



Transdisciplinarity from Below: Weaving a New Tapestry of Knowledge through Art and Collective Resistance

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Abstract. Decolonising research methodologies has expanded opportunities for a more pluriversal world, yet knowledge production still remains controlled by a privileged minority. This piece examines how *vivencias* (lived experiences) can shift attention and privilege away from dominant forms of knowledge. I offer three examples of transdisciplinary collaborations rooted in grassroots movements, led by Afro-descendant women affected by the armed conflict in Colombia. Despite widespread fears, these women chose to speak out, using art and art-making as means to (re)signify and (re)construct collective memory amid violence. They do not work alone; academics and social actors join these women's struggles, co-creating knowledge and resistance. These stories show how *vivencias* expressed through art become tools for weaving alternative knowledges from below and for developing situated, collective knowledge that fosters critical awareness and social change through peaceful resistance. This approach (re)invents research practices rooted in struggles for collective liberation, valuing diverse ways of knowing and being to challenge the dominance of traditional knowledge production and pursue epistemic justice.

Keywords: Transdisciplinarity from below; embodied knowledge; Art-making; Afro-descendent Women.

Resumen: Descolonizar las metodologías de investigación ha ampliado las oportunidades para un mundo más pluriversal; sin embargo, la producción de conocimiento sigue siendo controlada por una minoría privilegiada. Este texto examina cómo las *vivencias* pueden desplazar la atención y el privilegio de las formas dominantes de conocimiento. Ofrezco tres ejemplos de colaboraciones

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transdisciplinarias arraigadas en movimientos de base, lideradas por mujeres afrodescendientes afectadas por el conflicto armado en Colombia. A pesar del miedo generalizado, estas mujeres optaron por alzar la voz, utilizando el arte y la creación artística como medios para (re)significar y (re)construir la memoria colectiva en medio de la violencia. No trabajan solas; académicos y actores sociales se unen a sus luchas, cocreando conocimiento y resistencia. Estas historias ilustran cómo las vivencias expresadas a través del arte se convierten en herramientas para tejer conocimientos alternativos desde abajo y desarrollar conocimientos situados y colectivos que fomenten la conciencia crítica y el cambio social mediante la resistencia pacífica. La transdisciplinariedad desde abajo (re)inventa prácticas de investigación arraigadas en las luchas por la liberación colectiva, valorando diversas formas de saber y de ser para desafiar la dominación de la producción tradicional del conocimiento y, así, buscar la justicia epistémica.

Palabras claves: Transdisciplinariedad desde abajo; conocimiento encarnado; creación artística; mujeres afrodescendientes.

Resumo: Descolonizar as metodologias de pesquisa ampliou as oportunidades para um mundo mais pluriversal; no entanto, a produção de conhecimento continua sendo controlada por uma minoria privilegiada. Este texto examina como as vivências podem deslocar a atenção e o privilégio das formas dominantes de conhecimento. Apresento três exemplos de colaborações transdisciplinares enraizadas em movimentos populares, lideradas por mulheres afrodescendentes afetadas pelo conflito armado na Colômbia. Apesar do medo generalizado, essas mulheres optaram por levantar a voz, utilizando a arte e a criação artística como meios para (re)significar e (re)construir a memória coletiva em meio à violência. Elas não atuam sozinhas; acadêmicos e atores sociais se unem às suas lutas, cocriando conhecimento e resistência. Essas histórias ilustram como as vivências expressas por meio da arte se tornam ferramentas para tecer conhecimentos alternativos a partir de baixo e desenvolver saberes situados e coletivos que promovam a consciência crítica e a mudança social por meio da resistência pacífica. A transdisciplinaridade de baixo (re)inventa práticas de pesquisa enraizadas nas lutas por libertação coletiva, valorizando diversas formas de saber e de ser para desafiar a dominação da produção tradicional de conhecimento e buscar a justiça epistêmica.

Palavras-chave: Transdisciplinaridade a partir de baixo; conhecimento incorporado; criação artística; mulheres afrodescendentes

Introduction

In recent years, anti-colonial and decolonial movements have been increasing worldwide. These movements use multiple channels to call to transform a dehumanised, colonial, racist, and patriarchal world into a plural world. They attempt to raise awareness of the colonial heritage of academic institutions (Ziai, Bendix and Müller, 2020) by decolonising research methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012; Zavala, 2016) and the researcher (Datta, 2018).

Scholars and activists are calling against the dehumanisation of the Otherness (Freire, 1970; Fals-Borda, 1995; Smith, 2012), which has led to the denial of alternative knowledge systems (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2016; Motta, 2021). They seek to revalorise and reposition the historically marginalised Indigenous and local knowledge (Wilson, 2008; Chilisa, 2017; Vásquez-Fernández and Ahenakew, 2020) and its protagonists. These movements demand social and epistemic justice (Santos, 2014) and end with the cognitive empire of knowledge production (Santos, 2018).

Some scholars propose adopting indigenous methodologies in the spirit of ending epistemic injustices. However, there is a risk of encapsulating Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) fragments in the dominant paradigms (Muller, 2012) and “instrumentalise and embrace Indigenous research methodologies as quick-fix solutions to, or escapes from, deep-rooted and ongoing (neo)colonial thinking” (Ahenakew, 2016, p. 323).

Although these efforts to decolonise knowledge production through alternative methodological approaches open new possibilities for bridging diverse knowledge systems in collaborative approaches, they still do not question who has the “right to research” (Appadurai, 2006), what research is, and which knowledge counts as valid. In this way, knowledge production remains the reserve of a minority marked by privileges based on neutrality and expertise. These privileges are granted under the premise of Western epistemologies’ cognitive supremacy, making other forms of knowledge invisible or non-existent (Santos, 2014). Santos uses the metaphor of abyssal thinking to refer to the epistemological dominance of modern Western thinking. According to Santos, abyssal thinking establishes an abyssal line that divides social reality. This division vanishes everything on the other side of the line, making those on the other side invisible. Thus, abyssal thinking grants modern science the universal distinction to the detriment of alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating (Rhee and Subedi, 2014).

Ziai and colleagues (2020) argue that decolonising knowledge production is necessary to deconstruct existing methodologies and practices that (re)produce the coloniality of knowledge. In contrast, Arturo Escobar (2016) argues that it is essential to (re)invent research practices that are not complicit in silencing local knowledge. Escobar contends that knowledge produced through struggles to defend relational

worlds is more appropriate than that generated from the disconnected perspectives of academia (Escobar, 2016). He advocates for replacing dominant social theories with relational ontologies rooted in the struggles within territories, interweaving cultural, spiritual, and natural elements.

Thus, decolonising knowledge production requires us to (re)think of our privileged role in knowledge production and our responsibility to transform monocultural thinking into a plurality of knowledges (Santos, 2014). It implies de-centring power to re(connect) with and centring others' knowledge, voices and beings. It also requires incorporating ethical (axiological), spiritual and relational dimensions besides the epistemological and methodological levels.

Similarly, decolonising collaborative research practices begins by examining which voices are silenced and which are amplified in the research process (Chilisa, 2017). Therefore, we must (re)consider our historical responsibility to generate knowledge (Rhee and Subedi, 2014). Given this, we should question whether knowledge is our ultimate goal or if our aim is to change power relations or understand reality. Are we willing to share or relinquish control of the research to communities? (Moreno-Cely *et al.*, 2021). What methods are we using to disseminate research results? Is written knowledge privileged in this process? (Santos, 2018). These reflections should be undertaken before, during, and after a research process, as there is a risk that transdisciplinary collaborations can consciously or unconsciously reinforce structures of inequality and domination (Merçon, 2021).

Although numerous examples of transdisciplinary research collaborations exist in the literature, most are initiated and led by academic actors who focus on specific topics, inviting non-academic actors to participate but without involving them in the decision-making process. Instances of transdisciplinary processes led and undertaken by communities are rare in scholarly sources. Then, the questions that guide this essay are: What does a transdisciplinary process led by non-academic actors look like? And what can we learn from them? At this point, I must acknowledge that being an academic scholar made me part of the privileged minority mentioned above, and this essay could be seen as an example of cognitive supremacy. However, I intend to question this privilege and, at the same time, use it as a tool to connect with other scholars interested in confronting colonial legacies in academia.

This essay was inspired by meeting Virgelina Chará, a Colombian Afro-descendant woman nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with victims of Colombia's armed conflict. The encounter happened in 2019 during an online workshop organised by 'Colombianas por la Paz,' a support network for Colombian immigrant women in Belgium, of which I am a member. The workshop supported Virgelina's initiative to cover the Palace of Justice in Bogota, highlighting the war's atrocities in Colombia and serving as a healing step towards peace.

As a woman of colour from a modest background, with experience working as a practitioner and learning from Indigenous and rural communities across the country, I have directly observed their invaluable knowledge and resistance of these communities—especially among women—in managing the impacts of war amidst a patriarchal, discriminatory, and racist society. My decade of work with these communities and awareness of my own limited impact in improving their living conditions motivated me to pursue an academic career. I sought ways to contribute more meaningfully, often unaware that many solutions were already within my reach. After earning my doctorate and recognising the privileges and potential harms associated with academia—particularly for marginalised groups— I realised that decolonising knowledge production was not optional but essential for fostering transdisciplinary collaborations.

The reflections in this article are rooted in an ethical, reciprocal approach to knowledge creation that respects local and ancestral knowledge systems. It also highlights the work of three women's organisations: *Asomujer y Trabajo foundation*, *Tejedoras of Mampujan*, and *Las Cantadoras del Pacífico Sur*. These groups employ art, spirituality, and solidarity as strategies to recover collective historical memory in pursuit of social justice and to revitalise ancestral and local knowledge. I explore how these experiences can inspire alternative forms of knowledge generation to address the onto-epistemological apartheid (Visvanathan, 2009) and break down barriers between different forms of knowledge. By analysing the similarities and differences of these collaborations, I argue that scholars and practitioners can learn from these efforts to reinvent transdisciplinary partnerships, decentralise and diversify knowledge-creation processes, and hand control over to true experts.

Methodologically, my insights are based on a decade of experience working with rural communities, particularly in southern Colombia, complemented by analyses of written, audio, and visual materials produced and shared via channels such as social media. This includes content from the three Afro-Colombian women's groups on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp, as well as interviews published in local journals and magazines. I use reflexive thematic analysis, which values the researcher's subjectivity as an essential tool for reflection and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Aware of my position as a non-Afro-descendant woman and of my limitations in understanding their worldviews, my focus remains on collaborative processes and aspects related to creating alternative knowledge often neglected within academia.

The main protagonists of the three stories are Afro-Colombian women who transitioned from being victims of the armed conflict to leaders within their communities. Women's stories were born from their *vivencias*. Although there is no direct equivalent in English, *vivencia* intricately blends life experiences and genuine

participation by narrowing the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed, the superior and the subordinate, academic knowledge and popular wisdom (Fals Borda, 2007). Therefore, *vivencias* cannot be merely observed but must be lived, felt, and experienced (Glassman and Erdem, 2014). The three stories of Colombian women affected by the armed conflict illustrate how women utilised art and art-making as tools to reflect on their *vivencias*, raise awareness, (re)build personal and community confidence, and strengthen resistance processes. They also serve as a means to forge connections with other knowledge systems. These stories highlight alternative forms of transdisciplinary collaboration (Merçon, 2021) in which diverse actors, including academics, join communities' struggles, creating spaces for co-creation, re-imagination, and transforming research into a dialogue between equals.

Situating the Stories

The three stories have their origins in the armed conflict that has plunged Colombia into violence for more than seven decades (Niño Gonzalez, 2017), making it one of the most prolonged internal conflicts in the Abya Yala². There is no agreement on when the internal conflict started, and its triggers are also unclear. Multiple studies on violence in Colombia highlight varied political, social, cultural, economic, and even religious factors. However, they agree that the violence intensified in 1946 with the return of power by the conservative party (Vázquez Piñeros, 2007). Two years later, these tensions would end in a civil war after the assassination of the liberal political leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán on April 9, 1948 (Archila Neira, 1995; LeGrand, 1997; Vázquez Piñeros, 2007). The civil war gave rise to extreme left guerrilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). In this period, the developing drug trafficking business also increased due to the high demand from the United States (Cruz and Rojas Rivera, 2008; Sáenz Rovner, 2009). The multi-million-dollar profits also multiplied the drug cartels that would give rise to gangs of hitmen (Cruz and Rojas Rivera, 2008).

In the late 1970s, the United States introduced paramilitary groups that, as allies with the armed forces in Colombia, attempted to counter communism in the region (Rivera, 2007). Later, landowners and businesspeople also used these paramilitary groups to protect their businesses (Rivera, 2007). Furthermore, powerful economic interests employed paramilitary groups to seize large tracts of land for the construction of mega projects, including mining, growing African palm crops, and extensive cattle ranching (Oslender, 2004). These factors make the conflict more complex and difficult to resolve. The conflict has caused chaos and despair, mainly in rural areas, by displacing communities, killing, and disappearing community

² Abya Yala was the name that the Kuna people from Panama used to denominate the continent that the Spanish called America, which means "the fertile earth in which we live"

leaders. Two of the regions hardest hit by violence are the coastal areas, which, since the colonial period and to the present day, are inhabited mainly by descendants of enslaved Africans (Castaño, 2015; Colectivo OFB and REDHPANA, 2021).

The armed conflict in Colombia, characterised by state involvement and a political system dominated by elites who control land, the economy, and power, has caused many victims (Cadavid Rico, 2014). Research shows that children, adolescents, and women are the most affected groups (Cadavid Rico, 2014; Santis Vellojín and Mira González, 2020). Official data reports 9,218,796 victims of the armed conflict, including 4,506,719 women (Unidad para la Atención y la Reparación Integral a las Víctimas, 2021) and 2,365,997 children and adolescents (Santis Vellojín and Mira González, 2020). Women have been targeted by all armed factions, experiencing displacement, family loss, and enduring sexual violence, forced disappearances, torture, kidnapping, and illegal recruitment (Cadavid Rico, 2014; Santis Vellojín and Mira González, 2020). While some women have participated as combatants, their involvement is often driven by poverty and patriarchal systems that influence their choices (Cadavid Rico, 2014). Although the following stories occur within this challenging and complex context, I am interested in exploring how these examples can teach us about building bridges between different knowledge systems in transdisciplinary collaborations.

First Story: Costureras Por La Paz

Virgelina Chará, a war-displaced Afro-Colombian woman leader and human rights defender, was nominated in 2005 for the Nobel Peace Prize for supporting women and displaced families, victims of armed violence in Colombia. Virgelina is a multifaceted woman who uses music, poetry, embroidery, and food to denounce and reconstruct history and weave bonds of solidarity and hope.

Many Afro and indigenous communities from the Pacific region have been forced into displacement and migration caused by armed conflict, drug trafficking, looting of natural resources, and megaprojects of multinationals. Virgelina is one of the victims of this conflict. She was first displaced in 1985 in the name of development. The construction of a hydroelectric dam in the municipality of Suarez in the Colombian Pacific, where she is from, caused the displacement of hundreds of Afro-descendants and indigenous people (Pérez Lugo and Díaz Escandón, 2017). Virgelina and more than 200 families had to flee to Cali. This city is the refuge of thousands of displaced Afro-Colombian people, where she tried to survive with her seven children by selling fruits on the street. In her little spare time, she and other community leaders fought to find housing for the displaced and protect their children from being recruited by illegal groups. However, for raising their voices denouncing the abandonment of the state, she and other community leaders were accused of

being guerrillas and received death threats from paramilitary groups (personal conversation, October 2020).

Virgelina, to save her life, fled with the displaced to the city of Bogota in 2003 (Medina Abad, 2021). Upon her arrival, Virgelina created the *Asomujer y Trabajo Foundation*. This social organisation works for and with the victims of the armed conflict. Her work has focused on the fight for human rights, mainly for female victims of forced displacement. The association focuses on finding alternatives for displaced women and promoting training and education to fight for their rights. Over time, Virgelina becomes an expert on the rights of the victims of the conflict. With the support of professors, researchers, and activists, she and other leaders have successfully influenced public policy, primarily through the National Victims Board. Virgelina and her colleagues proposed a law to guarantee the rights of conflict victims. They proposed a document that collects the different laws related to victims' rights. In 2011, many of their proposals were included in the Victims and Land Restitution Law No. 1448. Although the new law dictates measures of care, assistance, and comprehensive reparation for the victims of the armed conflict, there are still many victims who have not been able to rebuild their lives or return to their territories (Sanabria Rodelo, 2018).

In 2008, a group of 40 victims of the armed conflict had the idea of covering the Justice Palace in Bogotá with embroidered fabrics that told the stories of violence. One of these groups is the *Union de Costureros*, led by Virgelina. They sought to create spaces that would reconstruct the historical memory of the armed conflict in Colombia through embroidery. Virgelina and many victims of the conflict decided to break the silence, heal their wounds, (re)write the history of Colombia, (re)build relationships with coloured threads and pieces of cloth, and sing songs against violence and for peace (personal conversation, October 2020). The *Union de Costureros*, through embroidery, aims to portray the conflict's complexity by bringing its protagonists and their stories closer to each other in an intimate dialogue of their pain and suffering, but also of hope and resistance.



Figure 1. Illustration of women's creations (*Arropamiento Palacio de Justicia*, 2024)

The *Union de Costureras* became a collective exchange and learning space where students, professors, nationals, foreigners, and neighbourhood residents converge. Today, this space is open to anyone interested in (re)writing Colombian history and building the long-awaited peace. Embroidery is combined with talks, songs and reflections. After many years, hundreds of people have shared and embroidered their stories, building an alternative Colombian history. Various institutions, including universities, support this experience (Atehortúa, 2019). In this way, the *Union de Costureras* has been transformed into a classroom and space for co-creation. Victims, researchers, activists, and institutions work and search together for alternative solutions to the war to bring peace and social justice to the victims of the Colombian armed conflict.

Second Story: The Tejedoras of Mampuján

The following is the story of Juana Alicia Ruiz and a group of women from Mampujan, who won the National Peace Prize in Colombia in 2015 for their contributions to the peacebuilding process in the Montes de María region (Ramos Díaz Granados, 2018).

Mampujan is a township located in the Montes de María region, a jungle area situated near the Colombian Caribbean coast and rich in natural resources. Yet, like many others, this region is characterised by state abandonment and the permanence of illegal armed groups. In the Montes de María region, the conflict engendered 57 massacres (Comisión de la Verdad, 2020), thousands of displaced people, and multiple signs of violence that testify to the barbarism of the war. Only 15 days after one of the bloodiest massacres in the country's history, which caused the death of more than 100 people, including a 6-year-old girl in the town of Salado, the paramilitaries arrived in Mampuján (Rubio, 2012). Between March 10 and 11, 2000, the group known as *Bloque Héroes of Montes de María of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) arrived to continue its wake of terror and death. They forced the displacement of the community, 245 families in total and murdered 13 people in the village of Las Brisas (Rubio, 2012; Ruiz Hernandez, Romero Sanchez and Ladeus Teheran, 2019). That day marked the beginning of the suffering of its inhabitants, caused by the loss of their relatives, land, crops, and goods. But the most profound pain was caused by uncertainty and exile. Likewise, their economic situation became precarious when they lost their land and work. This situation generated hunger, unemployment, diseases, instability, mistrust and a rupture of the social fabric that would soon transform into domestic violence (Ruiz Hernandez, Romero Sanchez and Ladeus Teheran, 2019).

Four years after the forced displacement and worried about the women's situation, Juana Alicia Ruiz, a teacher, nutritionist and community leader, decided to seek help. They met Teresa Geiser, a Canadian psychologist who used quilting as a form of healing (Ramos Díaz Granados, 2018). The therapeutic art proposed by Geiser consisted of making patchwork quilts with geometric figures. The scissors are used to cut the pieces of cloth, which serves as a symbolic act of cutting the pain; likewise, puncturing the fabric with the needle aimed to pierce the pain, thus releasing it (Ruiz Hernandez *et al.*, 2016). Initially, Juana motivated more than 30 women to participate in this process; however, the women felt that although it was an activity that allowed them to be together, they did not find meaning in creating geometric figures (Ramos Díaz Granados, 2018). Thus, together with other women, Juana had the idea to change the geometric figures to landscapes and stories of the region. In this way, the Mampujan tapestries were born. Women began to represent their lives, primarily through stories of displacement. As they were weaving, they narrated their stories and gradually began to heal their wounds (Ruiz, 2018), gaining self-confidence and (re)building community ties.

In 2005, a new law called the Justice and Peace Law was enacted, which sought to facilitate the demobilisation process of paramilitary groups. The objective of this law was to establish judicial, administrative, social and economic measures for the benefit of the victims of violations of international humanitarian law (Fiscalia General de la Nacion, 2005). This law opened new avenues of hope for displaced families of

Mampuján. In 2006, a group of women led by Juana Ruiz and supported by many institutions decided to create an organisation called *Asociación para la Vida Digna y Solidaria* - ASVIDAS (Ruiz Hernandez et al., 2016). Since then, the women of Mampuján have been implementing diverse initiatives, including using the art of quilting to preserve historical memory and heal the wounds of the armed war in the Montes de María and developing various food products. Their *vivencias* are reflected in the tapestries. Their work has become so well recognised that some creations are exhibited in the National Museum (Sanabria Rodelo, 2018).



Figure 2. Example of women's creations (*Mujeres Tejiendo Sueños y Sabores de Paz*, 2016)

The women of Mampuján received funding from the United Nations for a project called *'La Ruta por La Vida'* to share their experiences and knowledge in areas once affected by paramilitaries, which left a trail of death and destruction. They would walk those same paths to sow life and hope by sharing their healing experiences with other women. Simultaneously, supported by national and international organisations and individuals, such as the priest of Mampuján, the organisation "*Sembrando Semillas de Paz*", "Mennonite Central Committee", "*Fundación Desarrollo y Paz*", "*Fundación de Arte Popular*", the Attorney General's Office, the Ombudsman's Office, the Department of Justice of the American Embassy, and the Prosecutor's Office, among

others, the community became empowered. They began to demand compliance with international humanitarian laws of truth, justice, and reparation. Although they did not initially know how to do this, they started attending meetings and debates on the reparation process for victims of the armed conflict, based on the Justice and Peace Law of 2005. For example, the Montes de María communities began organising marches, demonstrations, protests, legal actions, and videos to demand the benefits stipulated in the law (Ruiz Hernandez *et al.*, 2016). However, it was not until 2014 that reparation measures enshrined in the Victims Law began to be implemented (Sanabria Rodelo, 2018).

Nowadays, thanks to the “*La Ruta por la Vida*” project, this group of women has had the opportunity to share their experiences with other women affected by the conflict in various towns across Colombia. In this project, the *Tejedoras of Mampuján* offered tapestry workshops in areas impacted by massacres, where people could express their pain through weaving and knitting. The story of the *Tejedoras of Mampuján* is a collaborative process in which women transform the art of quilting into a political act to (re)construct, (re)signify, and (re)create their lives, community bonds, and history. Through art, the women from Mampuján began rebuilding their lives and spreading hope in other communities. They have also diversified their actions by complementing the quilt with organic food and small businesses to generate economic resources while strengthening their efforts to build peace in Colombia (Garzón Martínez, 2020). The *Tejedoras of Mampuján* have collaborated with academics, researchers, social activists, artists, and even businesspeople. All of them have worked with and supported the group in various ways, including backing their activities to reclaim their lands, documenting their stories through videos and documentaries, and even showcasing their art at the Colombian National Museum and various locations around the globe. They have also received training in different fields to broaden their knowledge in entrepreneurship and business planning, as well as to promote and commercialise their products. Nevertheless, ownership has remained with the women (Ruiz Hernandez, Romero Sanchez and Ladeus Teheran, 2019). This ownership can be observed in the demand for creating the Museum of Art and Memory of Mampuján, as a mechanism for symbolic reparation for the displacement and massacres that occurred in 2000. Today, the museum is a reality, having been the result of a collaborative process supported by the National Museum of Colombia (*Museo Nacional de Colombia*, 2023).

Third Story: Las Cantadoras del Pacífico Sur

This story takes place in the Colombian Pacific coast region, which spans more than 10 million hectares of tropical forest (Oslender, 2004). This region is renowned as one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. The Colombian Pacific is home to approximately one million Afro-descendants who have maintained a significant portion of their cultural traditions (Oslender, 2004). They transmit their

traditions and knowledge through songs³ and poems, accompanying all moments of life. Women sing to celebrate the birth of a newborn, at funerals, during messes, and at patronal festivities, as well as in community encounters.

In 1993, through Law 70 of 1993, the Colombian state recognised the collective territorial rights of rural black communities and the recognition and protection of their ethnic and cultural diversity. Paradoxically, after receiving the legal recognition of being the ancestral owners of these lands, the armed conflict reached their territories. Since then, the communities have become the target of armed actors (Oslender, 2004), bringing pain and fear. In her research, Pinilla Bahamón (2017) observed that armed conflict had affected traditional practices such as *Alabaos*, rituals performed mainly during funerals. Owing to different factors, such as the mobility restrictions imposed by the armed groups in the territories and the forced displacement, communities could not give the last goodbye to their dead. Thus, the conflict puts the practice of their rituals at risk and the loss of traditional knowledge.

The Ombudsman's Office and the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) reported that for more than 20 years, the Colombian Pacific has become the region with the most forced displacement in the country (CODHES, 2020; CIVP, 2021). According to CODHES, between January 2018 and February 2019, the Pacific region reported 20,850 displaced people (CODHES, 2020). Various analyses agree that multiple factors have contributed to this situation. Scholars and activists consider that the main reason is powerful economic interests such as the extensive cultivation of the African palm, megaprojects, and drug trafficking (Escobar, 2004; Oslender, 2004). Forced displacement, massacres, and the kidnapping of communities have generated radical changes in the inhabitants and the environment. However, communities have also generated multiple forms of resistance. Communities have created networks and alliances to confront the terror of war (Oslender, 2003, 2004; Lozano-Lerma, 2017; Quiceno-Toro, Ochoa-Sierra and Villamizar, 2017; Riaño-Alcalá and Chaparro-Pacheco, 2020). As Betty Lozano (2017) says, everything in the Pacific is done collectively. It is also the case of the *Red de Cantadoras del Pacífico Sur* (RCPS). For 13 years, this network has woven a wall of social containment through its songs in several municipalities of the Colombian Pacific (Guerrero, 2019a).

The RCPS network, comprising 220 artists, mainly Afro-descendant women, was born out of an act of reciprocity, as explained by the anthropologist Paola Navia, its director (Guerrero, 2019b). Paola, who has her origins in Tumaco, one of the Pacific

³ It exists diverse types of traditional songs. Two of the most important rituals are the *alabaos* and *arrullos* which were declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014. The *alabaos* are mainly performed during the funerals and *arrullos* which are more joyful and rhythmic songs sung in patron saint festivities. The *alabaos* and *arrullos*.

municipalities in southern Colombia, decided to do her graduate thesis on traditional music and songs. Her interest was focused on groups of women *cantadoras*⁴ in the municipality of Tumaco. Between 2006 and 2007, through her research, Paola contacted seven of these groups of *cantadoras* that were made up mainly of older adults. They started knowing each other's life experiences, sharing their music, and building new projects during this process. In the spirit of giving them back a little of all these shared learnings, Paola decided to seek help to support these women in constructing their dreams (Guerrero, 2019b).

In 2008, within the cultural policy framework for the South Pacific launched by the Colombian Ministry of Culture, Paola introduced to the Minister some of the work of these seven associations of *cantadoras*. Interested in expanding the project, the Minister proposed to Paola to extend this work with groups all over the Colombian Pacific, consolidating the network of *cantadoras* (Guerrero, 2019b). During these 13 years, the RCPS has participated in several festivals and has recorded three music albums. The network also opened a space for exchange and dialogue between the diverse groups and community associations of *cantadoras*. It also created research and educational projects to safeguard the region's cultural wealth (Martinez, 2020). Children and youngsters received their parents' inheritance, spawning new *cantadoras*, poets, and artists (Martinez, 2020); through their songs, women keep alive the memory and the legacy of the traditional culture and, at the same time, use music as a form of peaceful resistance (Lozano-Mancera, 2017).

Additionally, the network has consolidated processes of resistance to the conflict, establishing social cohesion, resilience, and healing through music (Guerrero, 2019a). The *cantadoras* transformed their rituals and, more precisely, the chants into tools of denunciation (Pinilla-Bahamón, 2017). Their songs demonstrate that the *cantadoras* compose and sing for peace to promote solutions against violence and poverty (Guerrero, 2019b).

The *cantadoras* used their spirituality, traditions, voices, and songs to heal. They go beyond music, weaving their voices for reconstruction and transformation. Each group of *cantadoras* has established a training space where all generations, musicians, midwives, cultural managers, and academics converge in their communities. In this space, the new generations learn the musical and cultural diversity of the region, share their stories, and train social and political leaders to safeguard and vindicate their rights to strengthen ties in the territory (Guerrero, 2019b). As in the previous stories, the women of the network also combine music with culinary activities. These ventures allow women to generate income to improve their living conditions and, at the same time, promote traditional Pacific food. This transformative process has resulted from collaborative work between various stakeholders, including academics,

⁴ This is the name given to Afro-descendant women who, through their traditional songs transmit ancestral culture and values.

decision-makers, and the communities who have supported the different groups in the network of *cantadoras*. In 2021, to commemorate the International Day of Women Human Rights Defenders, the group composed a song⁵ called *Cantamos por la Libertad* (We Sing for Freedom), which has become a hymn among women to cry out for peace with social justice.

Somos mujeres diversas, entre tejidas por
hermandad
Es un clamor por la vida y nuestra madre, la
libertad.
Tengo derecho a mi pueblo, a mi río y a mi
mar
Que no se maten los sueños, cantamos por
la libertad
Tengo derecho a mi suelo, mis montañas e
identidad
a libremente expresarme, cantamos por la
libertad.
Tengo derecho a la vida, tengo derecho a la
libertad
a transitar por mi tierra, sin miedo la muerte
encontrar
tengo derecho a expresarme y en los
espacios participar
merece todo el respeto nuestro cuerpo y
nuestra dignidad.
Que no hayan más violaciones al derecho
fundamental
el de la vida y del territorio y sin violencia
vivir en paz
Tengo derecho a cumplir mis sueños, a
hacer alianzas por la paz de mi tierra no
desplazarme y mi cultura conservar

We are diverse women, woven together by
sisterhood
It is a cry for life and our mother, freedom.
I have the right to my people, my river and
my sea
that dreams are not killed, we sing for
freedom
I have the right to my land, my mountains
and my identity
To freely express ourselves, we sing for
freedom.
I have the right to life. I have the right to
freedom
to travel through my land without fear of
finding death
I have the right to express myself and
participate
Our body and our dignity deserve all the
respect.
No more violations of the fundamental
right
That of life and territory, and without
violence, live in peace
I have the right to fulfil my dreams, to make
alliances for peace
not to move from my land and keep my
culture

Transformations that Arise from Art, Struggles, and Resistance

Although the three stories described above did not originate from collaborative research, they illustrate alternative forms of transdisciplinary collaborations that emerged from struggles in the territories (Escobar, 2016). They also inspire possible

⁵ The song was composed in 2020 as a tribute to women on the International Day of Human Rights defenders. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC9r6INK558>

pathways to decentralise knowledge production while generating collectively situated knowledge, transforming their *vivencias* into art. Inspired by these stories, the following sections describe three elements that could inspire scholars to (re)connect academia to the struggles in the territories and (re)create transdisciplinary collaborative research practices from below.

1. Knowledge, action and resistance arise from lived experiences in the struggle.
2. Art and art-making are used as transformative tools.
3. *Vivencias* to de-centering and diversifying knowledge generation.

Knowledge, Action, and Resistance Arise from Lived Experiences in the struggle

A common feature in all three cases is that struggles, lived experiences, resistance, and the creation of knowledge are interconnected. Knowledge is created through the collective (re)construction of lived experiences (*vivencias*) that arise from struggle, thereby reinforcing social cohesion. In each of the three stories, knowledge is not generated for its own sake (Louis, 2007) but rather to address the struggles, and through this process, they begin to change their realities. All stories feature a dynamic interplay of action, reflection, and transformation. Paulo Freire (1970) describes this as praxis, where practice plays a key role in the process of knowledge production.

This experiential knowledge is created through face-to-face encounters characterised by empathy and resonance (Heron and Reason, 2008), which emerge from social, territorial, and survival struggles (Fals-Borda, 2015; Escobar, 2016; Santos, 2018). According to Santos (2018), knowledge born from struggles is a means to decolonise knowledge production through a sense-driven encounter with multiple worlds. It involves recognising that knowledge is a corporeal activity that engages all our senses. It requires us to enter into a profound experience of deep feelings that enable the transformation of the world (Santos, 2018). Such knowledge is highly contextualised, remembered and experienced, resulting from profoundly intense and emotional expressions of feelings linked to a storied, relational and intimate space (Styres, 2019). A struggle also serves as a collective agency tool that transforms the consciousness of injustice into strategies of resistance and change (Smith, 2012). In all three cases, women used their *vivencias* to build critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). This action-reflection process allowed women to develop strategies of collective resistance. Reflecting on their lived experiences and (re)constructing collective memory became the means to confront the violence they endured. Non-written knowledge, such as music, poetry and tapestries, was central to constructing and articulating political consciousness and spaces of resistance against violent dynamics (Oslender, 2003; Lozano-Mancera, 2017). These spaces also helped reaffirm ethnic and cultural identities, fostering new pedagogies of resistance based on art, music, and flavours.

In transdisciplinary collaborations from below, linking knowledge, action, and resistance involves decolonising and de-centering knowledge production. It requires shifting from problem-based to struggle-based research (Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019) and replacing extractivist research practices with transformative and creative dialogues committed to local struggles. It also calls for humility, responsibility and generosity to empower communities by keeping research control in their hands.

Art and Art-making Used as Transformative Tools

Art plays a crucial role in decolonising knowledge production (Santos, 2018), healing (Rathwell and Armitage, 2016), and transformation (Steelman *et al.*, 2019) across the three stories. It serves as a tool for collaboratively generating new knowledge by integrating historical, symbolic, and epistemic elements. Art also functions to communicate emotions, challenge and reinterpret ancestral traditions. Simultaneously, the collective process of creating art offers a space to share lived experiences, reshape community bonds, and address struggles in a non-violent manner.

As illustrated in the three stories outlined above, artistic expressions such as songs, embroidery, and tapestries serve as means for women affected by struggles to represent, conceptualise, and interpret their experiences in non-discursive ways. However, this knowledge is not solely (re)presentational (Heron and Reason, 2008). It also weaves together spirituality, solidarity, and worldviews through coloured threads, poems, verses, and songs. Furthermore, they reconstruct historical memory through art and storytelling, linking the past, present, and future. Women's lived experiences, emotions, and struggles resemble delicate threads of intertwined fibres, while community bonds are reinforced through the weaving process.

As Juana Ruiz explained in an interview (Ruiz, 2018), women weave not only threads but also new stories of personal and community life; they weave peace and a better future for themselves and their families. The initial aim was to heal the wounds and pain caused by forced displacement, and art was an essential tool in this process. Art helped women heal their wounds by transforming pain into art. In this way, the art-making activity created a safe space for community members to come together. In the case of Virgelina Chará, healing is linked to the search for the truth—the truth of the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. The collective construction of the tapestries allowed them to reconstruct the truth from the victims' perspective. This collective encounter enabled them to heal and foster collective transformation and social change.

According to Freire (1970), to overcome a situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes to create a new situation through transformative action.

In all three stories, the women discuss their realities while (re)writing their stories and (re)inventing new ways to address their current problems. In this way, artistic creations serve as a unique language that connects with the past, present, and future (Steelman *et al.*, 2019), uniting knowledge, practices, and beliefs (Rathwell and Armitage, 2016). Artistic creation also becomes a means of transformation since artistic creations open up economic security and leadership possibilities, providing social recognition and increasing self-esteem. It is important to emphasise that these transformations occur on a personal and community level; as women grow stronger, so do families and the community. This transformation has helped them face new situations of violence using a combination of art, solidarity, and spirituality.

In the stories illustrated in this article, art is not a research method used by academics to collect data. Art and art-making are: (i) ways that communities employ to (re)construct, (re)present, and (re)signify lived experiences and knowledge; (ii) vehicles to connect individual and collective struggles and transform them into strategies of resistance; and (iii) languages that help bridge knowledges (Rathwell and Armitage, 2016), praxis and spirituality. Therefore, in a transdisciplinarity from below, art and art-making are not methods or tools for collecting or (re)presenting data; they form part of the plurality of knowledge, equally valuable as academic knowledge.

Vivencias to De-centering and Diversifying Knowledge Generation

Decolonising knowledge production requires displacing the centrality of Western reasoning (Ahenakew, 2016). It entails rethinking the purpose of producing knowledge, the means used to obtain it, and the role of the researcher. In other words, to decolonise knowledge, it is necessary to decentralise the academy's power and promote onto-epistemic diversity (Grosfoguel, 2013; Santos, 2014). The stories presented in this article illustrate a possible pathway to decentralise and diversify knowledge production from below.

The three stories originate from women's lived experiences (from below) rather than academic interests or funding priorities (from above). Women lead their efforts to confront the violence they face but invite other actors to join their struggles, including individuals and organisations willing to share their experiences, knowledge and resources. These new alliances build and nurture networks of learning and solidarity, weaving together new forms of knowledge production and using art as a language for transformation. Through this praxis of solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012), external actors have become accomplices in the struggle, standing alongside women and communities in the pursuit of transformation. However, and most importantly, these initiatives were initiated and continue to be led by women and community struggles, not by knowledge gaps in the academic literature. For instance, in the case of the *Cantadoras del Pacífico Sur*, a researcher established the network as an act of reciprocity, serving the community by sharing her knowledge

and work. The *Cantadoras*, who are midwives and wise women, then lead local initiatives, organising training schools where cultural traditions are passed down to new generations. Their goal is to overcome violence, poverty, and lack of opportunities through art and community bonds. In the case of the *Tejedoras of Mampuján*, the Museum of Art and Memory of Mampuján creates new opportunities not only to diversify their actions but also to demonstrate to new generations that art and alternative forms of knowledge are just as valuable as academic knowledge.

To support women and community struggles, government organisations, musicians, and educators contributed in different ways to strengthen local and ancestral knowledge. The *Tejedoras of Mampuján* teach us how various institutions and academics supported women in their fight against violence. The idea arose from a search to heal the wounds caused by the traumatic experiences of forced displacement. In this healing process, a psychologist introduces them to the art of quilting, which they later transform into a tool for reconstructing their stories, lives, and communities. Combining art with their lived experiences and the desire for change takes them all over the country to share with other women who have suffered the effects of war. The experience has been so successful that academics from around the world have come to learn from these Afro-descendant women, who have turned the small town of Mampuján into an academic destination. Finally, the story of Virgelina shows how a displaced Afro-descendant woman transitions from selling fruit on the street to delivering lectures at academic institutions on the issues faced by victims. As in the previous case, Virgelina transforms quilting art into tools of denunciation, awareness, and solidarity. Likewise, she has managed to mobilise academics, policy-makers and institutions worldwide to denounce the atrocities of the armed conflict in Colombia, seeking guarantees of non-repetition and supporting victims in the struggles for restoration and compensation.

The collective knowledge shaped through lived experiences stemming from struggles (Santos, 2018), as outlined above, revives, enriches, and vindicates everything that dominant epistemologies have attempted to erase. These stories challenge the traditional role of the researcher, creating opportunities for new forms of dialogue between academic and non-academic knowledges. In such dialogues, academics view the struggles of the oppressed as their own, not to impose solutions from above but to weave together knowledge, solidarity, and hope from below. It is also evident how the processes of co-creating new knowledge are facilitated through praxis. In this way, the lived experiences of struggle, praxis, and knowledge embodied in art become instruments for social change and collective liberation.

Conclusion

There is an increasing recognition that knowledge should do more than just foster understanding; it must also contribute to people's liberation (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Louis, 2007; Smith, 2012; Ayyash, 2025). At the same time, there is a growing call to decolonise, de-centre, and de-privilege the ways in which knowledge is created. The earlier-mentioned lived experiences show how women use various artistic expressions as tools for mutual learning, assisting them in reconfiguring histories for healing, confronting their struggles, and building a collective identity. Most importantly, the collective knowledge born from struggle and grassroots efforts is transformed into art, fostering spaces for critical and liberatory reflections that (re)value and centre alternative ways of knowing. In these stories, women leverage art and art-making to transform their lived experiences into processes of learning, solidarity, and resistance. This praxis enables women to critically examine their environment and social realities, leading to transformation and creating new narratives of peace and hope. They are not alone on this journey. They are supported by other social actors, including academics and practitioners, who join in bridging diverse ways of knowing to pursue collective liberation and change. However, it remains crucial that leadership and ownership of this co-created knowledge stay within the communities themselves to challenge the monopoly over knowledge production. As researchers, we can no longer ignore this call for epistemic justice.

I hope the ideas shared in this contribution will inspire researchers and practitioners to (re)invent new forms of transdisciplinary collaboration from below, striving towards sustainable transformations and peaceful coexistence in the territories, while revalorising diverse knowledge systems.

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