disruptive, and rather than being acknowledged by the institutions for promoting community organization and addressing local needs, it has been discredited and delegitimized through paternalistic activities such as gift-giving and brigades that overlook the essence and significance of the process. There needs to be oversight by control entities to highlight these failures, one of which is the lack of an annual action plan. However, it is worth noting that persistence reveals strategies for institutional engagement, including efforts to organize the annual Environmental and Arts Festival.

Considering the city's creative dynamics, and the cultural and environmental offerings that drew virtual and physical attendees from other parts of the city, there has been a growing interest in involving the citizens of Ibagué. This interest is based on the premise that the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed is a strategic ecosystem in Ibagué. Therefore, a meso or middle-ground perspective could bring in new social stakeholders, weave support networks, highlight community efforts and organizations, and engage more individuals and institutions in the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed environmental restoration through alternative environmental awareness arts.

Learning by Doing Methodology

The pedagogical proposal of the “Titiribiblioteca Comunitaria” has been developed from the qualitative research method of social sciences, aligned with the critical social paradigm. This approach intends to boost a transformative experience from within the community, recognizing it as both the subject of research and the driving force behind its change. In the words of Guba, as cited by Colmenares, this Critical-Social paradigm:

[...] offers an answer different from positivism and post-positivism to the epistemological question, resolving the problem of the impossibility of neutrality; it actively and explicitly includes values in the research process. Regarding the three levels or dimensions, we have the following: a) a realistic or critical realist ontology, b) a subjectivist epistemology, in the sense of including values, and c) a transformative dialogic methodology (Colmenares, 2012, p.103).

Consistent with the above, the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, from which this exercise is approached, is categorized within the qualitative research methods of social sciences. According to Denzin and Lincoln, it implies:

[...] an emphasis on the qualities of entities and processes and meanings that cannot be experimentally examined or measured (if they can be measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is being studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the essentially evaluative nature of the inquiry. They pose questions and construct answers highlighting how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin, 2012, p. 62).

PAR identifies three key components that guide the process, implying an exercise of subject-to-subject interaction in the research. This methodology allows for a dialogue on an equal footing and a collective construction of knowledge based on individual experiences that give meaning to everyday life in the community. As Durston and Miranda state, “The potential of participatory research is oriented towards knowledge production, critically articulating the contributions of science and popular knowledge, to redirect them towards action that transforms reality” (Cepal, 2002, p.7).

The proposed methodology is materialized through daily individual and community encounters conducted from house to house. In order to summarize its achievements or discoveries, those related to events of great importance to the process will be highlighted.

Exchange of Seeds and Knowledge: The tireless work of women, who play a crucial role as pillars of community organization and as molders of society, is essential. Their work in unpaid caregiving of sons and daughters often remains in the shadows, unrecognized. Nevertheless, this work has led us to discover the rich culture around the care of life. It is imperative to make visible and value this living memory of everyday, popular, and ancestral knowledge as if it is not recognized it runs the risk of being forgotten. For this reason, three visibility events were conducted: *The fique weaving workshop*, an ancestral practice of the Pijao People for the production of jigras and fishing nets; *the conversation with knowledgeable city women and the first exchange of ancestral seeds and knowledge*.

These spaces revitalized through symbolic practices such as the Song to Water, to Seeds, to life, and instilling hope in planting, allowed the audience to witness the present wisdom of the Pijao People in seed care and traditional planting and medicine practices, which are feasible even in small gardens. Women were the protagonists, and thanks to their knowledge, it was possible to share with a broad young population of the city interested in delving into the roots of the Pijao People and the vibrant Amerindian essence that communicates from the interculturality of the 21st century.

Women's Tales: From grassroots communication, audiovisuals were developed in which two women from the Pijao People tell us about their role in plant care and the sustenance of society. The aim is to keep alive the memory that directly communicates elements essential for the survival of identities in the city: <https://youtu.be/H6eAl-zZCx8> and <https://youtu.be/GfupILhReQY> (Titiribiblioteca Comunitaria, 2021).

Community Theater Play "Virgelina and the Stream, A Tale of Water and Invasion": This creative process, which lasted four months and involved the participation of six city women from various backgrounds and life experiences (who came together with an interest in exploring theater and contributing to the visibility of the memory of settling in the Hato de la Virgen watershed), fostered aesthetic languages to raise awareness about the care of life. As part of their testimonials, the participants say:

I have enjoyed discovering the performing arts because I see that here I can be myself and explore. I feel outgoing and can show more of who I am. Here I come, and I forget everything I have to do. I have decided to make time for theater, I am learning new habits and setting new goals in theater, cooking, and languages. What we have been doing seems cool to me, it's my first experience exploring the body, emotions, and collective creation. I am discovering abilities, my internal connection, and theatrical exploration. I like that they open the door for me, they do not scold me, they do not bully me, they accept me. Here I feel integrated and feel loved, they appreciate me as I am. Developing this play, for us, the residents of the Buenaventura neighborhood is significant because it shows the entire development of a neighborhood, it's seeing how through art we can move forward with a process that will involve many people in the recovery of water sources vital for the city. Moreover, the memory of what Hato de la Virgen was brings back many memories we know we can rescue through this work (Hoyos, D. 2021).

The continuous work of body preparation evolved into an inductive theater workshop with a social commitment. It invited participants to visit the neighborhood, get to know the local women, interact with them, and conduct a rehearsal with the public to discuss with the community the aesthetic proposal's strengths and closeness based on the territory's everyday life.

The play, which effectively incorporated symbolic elements such as the deteriorating snake, the stream, conflicts between neighbors, the care of plants, and the chaos of the city, resonated deeply with the audience during the *'II Festiencuentro Ambiental y de las Artes'*. There is anticipation for this play to be showcased in various places in Ibagué, Tolima (Colombia), fostering a dialogue about appreciating urban ecosystems.

This theater production shifted the creative dynamics of the Titiribiblioteca Comunitaria. The community library had been staging puppet scenes with children in previous iterations. This shift underscores the flexibility of the methodological proposal and its capacity to create aesthetic projects with a territorial perspective.

Environmental and Arts Festival, together for the Solidary Care of Life: This event was formalized in October to commemorate the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed day. It offers an opportunity to promote a high-quality artistic showcase that brings nationally renowned theater and puppet shows to peripheral areas of the city. This time, the area of intervention was expanded in the Musicalia neighborhood. Thus, the neighborhoods of Buenaventura, Jardín Santander, and Musicalia had the chance to witness the premiere of the play ‘Virgelina and the Ravine, a Tale of Water and Invasión’; puppet shows from national groups such as ‘El Baúl de la Fantasía’ and ‘Ave-Títeres’; and the Literary Roulette, a reading and theater engagement initiative, executed by the “Germán Uribe” Foundation in public spaces of Ibagué, thanks to the Tolima Departmental Culture Directorate and the Pa’Leer Network. Comments from attendees highlighted: “Even though I’m not from District 8, I am moved to see the persistent struggle of this community, their healing process, and resilience; to see and feel how they bring it into other languages.”

Over 300 people, mainly children, and women, participated in this festival. As is customary, a mandala was set up to offer intentions for healing the Hato de la Virgen stream. This was followed by artistic performances and concluded with a thank you to the institutions that made it possible. As one participant expressed: “the *Festiencuentro* is a fight to reclaim the right to enjoy the arts and to provide children with alternative windows to view the world, stepping away from the daily violence they face”.

Regarding this event, Laura Torres, a student of Peace and Region from the University of Ibagué, who carried out her internship at the “Germán Uribe” Foundation, remarks, “Both theater and puppet plays were performed to celebrate the day of the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed. This event was executed through a process led by the “Germán Uribe” Foundation and involved institutions and individuals from District 8 of Ibagué.

Praxis in Dialogue with Community Feminisms

The opportunity to reflect upon community actions and the dynamics of the process allows us to recognize the presence of politics in all facets of life and how relationships constantly reshape the meaning of what is considered political and what is not. This idea provides the

chance to connect with claims from feminist and women's movements, rooted in historical demands or perspectives illustrated by the emblematic phrase: "The personal is political."

Similarly, this notion is also explicitly manifested in the community process under the term "the personal is political," highlighting the political significance of daily life in our experiences. There is an emphasis on recognizing women as political agents in the community across various dimensions of social life (individual-household-city), not just as delegates or representatives but also as artists, caregivers, and facilitators of reflection and collective organization. This perception positions neighborhood women's multiple voices and actions as essential in the political exercise for social transformations.

Thus, the possibility emerges not to label this community exercise as a feminist process but indeed to reflect upon and act on the approaches towards feminism by some of its members; the sensitivities and demands that arise from the heightened inequalities in the peripheries, which are experienced more violently by women and feminized bodies. From this springs the need to contemplate and propose dynamics, spaces, and community activities with a feminist lens, that is, aimed at transforming the patriarchal logic of power, which manifests in numerous ways and across diverse relationships.

Therefore, when the grassroots, community-based, and self-managed exercise sets out with the challenge of integrating environmental consciousness into the culture as a strategy for the restoration of the Hato de la Virgen micro-watershed, dynamics unfold where women and the care for all forms of life take center stage. Female artists stand out as they position their voices, experiences, and the reconstruction of their historical memory as protagonists in neighborhood processes. This practice allows us to see not only the relationship between culture and politics but also the ethical and transformative potential of art made by women in the context of a political demand for a dignified life on the city's outskirts.

It is precisely this element of art created by women, in which stories, claims, and objectives are central, without losing sight of the purpose of the artistic exercise, which is political; it thus approaches the art-politics relationship from a feminist perspective. In the words of Sánchez, C. A:

I believe the notion of feminist artistic, political action is broader and more appropriate since both arts and feminist politics have transformed—and continue to transform—both the world of art and politics in their canonical and limiting ideas. These changes surpass the subordination of forms to content and their mere utility exercise, as the medium becomes the political action (Castro, 2018, p. 27).

In the process, a synergy is recognized between the proposals - political demands - and art, which allows expression and becomes another way of practicing politics. According to Tarrés, cited by Sánchez, C.A., this synergy generates a: “[...] rupture with the classical conception of politics, which defines it as the exercise of public power, as well as with the idea that politics is a matter whose contents are determined within the borders of the institutional system.” (Tarrés, 2002, p. 120).

While this process has not been constructed based on an epistemological and feminist political commitment, thanks to praxis, it has been discovered how popular environmental education converses with perspectives of ecofeminism that place the care of life at the center or of community feminism (Martínez, S. 2019), which is decolonial, recovers ancestral memories and knowledge, values diversity, proposes a change in the social order from a place of enunciation outside the lenses of European and North American coloniality, and begins by exploring feelings and the creative capacity of the body and its relationship with the territory. These elements lead to reflections on the rhizomatic nature of feminism and the multiplicity of quests for the transformation of the patriarchal order present in facets, layers, and institutions of everyday life.

Conclusions, Learnings, and Future Proposals

Social intervention in 2021 changed its dynamics due to the context of the pandemic, which generated a virtual cultural and artistic offering that broadened the base population spectrum and involved people from other sectors of the city interested in participating in both artistic and environmental actions. Thus, the proposal arises to strengthen the city analysis category and propose artistic-environmental agendas that dialogue with a diverse audience.

The proposal of popular education, which names reality from aesthetics such as literature, theater, and puppets, stems from the conviction of viewing art as both an aesthetic and political act that contributes to the reconstruction of the social fabric in the territory. Processes require time and are circular, fluid, and contradictory. Thus, this qualitative method values aesthetic enjoyment and the contemplation of arts as a right that builds more sensitive citizens to reality in the medium and long term.

Recognizing, highlighting, and disseminating widespread and ancestral knowledge contribute to a sense of belonging in the urban-popular field and the survival of cultural heritage. This knowledge dialogue with community feminisms and materialize in caring for life through urban gardens, child-rearing, natural medicine, spirituality, and a sense of community. These

symbolic articulators created empathy between neighborhood residents and people from other city sectors.

The pedagogical proposal of the “Titiribiblioteca Comunitaria” (Community Puppet-Library) has proven to be emancipatory social work in that it addresses context needs, discusses local issues, and tackles a plethora of topics organically adaptable to other contexts. At the same time, it is flexible since it involves different age groups in creative processes that problematize their reality from aesthetic languages such as literature, theater, and puppets.

As with community feminisms, this process is not linear, surpassing the so-called patriarchal hierarchy, homogenizing, and excluding junction. In the words of Martínez, in community feminism: “There are no timelines but processes that connect, intertwining mutually... processes that modify and construct dialectically” (Martínez, 2019).

The Network for the Recovery of the Hato de la Virgen Microbasin has demonstrated consistency in its institutional articulation. This network has challenged territorial planning and order capacities. Moreover, it has left a mark on local territory management, hoping to set a precedent highlighting the persistent patriarchal institutional logic, which perpetuates oppression, marginality, and exclusion, typical of the dualism between the center and the periphery.

As a continuous critical reflection on practices, research has unearthed these learnings, strengthened grassroots organization, and built affections with women who, with their persistence, showcase the conviction of this long-term collective dream, thus enacting community struggle.

Challenges include fluctuations in community participation tied to the economic and health crisis that significantly impacted organizational dynamics during 2021. The impact of patriarchal institutional welfare, which produces transactional relationships and particular interests among community members and organizations in the territory, has also been a significant obstacle. This limits the possibility of strengthening the sense of the public, the collective community, and long-term work.

The pandemic context and intervention broaden the focus from merely local dynamics to a dimension that includes two new areas: the city and virtuality, as future action proposals.

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