Critical literacies in Colombia: between social struggle and performative practices

Diana Carolina Moreno Rodríguez

Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia Vladimir Núñez Camacho Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia Leonardo Varela Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia

Abstract

This article reflects on critical literacies and advances on the idea of performative literacies concerning non-schooled writing practices. Critical literacy posits that beyond literate-school practices there are alternatives to reading and writing. These include semiotic, multimodal, ritual and corporal elements that show knowledge of reality and how it can be adopted or criticised. This study examines the social organisation experiences of MAFAPOⁱ and three memory reconfiguration processes led by the communities of the Port of Buenaventura in Valle del Cauca, Colombia. It reveals how these groups of victims grieve and bereave through rituals and textualities, such as tattooing. These artistic and performative expressions can also be considered forms of critical literacy in which the reconstruction of history occurs through multi-languages, individual and collective exercises. Rituals express particular experiences of individual pain and loss, they lead to the collective recognition of common pains and, therefore, to a

reconstruction of traumatic situations, a step towards transformation and political agency.

Keywords: Critical literacy, performative, political participation, collective memory

Introduction

Over the last thirty years world educational agendas, and especially those in Latin America, have been interested in developing policies aimed at expanding the processes of school modernisation and literacy. There was a firm conviction that access to literacy practices guaranteed both the broad exercise of citizenship and, therefore, of democracy. However, the debates initiated by new literacies and critical literacies have broadened their understanding, showing that beyond the development of cognitive processes, reading and writing constitute social practices. Such practices interconnect production contexts with codes of different semiotic and textual nature. Not only do the expressions of social mobilisation and political struggle reveal their claims, but also engrave on the public space, through aesthetic and performative repertoires, what confronts them towards grieving; in doing so, they perform memory and reconciliation tasks.

One of the main objectives of this article is to reflect on critical literacy and performative literacies based on two performative expressions of social mobilisation used by the MAFAPO collectives and three communities of Buenaventura in Valle del Cauca, Colombia that propose memory as a process of reconciliation. We, specifically, seek to establish how the expressions of these two groups are configured in non-schooled ways of understanding and revealing reality and in expressions of dissident, transformative, and challenging citizenships of institutionality.

Critical and performative literacies

The debates on the new studies of literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1984; Zavala, 2002; Zavala, Niño-Murcia and Ames, 2004; Gee, 2015), critical literacies (Cassany, 2009) and digital literacies (Kress, 2003) have broadened the relationship between literacy and citizenship. This is because, on the one hand, they have opposed the classical idea that knowledge and language use are exclusively related to the learning of literacy practices; and, on the other, they recognise the multidimensional character of the discursive and the semiotic reaffirmation of opinionated and democratic citizenships.

Concerning literacy, Chakrabarty (2020) establishes that "the model depends on Western practices of literacy rooted in and represents a culturally specific model. School-based concepts of literacy are held as a benchmark definition of literate proficiency across backgrounds by this model" (p, 02). Thus, not only has the Western way of understanding the literacy process consolidated a representative language model and has established school settings as the gold standard; but it also has centralised its importance by excluding other semiotic and multimodal representation approaches. This focus on the linguistic aspect of language, for example, has rendered the role of orality in the understanding of writing invisible. Ong (2016) referred to the original appearance of orality regarding writing and to the close relationship that these two processes have in reading, mainly, by constituting parallel dimensions that reaffirm the rhetorical and figurative force of language. It has been the excessive cult towards the written alphabet that has characterised 20th-century studies and what has limited interest in the communicative potentiality of various codes and symbols.

The equivalence between the training of the literate man, the generation of rational thought and, therefore, the exercise of citizenship, has lost its validity recently despite its universal significance. Although many policies behind the formation of established competencies in Latin America during the '90s was concerned with fostering a political culture that sees language as a hub of rationality and civic decision-making, the re-contextualisation of these policies considering the realities of southern countries paves the way for a new way of conceiving citizenship. The liberal tradition, rooted in political philosophy and economics, exerted a strong influence on the notion that discourse and the processes of the normalisation of the subject were articulated with certain values and beliefs, thus determining their actions in public (Álvarez, 2003; 53).

As reading and writing are two of the most characteristic practices of language use, they were essential referents to determine entry into the world of socialisation. However, writing and reading as literacy activities were not always a priority on the agendas of Latin American governments. The limited access to education, the reduced scope of their practices to mobilise knowledge, and the circulation of elite knowledge made these two practices the object of manipulation by some fractions of power and, paradoxically, the best tool to confront them. Freire, for example, vindicated the need for a popular pedagogy in which reading and writing were counter-hegemonic resources of power. If reading mainly some texts or writing in particular ways perpetuated the circulation of biased information, reflecting critically on what is read and written could also become a tactic to oppose the oppressive system.

That said, the perspectives of critical literacy broaden their focus of study and the disciplinary nature of their application. Here, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, gender studies, the philosophy of difference, the sociology of the body and emotions intertwine (Ocampo, 2021). Some interdisciplinary proposals that problematise how competences and dispositions about reading and writing are understood allow us to analyse their scope as distribution devices of knowledge and power.

Interest in critical literacy, in the words of Ocampo and López (2018), lies in inquiring about the socio-political role of reading and writing, particularly, in terms of its epistemological and technical nature. The first would advocate dismantling the reigning procedural character that has permeated educational policies and projects aimed at its promotion, while the second would appeal to more relational concepts about the right to read and write. In either case, it is worth recognising how reading and writing both generate processes of social transformation and allow for understandings and interpretations of multiple and diverse realities. Against this background, we must be open about decentralising the practice of what is considered literate in order not to confine it to a code, but rather to multiple textualities. This article delves into the proposal of some performative literacies. Literacies encompass broad expressions of languages and seek to dismantle epistemic regimes regarding what reading and writing imply. They generate cultural reconfigurations of politics by establishing embodied forms of writing that take over the public space to promote particular knowledge - regarding collective practices, social struggle and memory.

Performative literacies include performance studies and current perspectives on political performativity; the basics of anthropology and arts converge in this field

of study, too. Performative literacies embrace different dimensions of knowledge and offer a platform whereby powers that have been historically marginalized and oppressed are addressed. Within this framework, political philosophy takes concepts from Austin's pragmatics to rethink the idea of performativity and explains not only from the resonance of the body on stage but also from linguistics - locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts- the scope that statements have in action and how people recognise them. In the relationship between body and intentionality political performativity emerges as a counterresponse to the normative legitimacy of language in individuals. Butler (2011) argues that although language has become a cultural mark that determines the ways of being in the world, its creative capacity challenges the law and does so through new enunciations or new meanings. From there, the performative aspect of language broadens its influence by twisting its initial principles and proposing political performativities, exercises of disidentification and subjective transformation. Performative literacies recognise meanings in discursive, semiotic, and physical practices. They interpret and analyse textualities through interlocking codes that are no longer dead letter, but can emerge as authentic devices i.e. performances.

Shechner affirms that (2011) performance constitutes an epistemological and methodological alternative, a lens that allows the analysis of society within the framework of its conflicts and discontinuities; since it establishes ways of presenting situations of violence and injustice; when exposing grievances in the public arena. The roots of performance are found in theatricality and spectacle, and its value as a complaint mechanism has grown stronger over the last century in Latin America. In this regard, Taylor (2011) recognizes that performances are deeply rooted in America from its origins even though the word seems foreign and untranslatable (p. 25). The indigenous Mayan, Aztec and Inca peoples held their rituals using songs and dances to convey their stories. Political performance, different from those past forms of theatricality and action art, takes on a different meaning in southern countries, mainly in those in which dictatorships and internal conflicts have left millions of victims and much injustice that not even the policies of memory preservation have managed to vindicate. This is how the victims use numerous repertoires, including performances, artistic interventions, and action art samples to rewrite their struggles in the memories of their fellow citizens. Many victims turn to the judicial apparatus to make their complaints; however, the processes show no significant progress, partly because the legal language complicates their requests and claims. They find that their pain is not completely translated into the narrative of events, so they look for alternatives to externalize their suffering. They recognize the need for others -society- to understand and accompany how they grieve and mourn.

Political performance is a nomadic exercise of reading and writing. Graffiti in the streets, tattoos, and weaving become mechanisms to embody narratives of social reality; through them, it is possible to interpret the scope of the victims' struggles and grievances. The nomad is anchored in the feminist views of Braidotti (2000) who, from a materialist perspective, finds that both subjectivity and its processes cannot be explained in terms of abstract and universal units and categories. The itinerant is a realistic understanding of difference, of readings and writings that converge in these two practices, and of how contextual and intentional dimensions intermingle. In these writings - on the skin, on the walls, in the streets - the codes vary and play with meaning and significance; what can a tattoo on a mother's body evoke beyond the allusion to the missing body of her child? There, pragmatic knowledge transcends the immediate context of tattoo making and refers to its

disappearance; this is how these samples become expressions of political performativity.

Social struggle as performance

The phenomenon of false positives is one of the most dreadful episodes in contemporary Colombian history. It is described as the strategy used mainly, between 2006 and 2009, by the military forces to declare false combat casualties by sacrificing civilians. This strategy left at least 6,402 victims throughout the country and was recently recognised as the narrative of death derived from the conflict. It was first and foremost a ploy that, at the time, declared the triumph of the army over the guerrillas. With the advent of the peace process and the creation of a Special Jurisdiction for peace, the cases of false positives have been uncovered with full force, although at first the relatives of some victims were not even heard. This was the case of the mothers of Soacha, so named because they were the first women mothers of the victims who began to recognize similar traits both in the disappearance and in the death of their children. After the verification of the conditions of their deaths and the recognition of all the lies and misrepresentations used to pass them off as guerrillas killed in combat, the Soacha mothers organized themselves as a collective, establishing the MAFAPO foundation (mothers of false positives). From then on, the MAFAPO was organized as a conglomerate that attends courts and other legal instances to demand truth and justice concerning the deaths of their relatives, and they embarked on a path towards public recognition of what happened. They, together with different artistic groups, are taking actions to publicly expose their claims and expressions of pain. The MAFAPOs narrate again and again the stories of how their children and relatives became victims of the State through performances, photographic exhibitions, mobilisations, and different textualities. They, throughout these years, have transformed their reality

and have positioned themselves as political subjects demanding justice in the face of the negligence of the judicial authorities.

This article takes up a report written by *Pacifistas* in 2016, titled *Never again*! Here, a group of *Soacha* mothers were photographed while the names and other elements of their children were tattooed on their bodies. The mothers were recounting, simultaneously, their journey in the search for truth and justice. They configure multimodal textuality through their narratives, photos of their faces and parts of their bodies, where the symbolic value of the tattoo is of utter importance. The MAFAPO actions are performative in so far as they ritualize grief, exchange symbols of their relatives, and unravel the pain that accompanies their losses.

The report explains how, through tattoos, family members initially evoke stories of their children, while photographs capture the fresh ink of those stories that will become indelible on their bodies. Thus, double writing - what is put on the tattoo and what the photograph reflects - expresses two ways of writing the absence. While tattoos are painful marks that indicate the pain of loss, photography, as Sontang (2006) maintains, reinforces the virtues of memory. In both cases, textuality refers us to two types of memory, one intimate and one common. There is a dialectical relationship insofar as they resignify loss and make it public. According to Álvarez and Sevilla (2002), these become the sample of common and individual memories. The scene of the report commemorates the memories of the pain of absence and turns rituals into a narrative where tattoos are shared texts. Here, rituality and embodiment are performative because the bodies are marked. Although the report is not a performance, it is in so far as it presents tattoos as a symbolic exchange that evokes loss and shows the marks of family members on the skin.

The ritual has been considered one of the central features of performance. Its mythical conception indicates that the main cultural emblems have been consolidated through the celebration of rituals; that is, from ceremonies where symbols characterise the values and beliefs of certain peoples. For anthropology, the study of rituals accentuates their capacity to reiterate behaviour in a community and consolidates norms and schemes of action. The ritual has been considered one of the central features of performance. Its mythical conception indicates that important cultural emblems have been consolidated through the celebration of rituals; that is, from ceremonies where symbols characterise the values and beliefs of certain peoples. For anthropology, the study of rituals accentuates their capacity to reiterate behaviour in a community and consolidates norms and schemes of action that challenge socially legitimised behaviour. However, Turner (1987) points out that the contemporary character and repetition of the ritual is transgressive, especially in times of crisis. For the MAFAPO, their travels throughout the country, in different commemorative exhibitions of victims, reaffirm from their daily life the tirelessness of their searches; they do it to make their attackers uncomfortable and to keep their claims alive. For them, other spaces become a place of congregation and exchange.

Regarding the need to embody the loss, Taylor (2011) affirms that although the narratives listen to the voice of the victims, the staging and pain in the tattooed body mobilise sensations beyond speech. On the one hand, embodying the fight for injustice makes the victim aware of what her body feels; on the other, it invites viewers to wonder about what leads them to recognise themselves in the pain of the other. The body, then, establishes itself as a mediation of that which seeks to be vindicated and which, in the absence of it, has no concrete place for its loss. It is in the body itself where faces, names, objects or symbolic elements recall the

physiological condition of pain. The victims' insistence does not end in the passivity of the claim; in contrast, their role as victims helps them transform their understanding of what happened to make their pain a step towards political transformation.

This understanding of the tattoo as shared textuality resignifies the enduring idea of its practice as a marginal product. The tattoo symbolises rebelliousness and, in the context of the victims, it becomes a resource to recall a traumatic situation. The recognition of conflict is vital to work on the identities of the victims who, according to Alexander (2016), are prevented from moving on with their lives because they are marked by a horrendous event. Not knowing the trauma or the marks of the victims does not allow them to reach better conditions. On the contrary, when the victims feel accompanied to accept social trauma, their rituals lead to moral and political improvement.

Memory, reconciliation and new literacies as a life experience in three social groups in Buenaventura

The peace process in Colombia has shown the diversity and complexity of more than sixty years of armed conflict, so much so that it is difficult to refer to its effects homogeneously. Let us examine Buenaventura, where various forms of violence converge, many of them crossed by race, class, gender, economy, development and, of course, the guerrillas and paramilitary groups. The memory and reparation processes of the victims are problematic and cannot be explained from a single perspective.

Faced with the "discursive struggle" that emerged from the agreements signed in Havana and the strategies concerning memory and reconciliation, the need arises to use the voice of the victims as a counter-hegemonic referent of the institutionality – that of the state and academic institutions - and as an inter-discursive political challenge. In this section of the paper, the interposed voices of the victims from three social groups from Buenaventura are used to discuss both performative literacies and the construction of memory. Their voices transcend abstract concepts and allow these groups to reconcile with life and with themselves.

We start from a discussion that is theoretically circumstantial in the construction of memory, i.e., how collective memory comes from a social activity in which "groups need to permanently reconstruct their memories through conversations, contacts, remembrances, celebrations, uses and customs, conversation about their objects and relevance and permanence in the places where they have developed their life"(Aguilar, 2002, p.2) This accounts for two aspects that coincide with a performative perspective; on the one hand, rituality is a cultural and symbolic expression of what happened, and on the other, it is directed towards a relational practice of memory. In the latter, the lived stories are part of the identities of the social group.

In Buenaventura, despite the multiple massacres and historical events of violence, people manage to redefine their life testimonies by being participants in organisations such as FUNDESCODES. The Mothers of the Chapel of Memory, for example, find in FUNDESCODES a space for healing their psychological pain. The resilience of their people and community means memory is a tool for construction and social transformation. The communities once again feel within a family and they defend their rights and regain their peace of mind. The project "Recovering the corners" created by *Urban Faces* identifies art as the essence of life and incorporates training workshops for political managers; and educates the other members on Human Rights. The rationale of the project is to generate political incidence, re-signify the spaces lost due to the armed conflict and make visible the living conditions of the victims of the conflict in Buenaventura-Valle. *Urban faces* has been working for about 10 years in favour of human rights, generating conscious art through music with human rights content.

To make the truth in the middle of the conflict is complicated. There are unhealed wounds, there is no compliance with the agreements, and you must rethink things to tell the story differently, from another platform, such as art for example.

The truth is not clarification, in Buenaventura, we know what happened, it is more than clarifying a fact, recognition is necessary to rebuild society, it is necessary to have mechanisms that enable local recognition . . . a different understanding of the truth. STAND – (Urban Faces, personal Comunication, 2017)

In their testimonies, activists and social leaders consider it important to find and obtain territorial forms of truth construction, which must go beyond the written documents and/or t publications provided by the Truth Clarification Commission. From there, three forms of transformative memory are also identified: Being listened, being protected and being supported. The first seeks to identify a network of relationships in which the transformation process is possible when the stories of others are heard and respected. The second emphasises aesthetic expressions that, from music, constitute a space of protection - "music saves lives" - Javier-FUNDESCODES- and a strategy to protect from violence. In the third, the communities manage their alliances with organisations of a different nature and obtain psychosocial and economic support.

These experiences, in the voices of the actors, show that

Building awareness, building a better future through art, music moment, we through the microphone, you understood ... any question ... ask why the question is not more important . . . there is nothing I can do ... a contribution or a question "..." I think that when we said a while ago that we do not make transformative memory, it is because what is done explicitly is a transformation (Javier, Personal Communication, 2017).

From there emerge practical notions that transform memory, and have a political impact, such as those of the social movement that won the elections through music: "a song was composed that made it possible for the campaign of this social movement to become widely known, to such an extent, that people in the street began to dance and sing as if it were a musical hit". This song became popular and strategic to understand that it was, in fact, a campaign.

Another actor of these groups proudly affirms they are memory because they use it to generate life; memory allows them to share, coexist and bond. Memory serves people as a reconciling and transforming practice to transform conflict into a tool to rebuild their lives beyond any victimisation. A paradigmatic example is Dona Vicky, collective memory gave her life meaning and allowed her to overcome the disappearance of her son. She immediately turns to the "Chapel of Memory" when we talk to her about the loss of her son, since it is one of the few places where telling what happened helps all the actors in these groups transform their lives. The people there are transformed radically since they share their traumatic experiences to overcome them and not live off resentment. It is in the word itself, in the struggle and in the resistance that people can give a significant turn to their lives. Memory is both an element of identification and a political tool. It mobilises the impressions of what happened and its impact on the reconstruction of the social fabric. Memory, as a woman in the community recounts, is a box where memories and moments are kept alive. They are free to create other thoughts upon reaching their memories. Memory is transformative and allows us to go further, a way of migrating, just as the waves of the sea, which in their swaying, become tangible and make you want to move forward. Without memory, there is neither beginning nor end.

Based on these experiences, it can be said that memory and reconciliation are concepts that are not free from hegemonic charges of power - be they academic or inter-institutional - or from expressions of epistemic violence, the latter are impositions and discursive practices that ignore the voices of the communities and that, many times, instrumentalise them without collecting their territorial and ancestral sentiment. It is there where the understanding of critical and performative literacies is committed to, following Felipe MacGregor and his concept of "Culture of Peace", admitting that communities can build an educational process of vital and personal affirmation to recognize conflicts and resolve them by any means other than violence or abuse of power (MacGregor, 1991, p.51).

The abovementioned conception works in the three communities of Buenaventura because, in the absence of the State to resolve and guarantee the minimum conditions of a dignified life, they resignify their existence, building mechanisms of memory and daily Reconciliation through multiple and varied social practices that give their lives meaning. It is, following MacGregor (1991), an educational process that gives them "cultural security" and the necessary roots to be someone in the world. It also allows them to recognize that in expressions such as tattooing,

music, art, song, dance, food, the river, the sea, meanings are intertwined. These meanings arise from discourse and the body and refer to what challenges them individually and collectively. These communities are agents of knowledge from which multiple and varied expressions of memory and reconciliation emerge. The following poem was written by Lilibeth Escobar Díaz (personal communication, 2017), Facilitator of the theatre for lifeⁱⁱ FUNDESCODES and captures what memory is like for her:

La memoria

La memoria es una caja, donde se guardan recuerdos Donde se mantiene vivos algunos momentos Llegar a la memoria y tocar dichos recuerdos Te da la plena libertad de crear otros pensamientos Algo llamado transformación, que en su máxima exploración Te dan el paso a la liberación La memoria permite ir mas allá Como una forma o una especie de migrar Así como las olas del mar, que en su vaivén de recuerdos Se vuelven tangibles los momentos y dan ganas de avanzar Sin memoria no hay inicio y tampoco un final.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of some social movements in Colombia are reflections of how the history of the conflict is written, read and shared in spaces that are not exclusively schooled. Critical and performative literacies, in particular, allow us to explore and magnify the heartfelt experiences, day-to-day knowledge and feelings of the victims. Such experiences are different textualities that reconstruct "stories of pain"

and experiences of subjective and collective transformation. Ritual and bodily practices cry out for justice and disclose how traumas promote a space for reconciliation.

The MAFAPO and the Buenaventura communities are referents of critical ways of exercising citizenship through collective learning around memory, truth and reconciliation as life-transforming processes in non-institutionalized contexts of knowledge. Today, one of these groups does so by reaffirming their need for justice and truth; the other, the victims of port development, does so by forging political alliances.

Notes

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ⁱ MAFAPO groups the mothers and relatives of the victims of false positives. Crimes carried out by the Colombian army are called 'false positives'. Those who murdered civilians and made them pass as 'guerrillas fallen in combat'. In the page 8 we expand this explanation.

ⁱⁱ Dinamizadora del Semillero: Teatro por la vida, FUNDESCODES.

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Author Details

Diana Carolina Moreno, Professor- researcher of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. Doctor in Social Sciences, Childhood and youth from the University of Manizales- CINDE. <u>Email:mo-diana@javeriana.edu.co</u>

Vladimir Núñez, Director Departament of Languages, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. Doctor in Language Sciences from the Paul Valéry University, Montpellier 3. Email: <u>Vladimir.nunez@javeriana.edu.co</u>

Leonardo Varela, Professor of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia. Master's in Education from the Open University, London, England. He is a teacher-researcher-trainer, a virtual learning objects writer, a TOEFL & IELTS instructor. Email: <u>e_varela@javeriana.edu.co</u>