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Pedagogies to "hold on to life": practices of body-territory care in the midst of the armed conflict in Buenaventura, Colombia

Pedagogías "para agarrarse a la vida": prácticas de cuidado del cuerpo-territorio en medio del conflicto armado en Buenaventura, Colombia

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Abstract

In this article I analyze the practices of defense of the body-territory of teachers working in schools affected by the armed conflict in the city of Buenaventura, in the Colombian Pacific. Through ethnographic research work, I show how the armed conflict and the capitalistic depredation of the ethnic territory of Buenaventura have affected the schools and the reproduction of life of the black communities that live there. In the face of the practices of terror, dispossession and deterritorialization promoted by the armed actors, female black teachers of Buenaventura have responded with "pedagogies to hold on to life". These pedagogies articulate teaching strategies, care relationships and ancestral knowledge that allow them to sustain their bodies and school territories in the midst of despair. I conclude that care is a form of political-pedagogical agency to recover and heal the territory, but it is also an ambivalent practice full of pain, injustice and contradictions. In this sense, care is highlighted as a central analytical key to understand the possible relationships between education, resistance and the defense of ancestral Afro-Colombian territories.

Keywords: care – pedagogies – body-territory – armed conflict – Buenaventura.

Resumen

En este artículo analizo las prácticas de defensa del cuerpo-territorio que realizan maestras que trabajan en escuelas afectadas por el conflicto armado en la ciudad de Buenaventura, en el Pacífico colombiano. A partir de un trabajo etnográfico, pongo en evidencia cómo el conflicto armado y la depredación capitalista del territorio étnico de Buenaventura han afectado a las escuelas y la reproducción de la vida de las comunidades negras que allí habitan. Ante las prácticas de terror, despojo y desterritorialización agenciadas por los actores armados, las maestras negras bonaverenses han respondido con "pedagogías para agarrase a la vida". Estas pedagogías articulan estrategias de enseñanza, relations de cuidado y conocimientos ancestrales que permiten sostener los cuerpos y los territorios escolares en medio de la desesperanza. Se

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concluye que el cuidado es una forma de agencia político-pedagógica para recuperar y sanar el territorio, pero también se trata de una práctica ambivalente, poblada de dolores, desigualdades y contradictions. En este sentido, se destaca el cuidado como una clave analítica central para comprender las relations posibles entre educación, resistencia y defensa de los territorios ancestrales afrocolombianos.

Palabras clave: cuidado – pedagogías – cuerpo-territorio – conflicto armado – Buenaventura.

Introduction

> *You know, for the black people of the Pacific ethnoeducation is what keeps us holding on to life […] that i show we defend ourselves from so much evil that has come to our territory.* Nicolasa, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022.

I heard these words from Nicolasa, a Social Sciences teacher who teaches in one of the neighborhoods most affected by armed conflict in the city of Buenaventura, on the Pacific Coast of Colombia. For many black women from Buenaventura education is not just an act of transmission of theoretical contents but a process that allows them to "hold on to life"; that is, a fabric of knowledge to protect their community, nature, and the territory from the deadly effects of violence, drug trafficking, and extractivistic projects that have penetrated the Pacific region of Colombia in recent decades.

As sociologist Betty Ruth Lozano (2016) points out, the black women who arrived in the region as a result of slavery or *cimarronaje* have not been passive subjects of the violence but, to the contrary, have throughout history been the agents of epistemic insurgences through pedagogical and spiritual practices "that nowadays become alternatives to the predatory hegemonic development and wagers for Good Living" (Lozano, 2016: 10). The epistemic insurgences of the black women from Buenaventura have become alternatives to the model of death imposed by colonization, patriarchy and racist capitalism. These insurgences do not constitute defensive resistances or practices of opposition to the agents who try to prey on the territory, but practices of care rooted in daily life that build communitarian worlds to live better in the midst of situations de violence, exploitation, and death.

The communitarian worlds sustained by the black women are based on the teaching of relational modes of existence in which society, nature, and culture are conceived as interlinked, forming a web of interdependent life (Escobar, 2018). From this standpoint, we may say that the own education processes sustained by black women from Buenaventura are not just "cultural know-how" but dissident epistemologies that light the road ahead for other ways of existing and of relating with the territory and with other beings besides humans.

However, there have been important conceptual developments in the field of educational research in Colombia that highlight the role of Afrocolombian ethnoeducation as a political

process that has been fundamental for the defense of ancestral territories of the Pacific coast against the avalanche generated by the armed conflict and the neoliberal model of development imposed on the region since the 1980s (Lozano, 2016; Caicedo *et al*., 2016; Escobar, 2018).

Afrocolombian ethnoeducation has been built through tensions between its formalization as a State policy and its practice as an emancipating popular education or "casa adentro" education, as teacher Jorge García (2011) calls it. "Casa adentro" ethnoeducation is conceived as a political process of research and teaching of black ancestry whose aim is to strengthen the identity processes to fight the racism of the school system, bring the community together around the legacy of the elders, men and women, and reclaim political autonomy and respect of ways of production based on harmonic coexistence with nature. The defense of the territory is at the heart of Afrocolombian ethnoeducation. For these communities, the territory is not a juridical-administrative unit or a geographical boundary but a "collective space for existence, a vital space that ensures survival as a people in a profound interdependence with nature, the human and the spiritual" (Escobar, 2018: 168).

Besides being a way to defend the territory, Afrocolombian ethnoeducation has been an "alternative to war" (Caicedo *et al*., 2016) in which Afrocolombian educators have built teaching strategies and methodologies which have helped to alleviate the damage generated by the armed conflict, such as displacement, forced disappearances, and the psychosocial traumas derived from abandonment, terror, and discrimination. As Caicedo *et al*. (2016) have shown, ethnoeducation has contributed to the persistence of Afrocolombian communities in their territories through cultural resilience strategies, strengthening of the links between school and community, and the construction of a historical memory for peace.

However, in this article I intend to delve into the dimensions of care present in Afrocolombian ethnoeducational practices, particularly those that allow them to "maintain, continue, and repair" (Tronto, Fisher, 1990) the bodies of the students who have suffered the victimizations of the armed conflict and the capitalist depredation of the ethnic territory of Buenaventura, Colombia.

In this regard, I intend to analyze the care practices carried out by the teachers of Buenaventura to "hold on to life", which implies understanding care not only as a craft but also as a form of pedagogy that interlinks ways of knowing, relations with the students, affection, ancestral knowledge and community practices that support the world of the school in the midst of the violence imposed by the armed actors who dispute the territory among themselves.

I propose the notion of *pedagogies to hold on to life* in order to encompass the epistemic matrices and ways of teaching through which the teachers weave together forms of knowledge that seek to repair the bodies-territory dismembered by the violence of the armed conflict and the extractivistic processes that generate despoliation and de-territorialization.

In this respect, I wonder how one can teach to coexist with the territory through an ethos of care and interdependence, which teaching strategies allow us to care for the body-territory

in contexts of schools affected by the armed conflict, and what are the challenges faced by the teachers who carry out care practices in the midst of severe dynamics of ethnic, ecologic, and territorial extermination.

In order to respond to these concerns, in the first part I will make a brief contextualization of the ethnography I conducted between 2020 and 2022, with teachers who carry out practices of defense of the territory in public schools affected by the armed conflict in Buenaventura. Then I will offer a panorama of the dynamics of the armed conflict in this city and its impact on the school system and the teachers' work. Thirdly, I will show the conceptual bases that support the notion of *pedagogies to hold on to life,* as well as the ways in which the teachers care for the bodies of their students to care for the territory and the other way around (Cabnal, 2010). I will also question care as a category that is always kind, positive, or tending to the construction of peace, by showing the risks, pain and violence that this kind of practices also engender. Finally, I will present some provisional conclusions, in which I underscore care as an agency that creates enclaves of life, dignity, and healing in the midst of schools hurt by the armed conflict.

An ethnography on school care

This research is part of the doctoral dissertation I conducted at the School of Education of the Universidade de São Paulo (Brazil), in which I analyzed the care practices that arise in schools affected by armed violence in Colombia and Brazil through a feminist approach and an intersectional view of race, gender, and territory.[1]

Using a case study methodology, I conducted field work in the city of Buenaventura, in the department of Valle del Cauca in the southwest of Colombia, a region that since the 1980s has been under the scourge of the armed conflict and the territorial despoliation of the black communities who live there by agents of the State, multinational companies and outlaw armed groups (CNMH, 2015). In this respect, I wanted to learn how the armed conflict in this region has affected the schools and the teachers' work, particularly that of the teachers of basic education, since this symbolically feminized profession is also one in which women represent 70.1% of the teaching staff in this city (DANE, 2021).

In order to make contact with the teachers I conducted workshops with human rights organizations that work in the territory and that accompany processes of formation of teachers about the rights of the victims of the conflict, the gender approach, and the construction of strategies of historical memory. From all the participants in the workshops I selected 12 teachers based on three criteria. First, that they had worked for three continuous years in public schools affected by the armed conflict. Second, that they had reported to have conducted pe-

1 The dissertation is entitled "Professoras sob fogo cruzado: bordando cuidados e resistências em meio à violência armada na Colômbia e no Brasil" (Bello, 2023) and was funded by the Programa Estudantes Convênio de Pós-Graduação (PEC-PG) of the agency CAPES of the Ministry of Education of Brazil.

dagogical strategies to cope with the effects of the conflict; and third, that they had been linked to processes of mobilization of the black communities or the construction of peace.

Between 2020 and 2022 I conducted 12 in-depth interviews with teachers who identified themselves as black women and whose age went from 35 to 65 years old.[2] Some of them had been direct victims of the armed conflict, whether for conducting their work or for circumstances derived from the war experienced in the city. Their career as teachers went from 6 to 13 years, and a considerable group has worked for more than 20 years in the public education system. All the teachers work in the urban area of Buenaventura. Three of them work in basic primary education and hold a Bachelor's degree in Child Education, Sociology, and Social Work. One of them teaches Biology and works with teenagers in secondary school. Seven of them are counseling teachers[3] and, finally, I interviewed a school principal.

Buenaventura is considered an "ethnic municipality" because most of its inhabitants identify as black/Afrocolombian (90%) and indigenous (4%) (CNMH, 2015). This ethnic and cultural differentiation is applied to its educational administration, in which the teachers in this territory are selected under the category of "ethnoeducators". Since the promulgation of Law 70 of 1993, in which the State recognizes the collective entitlement of black communities to their territories, an ethnoeducational policy that included among its objectives having a body of teachers trained for the defense of their territory, ethnic identity, culture, vernacular languages and community practices was fostered (Castillo, 2023). In this respect, the teachers with whom I worked vindicate politically an identity as ethnoeducators derived from their activism in the community, closely linked to ethnoeducation as a "casa adentro" process (García, 2011).

I complemented the interviews with ethnographic observation exercises in the four public schools where the teachers work. There I was able to record some of the pedagogical projects about Afrocolombian ethnoeducation and the didactics used to care for the community and the territory. These observations were discontinuous and punctual, since the dynamics of the conflict prevented me from entering the schools or remain in them for long periods. Hence, I sought to adapt to the recommendations of the teachers and looked for "safe" spaces so we could talk. I conducted interviews on line, at their homes, in hotels and shopping centers, as the sensation of danger was real and strongly pervaded the atmosphere of the schools located in the neighborhoods affected by the armed conflict.

Both the interviews and the observations were transcribed and then systematized by means of the Software Atlas Ti. By using this tool, categories that account for the place of care in the strategies of resistance of the teachers for the defense of their communitarian and educational territories emerged.

2 The names of the teachers and the schools where they work were modified or not mentioned in order to respect their request for anonymity.

3 According to the Ministry of Education of Colombia, the function of counseling teachers is to attend to the educational needs of the students, promote institutional educational projects, prevent situations of risk and conduct psychosocial work to guarantee the rights of children and adolescents (MEN, 2021).

My interactions with the teachers were oriented towards the identification of their ethical, pedagogic and political approaches in regard to care, taking into account that care work "can only be understood through the words of the workers and the ethical sense that they give to their tasks, as unpleasant as they may be" (Molinier, 2018: 93).

The interviews stimulated the reflexivity of the teachers about the concrete work that they do in order to respond to the needs of their students, and the "teaching know-how" that each one of them has accumulated throughout their career (Rockwell, 1986). This know-how is not the same as the institutional codes regulated by the schools or the educational policies but rather local, everyday knowledge that emerges from the interactions with their educational community, the emotions that shape their teaching work, the history of each school within their territory, and their power dynamics.

Thus, the case study revolved around three lines: the working conditions faced by the teachers in the schools and their life stories; testimonies of the teachers about how they have experienced the impact of the armed conflict on their teaching work, and finally the narratives of care and emotional attention they have with their students, as well as the pedagogical projects they have created to cope with the violence.

I concluded my field work with an exercise of socialization of the results of the process, and I gathered and incorporated the recommendations and dissensions formulated by the teachers.

Buenaventura: a city of the Pacific coast bled by war

Buenaventura is a municipality located on the Pacific coast of Colombia. 51% of the international trade of the country goes through its port (CNMH, 2015). It is characterized as a humid tropical zone surrounded by multiple bodies of water, among them the sea, rivers, and lagoons. It is a land rich in biodiversity, and in it the black communities have, since the times of slavery, recreated a world in which their ancestors, the territory, rivers, plants, humans, and spirits coexist in an interdependent way.

By 2018, the municipality had 423,927 inhabitants, 90.4% living in the urban area and 9.6% in rural areas (CIVP, 2020: 36). Buenaventura in particular, and the region of the Pacific in general, have been constructed as racialized territories; that is, spaces conceived as uncivilized and underdeveloped, in sharp contrast with the Andean region, imagined as "white", modern, and booming. Through the white-mestizo hegemony that characterizes the Colombian socio-racial order these places have been treated as "emptied territories" of which nothing is known – conveniently – about their history, their culture and the traditional ways in which the black and indigenous communities have constructed their worlds in an interdependent way with the territory (Vergara, 2014).

Since the 1980s, the region of the Pacific has become one of the scenarios of imperial globalization and colonialism in which the extractivistic economic model, drug trafficking and the

state policies of development have pushed the local communities to the edge of ethnic and environmental annihilation (Escobar, 2018). Multiple processes of despoliation and de-territorialization have been deployed over the territory of Buenaventura, leveraged by an authoritarian model of development expressed in the enlargement of the maritime port, the construction of road infrastructure, the touristic industry, illegal crops, and extractivistic mining and forestry.

The "arrival of development" was simultaneous with the incursion in the territory of paramilitary groups who, seeking to take control of the port and of a thriving illegal economy, deployed a strategy of terror to take the collective territories away from the black communities through massacres, homicides, tortures, and disappearances. According to the National Center of Historical Memory (2015), between 1990 and 2015 there were 4,799 homicides, 475 forced disappearances, 26 massacres, and 152,837 victims of forced displacement.

In 2006 there was a demobilization of the paramilitary structures and the recapture by the guerrilla of the rural territories of Buenaventura. Likewise, successors of the paramilitaries arose, known popularly as "criminal bands" or "bacrim", who in a more atomized and dispersed way continued the processes of control over the territory, the population, and the illegal markets. According to Jaramillo *et.al*. (2019), between 2005 and 2015 the city experienced an intense wave of violence expressed in the imposition of "violence geographies" in which the armed groups in dispute accelerated processes of fracture and appropriation of the black territories through "invisible frontiers" and "landscapes of fear".

These devices implied the division of neighborhoods, militarization of daily life, control over the mobility of the bodies and the imposition of practices of terror that have torn apart the community life of the people of Buenaventura and sown mistrust and fear. In this period, practices such as the dismemberment of bodies in places known as "casas of pique" and the "acuafosas", clandestine cemeteries located in the lagoons in which the criminal bands tortured and killed their victims became infamous.

The echoes of peace that came with the signing of the Final Agreement for the end of the conflict with the guerrilla of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016 were felt very slightly in Buenaventura. The promise of the post-conflict quickly changed and engendered a new cycle of violence that still continues today. As anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo (2018) explains, the model of neoliberal peace imposed by the Colombian State was not conceived to do justice to the black communities but to benefit the model of capitalistic production through new touristic, commercial, and port circuits. In this way, this model of peace plunged Buenaventura into poverty and deepened the bloodshed in which intra-urban displacements, recruiting and using minors, feminicides and sexual violence have become systematic as weapons to break the leadership of women in the defense of the territory (Lozano, 2016).

The school system of Buenaventura has not been exempted from the damage of the armed conflict. This damage can only be understood through a complex assembly that links the histo-

rical abandonment of the State of the inhabitants of the region and the dynamics of the armed groups in the territory. For the teachers with whom I spoke, being a teacher in Buenaventura means working "with your heart and your fingernails" (Liliana, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020). The investment in education in Buenaventura is exiguous, and this is a product of a historical relationship of racism in which the education of the black communities has not been a priority for the State. Most of the school facilities of the municipality are old, in bad shape and with deficient materials, which creates huge obstacles to offer quality education. In many schools there is no internet, no libraries, spaces for recreation, dining rooms or even restrooms.

Many teachers buy the school materials and pay for the pedagogical experiences with their own salary. They also make repairs of the infrastructure such as painting the classrooms and even do surveillance work in their free time. There are great difficulties to conduct comprehensive and personalized interventions, since classrooms are crowded with up to 50 students. In the case of counseling teachers this gets worse, since there are schools in which there is only one professional to attend to a population of 3,000 students.

Liliana, a counseling teacher who has been working for three years in a school of the Commune 8 of Buenaventura, stated how her affection for her students helped her deal with the precariousness or her teaching work: "Here in Buenaventura a teacher works more for love, not for the benefits. One works for the kids, because even the pay is deficient and one is exposed too much on account of the violence" (Liliana, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

Another element that worsens the encroachment on the right to education of the people of Buenaventura is the patent corruption in the administration of public education. Between 2005 and 2015 significant funds were stolen from the purse for this sector, which landed one of the mayors of the city in prison. This generated great trauma, since the corruption affected the coverage and "out of a population of 140,000 in school age, 30,000 are still outside the system" (Rosendo, 2021).

The armed conflict has also been a dynamizer of the damage to education. Due to the multiples clashes between criminal bands, the schools have had to close their doors, one of them for up to 45 days of the school year. In schools that have been affected by the invisible frontiers pedagogical activities are paralyzed, classrooms are empty, and there is a high rate of dropout because families stop sending their children to school since they run the risk of being hit by a stray bullet or becoming victims of recruitment or sexual violence. Likewise, teachers cannot conduct pedagogical outings or sports events in public spaces because many neighborhoods are militarized and the free circulation of bodies is punished.

The greatest challenge faced by the teachers is to try to protect their students from recruitment, instrumentalization, and sexual violence. It is common that students are used for selling and distributing drugs within the school, but also as "campaneros" (informants), combatants, or to run errands. Girls and adolescents are coerced into becoming "lovers", as armed

actors take advantage of their economic and emotional vulnerability to offer their financial support and protection.

Some teachers with whom I spoke mentioned having been the victims of threats and sexual violence for trying to change the mindset of youths and for trying to prevent them from joining the "cuento", as they call the world of drug trafficking and criminal bands. Through sexual violence, in the form of expressive violence (Segato, 2014), some seek to threaten the teachers and send a message to the community that armed actors are the owners of the bodies and the territories, as well as to reassert a patriarchal gender order in which the women must remain silent and obey the male authority of the criminal bands.

Manuela, a school counselor with ten years of experience, said: "We try to take care taking all kinds of risk […] That's why we become targets, because we get in the middle of many things that make people tremble. But these kids need us and that's why we take the risk." (Manuela, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022). Working as a teacher in this context means practicing "high risk care" since, by trying to protect the students' lives, the teachers get in the middle of the interests of the criminal bands. Likewise, within the schools, they do not get support to make denunciations or activate routes of protection, which makes them feel guilt and frustration for not being able to do anything to save these kids' lives.

It is an exercise of care that takes place not as a heroic act but as a survival response before an inoperative State that is not in the territory to guarantee the life and security of the inhabitants of the Pacific Coast of Colombia. In this respect, it is common that teachers take upon themselves the responsibilities of filing complaints, protecting the physical integrity of their students, and fighting so the youths who are at risk of joining criminal bands are not expelled by the schools' administrations. Thus, the teachers keep many youths from being expelled from the school, since "expelling them would mean sending them into the lion's den." (Gabriela, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

In the ethnography it became evident that there is a sexual division of the work of care in the school in which the female teachers who take an interest in the aspects that affect the lives of the students in the context of the armed conflict are often considered not very professional and *sapas*, that is, meddling people who do more than they should. This causes the responsibilities of care in the school not to be taken equally by male teachers or administrative staff, which makes care appear as feminized, devalued, and invisible work.

> Committed teachers are branded as softies. The hardened ones are them, the teachers who just teach contents and see us as the lazy ones, the sentimental ones, the ones who give love. Many teachers think that their job is just to teach and don't consider our job useful (Gabriela, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

I was able to see this unequal and naturalized distribution of the work of care in a teachers' meeting in a school of the Commune 2 in which Rossy, a counseling teacher, has worked for 18

years. Her school is located within a context controlled by a criminal band that has deployed practices of instrumentalization and recruitment of children and adolescents.

In the meeting, the teachers were discussing the responsibility of implementing the Cátedra de la Paz (Decree 1038 of 2015), a compulsory academic space in all the schools of Colombia whose purpose is to foster citizenship skills for democracy, the culture of peace, and knowledge of the armed conflict. Education for peace is a very important issue in a context still run through by conflict. However, the Cátedra has found difficulties in its implementation, since it was not planned in a transversal way in the curriculum and there is not an equal participation of all the teachers in its execution. In that meeting, the school principal asked the teachers (all male, by the way) of Mathematics, Physical Education, and Technology to team up with Rossy in order to move forward with the school's educational project of peace. However, these teachers refused, claiming that they could not take on academic workload, and one of them insisted that his role was that of "being a teacher, not a peace negotiator of peace".

Rossy was upset and expressed her displeasure about her male colleagues' lack of commitment, and even then the school principal did not intervene. After the meeting, she told me "They always do the same, they play dead and delegate. They think we have to speak of peace and their job is to speak of serious things. Every year it is the same story, because if I don't do the Cátedra, nobody does" (Rossy, teacher, 2020, Buenaventura).

Many of these female teachers believe that their pedagogical work contributes to keeping their students alive. For example, Sara, school counselor, believes that her teaching work is to "dispute" youths from the criminal bands. "Here we are in a tug of war between two learnings, to see which one prevails. Who will keep the kid? Who will take it?" (Sara, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022).

On the one hand, in the midst of their precariousness, the teachers are doing an education for life and collective power in which they seek to persuade their students to continue studying, not to join the criminal bands, and defend the territory and the community. On the other hand, the armed actors function as pedagogues of cruelty (Segato, 2014), inculcating warlike, individualistic, consumeristic and insensitive masculinities, in order to shape subjectivities more akin to the project of depredation of the territory and capitalistic development.

Rita Segato (2014) mentions that pedagogies of cruelty constitute the educational model of the capitalistic and colonizing economic project. Therefore, the damage against the right to education provoked by the violence and extractivism must also be measured in function of the elimination of the educations of the original communities who struggle to remain in their territories. In this sense, the teachers are worried because the appropriation of young bodies for war means the destruction of the relational world of the black communities and of their persistence as a people.

Thus, the teachers face daily the need to intervene and question the know-how of war incorporated by their students. For example, I recorded how some children played in a school

yard dramatizing the rape of a girl and saying that they were *palas*; that is, bosses of criminal bands. Contesting this know-how of war is a titanic task, since the schemes of appropriation, cruelty and consumerism are legitimized in the culture.

Faced with hunger, exclusion, and poverty, many children and youths are seduced by armed actors with promises of money, power, and prestige. This generates anxiety in the teachers, as they see that the communitarian worlds of the Pacific coast of Colombia are crumbling down due to the patriarchal rationales of the armed conflict: "They are prioritizing material things, power, the legitimacy of violence. Our ancestral values are being set aside and one wonders how you do schooling in a place where violence is legitimized." (Gabriela, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

The teachers who participated in this research said they were tired, depressed, and abandoned. Many felt desperate, and sometimes felt they wanted to quit. I noticed none of them was getting medical attention for mental or psychosocial health from the Secretariat of Education of Buenaventura or any other state institution. This shows that the teachers constitute an ill class that has not been regarded as subject of repair by the State. These teachers suffer not only work fatigue but also a deep and historical trauma derived from the fact of witnessing the extermination of black youth, which is experienced as both a personal and collective damage.

Pedagogies to hold on to life

Faced with the current context of despoliation, de-territorialization, ecological damage and destruction of the ancestral practices of the black communities, the teachers with whom I spoke have built pedagogical experiences to "hold on to life". These pedagogies do not constitute a set of fixed practices or of formal curricula; to the contrary, they are daily actions that take place in the school and revolve around the care of the bodies, the territory and the ancestral Afrocolombian memories. To this extent, I understand that care may constitute a form of ethics and political agency that can transgress the orders of death imposed by the armed conflict (Puig of the Bellacasa, 2018).

As sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez points out (2020), care and material reproduction of the human beings constitute nowadays the central axes of popular struggles in Latin America, seeking to construct the common and defend life from the onslaught of capitalism, extractivism, and processes of despoliation and violence that are increasingly lethal. Care operates as a radical policy that upholds relationships of reciprocity, interdependence, and collective work to sustain life in a communal way, and against exploitation and domination. Practicing care in a communitarian way opens up possibilities to reimagine the world and transform it. Care as political agency is a process that emerges in response to the neglect of the State, "a collective, anti-hierarchical action situated outside the mercantile structures of capitalism that in the long term contributes to social transformation" (Nadasen, 2023: 171).

To some extent, these practices of care resonate with the black feminist pedagogies, which conceptualize emancipatory education as that which looks after the survival of oppressed groups, and the construction of knowledge for community integration, spiritual growth, political mobilization, and aesthetic as well as corporal resignification (Gomes, 2017; Thompson, 2003).

School care implies a concern for the wellbeing of the students beyond the cognitive aspects of teaching (De Carvalho, 1999), and in turn constitutes a labor of preservation and transmission of the links that support the communal worlds (Lozano, 2016). It is not "women's work" or "feminine pedagogy" but a human activity that seeks to respond to aspects of vulnerability and interdependence of the bodies in the educational processes. Following Tronto and Fisher's formula (1990), I see pedagogies to hold on to life as those ways of teaching whose political-educational horizon is to maintain, continue, and repair the bodies-territory that have been dismembered by the violence of the armed conflict.

This type of pedagogical actions that contribute to sustaining educational communities in the midst of State violence and criminal economies have gained recognition in the field of education in Latin America, since teachers in our region face the challenge of maintaining schooling in contexts run through by despoliation, violence, and militarization. Several researchers have tried to account for the nexus between education and the so-called "war on drugs",[4] which have left negative impacts in the education and in the life of thousands of children and adolescents. In this respect, the question about teaching work has become a concern about the role played by education in the construction of experiences of coping, resistance to and overcoming of the violence and the conflict associated to drug trafficking and State repression.

In México, particularly in the state of Guerrero, the studies of Solano and Trujillo (2021) have shown how the military policy of "war on drugs" and disputes with drug traffickers affect the daily life of schools through terror, violence, and kidnapping. Faced with these situations, teachers have developed strategies of silence to keep violence from infiltrating classrooms, with the aim of sustaining everyday life in schools and avoid associations with armed criminal groups.

In the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, it has been documented how the teachers of public schools deal with the military policies of public security and the factions of drug traffickers through pedagogical repertories that politicize daily life with exercises of physical and psychological protection of the students, in the midst of a continuous situation of shootings and armed confrontations that turn the schools into battlefields. These pedagogical repertories involve emotional work, artistic expressions, and critical reflection in the curriculum about armed violence. In this way, "the teachers are forced to improvise all the time in order to respond

4 The war on drugs is understood as a global policy that since the 1980s has been configured as an assembly of actors and rationales of prohibition of the production, distribution and consumption of substances conceived as illicit, as well as the deployment of a rhetoric of "war", based on which military actions to fight drug trade are justified, which has placed the State against different criminal groups, generating great insecurity and the violation of the right to life of the most marginalized populations in Latin America (Rodríguez-Gómez, Bermeo, 2020).

to dangerous circumstances and preserve some level of stability in their pedagogical routine" (Freire, Santos, 2022: 232).

In a dialogue with these studies, I believe that the pedagogical actions of the teachers in the midst of these "wars" seek not only to survive but also to transform the school and project other possible futures. Thus, holding on to life means several pedagogical movements that seek to maintain the hope of a different future, an ancestral future, in which the black communities may persist, re-exist and re-live in their territories (García, Walsh, 2017). That is how Luz Dary, a Biology teacher who has been teaching her students to defender their territory as the aim of her educational practice for the last 25 years, understands it:

> In the end we want our students to overcome and have a dignified life, to raise the flag that our ancestor left us. Although in this moment we teachers are under many threats, we must continue the struggle and not let our guard down. That is the legacy we will leave our children and grandchildren: our struggle and the persistence in the territory, and knowing that with education our existence can improve (Luz Dary, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

When I speak of body-territory I am borrowing from the thought of Maya-Xinca communitarian feminist Cabnal (2010), who understands that the damages generated by the capitalistic, patriarchal, colonial and extractivistic model on the territories are damages that affect the bodies simultaneously. The body-territory is a concept that refers to an inextricable relationship between the land-territory as a place of life, and the body as an existential territory interlinked to the earth. Cabnal explains that "the historical and oppressive violence exists both for my first body territory as well as for my historical territory, the earth. " (Cabnal, 2010: 23)

From this standpoint, it is interesting to think that the historical struggles of the Afrocolombian ethnoeducation for the defense of the territory are also struggles for the care, the recuperation and the defense of the bodies of the *renacientes*.[5] In this sense, the teachers of Buenaventura carry out practices of care with their students and their communities not only with the aim of resisting the war, but also to heal the bodies, prolong their lives and, through this exercise, heal the territory and recover it for a dignified life and their persistence as a community.

What are the teaching strategies deployed by the teachers to hold on to life and defend the bodies-territory like? Within the ethnography I conducted in Buenaventura I observed that the teachers have not been passive subjects before the armed conflict and that they have also deployed epistemic insurgences that rely on Afrocolombian ethnoeducation for their defense of the bodies-territory.

5 *Renacientes* is the Word used by the communities of the Pacific Coast of Colombia to refer to the new generations of black children and youths who embody the hope of rebirth; that is, of bringing new life to a community that has historically fought against physical, cultural and environmental extermination.

First, I found that the teachers carry out *strategies to mend the school territories* that have been fragmented by invisible frontiers. Through territorial resistance, the teachers keep the schools open even though there are curfews decreed by criminal bands or strategies of terror that seek to undermine the social order and daily life (Velásquez, Tangarife, 2019). Keeping the schools functioning, and staying in them despite the fear, constitute practices that give back hope to the communities and send the message that the collective territory must be respected.

María Isabel, a school principal, told me that in 2022 her school was caught in the middle of combat between the criminal bands. In that context, the *renacientes* stopped going to school and the community was paralyzed with fear. This led her to decide, along with her teachers, to camp in the school for 15 days with the purpose of sustaining a space of shelter and a referent of the collective amidst the anxiety of the armed conflict.

> After the July vacations there were shootings for 15 days and we had to go to a school together like this, with low heel shoes, going up the hill and taking the school. We got there and we did resistance. We called the parents and told them "We are here!" I told them "Bring the children, they're safer here, send them lunch, we're going to recover this." That's how we kept the school from falling (María Isabel, principal, Buenaventura, 2022).

Violeta teaches Social Sciences in another school affected by the invisible frontiers. There, the schools began to empty because the families stopped sending the children to school because of the fear of missing bullets, recruitment by criminals and sexual violence. Violeta joined other teachers and the female leaders of the territory and came up with a strategy of "communitarian cooking pots" to bring together the divided communities through cooking, solidarity, and food. Around the food, the teachers invite the families and the armed actors to negotiate strategies to prevent recruitment and violence against the *renacientes* on their way to the school.

The teachers take advantage of their position of authority in the community to speak with the members of the criminal bands, since many of them are not from outside the territory: they were their students and even their children are now. Using this agency through care, the teachers make it possible for their educational work to continue. Violeta remembered:

> […] Even the paramilitary man who watched over the frontier brought his pot and ate with us. He sat there and ate beans with rice. While he stopped watching, we told him "Come on, why don't you let the kids arrive to school safely?" That's what we did. (Violeta, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

A second type of pedagogical strategies consists of *re-educating the view towards the territory*. I met two teachers who promote an awareness of the interlinkage of the territory and the

care of nature through their ethno-educational practices. In 2021 they conducted an educational project with children about rescuing the ancestral knowledge of the women who know the territory. Through collaborative research, the teachers introduced the students to the knowledge of the medicinal plants used by female healers and traditional cooks to cure Covid-19 (The comadres, 2021). Through this exercise, the teachers promoted not only formal knowledge of the biodiversity of the territory but also affection and practices of care towards it.

Re-educating the view means unlearning the poisonous knowledge of modernity that teaches us to see the territory as a property or an inert object to be exploited. It implies going to the territory and teaching them to inhabit it through an awareness of the fact that there is no separation between society and nature. In fact, the teachers teach the children that their existence is only possible thanks to the existence of the rivers, medicinal plants, mangroves, the dead, the ancestors, and the jungle. In one of these exercises, I observed that the teachers and the wise women taught the children to ask the plants for permission before picking them to prepare remedies and cure Covid-19.[6] This act is not something from the folklore or magical thinking but a profound way to understand that nature is a living being and must be treated gratefully and with consideration.

To some extent, these educational practices resemble the concept of "interbeing" coined by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2022), a teaching in which "We no longer see the Earth as inert matter but as a sacred reality of which we are part. This view will change our attitude towards the planet, […] and we will be able to walk on the Earth with steps of love and respect" (Hanh, 2022: 38). The teachers practice an education for interbeing in which their students learn to see the territory as a space of life and deploy actions of care for its defense and preservation.

> See, ethnoeducation invites us to teach the children based on what they have in their territory. Ethnoeducation is a way of life. We teach that nature is wise and that is heals us of evil eye, bad air, frights. It is important that the children listen to their elders and thus learn. That's why what we did in the project was to highlight the relationship we have with our nature, knowing we are a people of the mangrove, of the river. So ethnoeducating is learning about the contribution of black men and women to society. And we make it visible because all that is getting lost because of the conflict. (Nicolasa, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022).

The last group of strategies points to what I call *pedagogies for healing and embodying*. The armed conflict produces psychosocial damage, emotional traumas and injuries in the children and adolescents. Their bodies are marked by racism, abandonment, and the trauma of having lost the connection with the territory and the memories associated to the place. Forced displacement is a common experience faced by the students, and many of them come from the rural

6 Some of the plants sowed by the wise women on their rooftops to cure Covid-19 are bitter andré, rosemary, citronella, gliricidia, and elderberry.

areas to the city as a consequence of despoliation, massacres and homicides. The black children of the Pacific coast are trapped in a situation of extreme vulnerability that exposes them to depression, suicide, drug abuse, alcoholism, sexual exploitation and instrumentalization by the criminal bands.

Faced with this situation, the teachers of a school have for the last ten years championed an ethnoeducational project entitled "Art and Social Gathering: ancestral pedagogy". This pedagogical experience has different angles. On the one hand, it seeks to recover a sense of the self in which children learn to feel pride and dignify their history, their rural origins, and their knowledge. On the other hand, through ancestral knowledge teachers seek to diminish the impact of the displacement and the uprooting. Finally, this strategy aims to make the school a space of welcome and affection, a space to encourage the *renacientes* to go on living.

> In the school we have always been working on rescuing the Afrocolombian tradition so that the kids could find an education that at least resembles a little what they had in their territory. So we offer them emotional support, lots of love and understanding, because leaving everything behind is very, very painful. (Nicolasa, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022).

For the teachers with whom I spoke, ancestrality educates and heals. Therefore, in Art and Social Gathering they research Afrocolombian knowledge related to popular economy, the arts, spirituality, and ways to weave community in the Pacific coast, as strategies to keep alive the struggle for the territory and heal the *renacientes* who have experienced the uprooting. Through the years, the teachers of this school have promoted a pertinent education in which children learn about the cultivation of medicinal plants on rooftops and dances and music of the Pacific coast such as the *currulao*, the *chirimía*, and the *bunde*. They have also learned to maintain Afrocolombian funerary rites, make ancestral drinks like the *viche*, and the community practices that have allowed this people to survive for centuries.

In this sense, I use Cabnal's (2022) notion of *embodiments* to designate those pedagogical experiences that contribute to rethread a community fragmented by the armed conflict. That is, they are practices of *juntanza* [bringing together] that allow them to strengthen the *renacientes* individually and collectively, which implies repairing links with neighbors and with the community through ancestral knowledge that invites them to see themselves as a collectivity, in interdependence, and as an extended family. Thus, the pedagogies of embodiment are those that help to re-communalize life and bring together the bodies to resist the pedagogies of cruelty that instill individualistic, capitalistic and insensitive subjectivities.

> In my area, which is Social Sciences, I emphasize the solidarity that characterizes us as, for example, learn to respect the elders, look after the neighbor. The issue of the idea of society is seen from the

> ethnic, from our ways such as the *gavilaneo*, the *mano cambiada*, the *chagua*, the *minga* and the *tonga*[7] (Nicolasa, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022).

Likewise, teacher Liliana works in another school with a strategy of affective listening to accompany youths who have been victims of sexual violence due to the armed conflict. Through an ancestral female practice known as *comadreo*, this teacher generates spaces to talk, strengthen bonds of care, protect each other and offer affective support. Through the *comadreo* in the school, Liliana says that many students have *gotten help and catharsis*. In this sense, the teacher's daily practice is to pay attention to signs in the bodies of the students and to provide exercises of listening in order to enact mechanisms of protection and denunciation. Through the *comadreo*, the teachers try healing methodologies so that their students can find a place to share their pain, regain strength, continue studying, and sustain spaces for embodiment. As Liliana says, "I have had to go into their skin, walk in their shoes, understand them in their problems and accompany them in their bitter moments and in their healing" (Liliana, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020).

Ancestral Afrocolombian knowledge constitutes epistemologies to hold on to life because the teachers teach the students to move forward in spite of the ravages of violence, the traumas and the threat of death. Thus, we may see that care becomes a political form of agency that mobilizes strategies to protect the school in the midst of violence, the rescue of ancestral views to maintain a vital interconnection vital between the body and the territory, and spaces of care and affection that explore possible reparations through embodiments and ancestral healing practices. Holding on to life means creating conditions in the school to live a dignified life with joy, and that is why the teachers see the school as a "trench line of hope" (Manuela, teacher, Buenaventura, 2022).

At this point, it is important to underscore that the care practiced in these schools moves over the axis of a creative tension. On the one hand, it contributes to affirming life and spreading hope, but on the other hand it is hard, unequal and painful work that reproduces gender inequalities and falls mostly upon the female teachers. It is work that is often made invisible and whose outcome is uncertain and plagued by of failure and impotence. The situation of death and violence is so overwhelming that the care of the teachers does not succeed in preventing the destruction of the lives of their students. For this reason it is work of modest dimensions, which seeks on a daily basis to make "partial recuperations" and relational fabrics to "live among the ruins" (Haraway, 2019: 69).

7 Through the work of pedagogue Mary Lili Caicedo (2022) we can define in a synthetic way these ancestral Afrocolombian practices. *Minga* is a communitarian space to share food and drinks, but also for social mobilization and political protest. *Mano cambiada* or *Gavilaneo* is an agreement among contrymen and women to share jobs in construction, agriculture or childcare. *Tonga* or *Chagua* is an área for agriculture. Between one *tonga* and another it is common for workers to share fish *atollado*, drink fruit drinks, tell jokes, and drink *viche*.

From this standpoint, feminist theories indicate that care is not a kind kingdom of warm affection or always positive experience always linked to love, healing, peace, or reconciliation. In the current educational debate, for example, school care is often regarded as a central core of pedagogies to make peace and, in some cases, these practices are romanticized to the point of being demanded as a moral obligation moral for teachers who work on contexts of conflict.

These theories suggest that teachers must be more careful and responsible, but they lack a critical view of the gender policies that distribute unequally the burden of care in the school. They do not offer either a criticism of the lack of responsibility of the State in its duty of guaranteeing the right to education and care of the communities affected by armed conflict. Thus, it is important to note the dangers of romanticizing care in the pedagogies for peace, and to undertake research processes that reflect the contradictions, roughness, and the lights and shadows that this type of work constitutes.

To this extent, I observed that some care practices conducted by the teachers do not always contribute to challenging the policies of death but, to the contrary, feed the formation of men in arms and support the dynamics of the conflict. Several female teachers informed me that, faced with the insistence of the criminal bands to recruit youths, some undertake strategies of care and economic support so the youths can release themselves free from this yoke by becoming soldiers in the Colombian armed forces.

Some teachers feel affinity with the armed forces, which have also been an agent responsible for the violence, death and despoliation in the territory of Buenaventura. Others see military life as an opportunity to gain prestige and avoid poverty, and some teachers collaborate with the enlistment of their students as a pragmatic measure, an act of urgency that prevents lives from being lost.

For the youths of Buenaventura reality is harsh, since as teacher Liliana pointed out, "the only option of life they have is to be displaced, pick up a weapon, or die" (Liliana, teacher, Buenaventura, 2020). Faced with this situation, the teachers decide to make efforts to protect the life of their students and support them in becoming policemen and soldiers. This shows that in a context of a prolonged war care does not necessarily bring youths out of the spiral of armed violence, nor does it make the world a place to "live as well as possible." (Tronto, Fisher, 1990: 40).

> We have done a lot to save those kids. We have had to send them to the [national] Army. We have to buy the certificate, the stamps, to speak with their mothers and convince them of sending them there. I just sent one to serve. I told him, "Before they kill you, I'd rather see you in the army." […] I gave him money to buy everything: uniforms, bus fares. He just swore his oath, he is happy, they already started paying him. I saved him and convinced him to pursue a career in the military. (María Isabel, principal, Buenaventura, 2022).

By way of closing

By relying on the tools of the communitarian feminisms of indigenous women (Cabnal, 2010; Gutiérrez, 2020) and of the black feminist pedagogies (Gomes, 2017; Thompson, 2003), in this article I proposed the notion of *pedagogies to hold on to life* in order to describe the practices of care carried out by female teachers in Buenaventura, Colombia, to defend the territory and sustain the lives of the students in the midst of processes of despoliation, armed conflict and environmental damage.

In this sense, care as work, ethics, and political mobilization contributes to enriching the view over the educational practices that defend the territories against extractivistic, capitalistic, colonial, and patriarchal violence. The care shown demonstrated by the female teachers of Buenaventura connects the defense of the territory with the emotional and physical restitution of the bodies of their students. Thus, the ultimate aim of ethnoeducation is the healing of the bodies of the *renacientes*. Healing is a way of prolonging the existence of the community and their ancestral roots of interconnection with nature, spirituality, and territory.

The care of the bodies-territory implies, as can be observed, the deployment of teaching strategies that take place in the daily life of the school and interlink ways of maintaining, sustaining, and repairing the school and community fabric. Care is not a reactive strategy before the power of the armed actors but the actions, affections and ancestral knowledge that contribute to sustaining the communal fabrics that enable the continuity of life. The teachers contribute to mending the geographies under attack by the invisible frontiers, and rethread community life with pedagogical actions that invite people to enjoy the territory through gatherings, dialogue, food and community pots.

Likewise, the teachers show us that the defense of the territory involves decolonization of nature, and sowing a view of love, care, and interlinkage between humans and territory. This way of teaching places value on the knowledge of ancestral wise women, which implies an exercise of epistemic justice for the worldviews of black communities. Re-educating the view towards nature means challenging the Eurocentric, capitalistic and anthropocentric curricula that teach us to see the Earth as an inert object. Lastly, to live well in the territories, the female teachers from Buenaventura make a wager for re-communalizing life and create embodiments to strengthen their students and inject them with life so they can prosper and go on with the collective struggle. Thus, the practices of care in the school contribute to reviving the community and resisting the pedagogies of cruelty that seek to instill warlike, individualistic and capitalistic masculinities that are functional for the processes of depredation of the territory.

Care is a fruitful category that allows us to analyze teaching work, pedagogy, and the construction of didactics for the defense of the territory. However, it is not a concept that leads automatically to kind, harmonic relationships free from power hierarchies. As can be observed, care in the school is a practice run through by gender inequality and situations of risk, and therefore

its practice cannot be romanticized. In fact, a great deal of care takes place as a response to the neglect of the State, and to its lack of responsibility in guaranteeing the right to a dignified life for the children and youths of the region of the Pacific coast of Colombia.

Care reveals that the defense of the community is far from idyllic, since the teachers' narratives show the lack of commitment of the male teachers and school administrators to the attention of the needs of the *renacientes* affected by the armed conflict. Likewise, it can be observed that the teachers' care can also contribute to forming men in arms and sustain the dynamics of violence, which rules out that care can be a pedagogical component that in and of itself contributes to making peace.

To this extent, I proposed to understand care as a creative tension that allows us to identify the struggles for life and the territory, but also as a conflictive and ambivalent relationship fraught with failure and contradictions.

Thus, it is worthwhile to keep wondering how to sustain these educational practices without reinforcing gender and race inequalities, and how to repair the female teachers, acknowledge the work of school care and dignify the profession of teachers. The teachers of Buenaventura invite us to make the care of the body-territory an emancipating pedagogy, and show us that, in the midst of violence, ancestrality lights the way for struggle for the future. In times of death, care seems to give us clues to hold on to life, and to create schools as enclaves to recover and defend the territory.

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