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Jorhenkuarheni: The Educador Comunitario and P'urhépecha-Based Pedagogies as Decolonial Praxis

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Abstract

In the P'urhépecha language, learning is expressed through the term *jorhenkuarheni*. In its morphological composition, *jorhenkuarheni* derives from the verbal root *jorhentani*; that is, to light the fire (*encender el fuego*). Learning is an inherently collective praxis embedded in the know-how of P'urhépecha culture and founded on our ethical values oriented towards our communal ways of being. In recent years, the P'urhépecha People have led a transformative self-government movement emphasizing demands favoring community-based educational practices. In this context, the Educador Comunitario was born in the P'urhépecha highlands in 2017. The Educador Comunitario constitutes an annual gathering that brings together P'urhépecha communities to engage in activities grounded in P'urhépecha education praxis and collective knowledge production. Drawing from an auto ethnographic reflection as a workshop facilitator in Comachuén and Huecorio (Michoacán), and as a P'urhépecha scholar navigating Western academia in the U.S., I offer a critical reflection on how community-based education through the Educador Comunitario constitutes a decolonial praxis grounded in P'urhepecha-based pedagogies and ways of knowing. I contend that the Educador Comunitario de-centers academia as the only site of knowledge production and stresses Indigenous community spaces as fundamental and legitimate sites for the reproduction of Indigenous knowledges.

Keywords: Indigenous pedagogies; Decolonial praxis; Indigenous education; P'urhepecha

Por la Resignificación de la Educación P'urhépecha
(Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante)

Introduction

For the P'urhépecha People of Central Western Michoacán, education does not only take place within the context of formal, or institutional, spaces found in settler-colonial States. Education is rooted in processes that center the community as a historical, traditional, and fundamental space for knowledge production and educational practices that have sustained us as P'urhepecha People. The Educador/a/x Comunitario, born in the community of Comachuén in the P'urhépecha Highlands in 2017, is a process organized and led by Daisy Azucena Magaña Mejía and her family,

community, and allies. The Educador/a/x Comunitario's communal library is modeled after a traditional P'urhépecha cargo system, a system of social posts where families or individuals take over a social position in the community and assume the responsibilities of that post for a specific amount of time; thus resulting in an intricate system of social relations that interweaves communal ties and belonging (Padilla, 2000).

In 2018, Uekorheni, a community-based collective located in Huecorio (Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico)—where I am also a member—became carguerxs of the communal library. That same year, our collective participated in the second edition of the Educador/a/x Comunitario, an event that takes place every summer in Comachuén, hosting a multitude of workshops aimed at the communities. Magaña Mejía notes that centering P'urhépecha-based pedagogical practices allows for the development and accompaniment of Indigenous autonomy processes in P'urhépecha communities (Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante, 2019). More specifically, the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x responds to holistic education systems already found in P'urhépecha territory, which are part of a more comprehensive epistemology that includes principles such as ánchekorheni (collective work/faena), marhoatspekua (communal/community service), jarhoajpekua (mutual aid), and kaxumpekua (honorability). All of these are part of the P'urhepecha jorhenpeni and jorhenkuarheni (aprender/enseñar, or teach and learn).

Inspired by and working in collaboration with the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x, Uekorheni also organized a series of workshops in Huecorio and eventually became an island of the Educador/a/x since 2018. In this text, I share this experience, both as a member of Uekorheni and as an P'urhépecha Ethnic Studies scholar who sees community-based educational practices as a central educational system to learn how to relate to the world. In the following pages, I reflect on the Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x as a decolonizing praxis grounded in Indigenous-based (P'urhépecha, specifically) pedagogies and ways of knowing that acknowledges and roots communal relations in our territories while contesting the coloniality of power present in Western education institutions (Quijano, 2000). Aligned with Ethnic Studies frameworks and the hallmarks of Ethnic Studies teaching praxis (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) that highlight community-engaged work and reclaiming cultural identities, for instance, the Educador Comunitario de-centers traditional Western academia as the only site of knowledge production and prioritizes Indigenous community spaces as fundamental and legitimate sites for the reproduction of Indigenous knowledges. The Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x not only empowers P'urhépecha communities and brings them to the center of knowledge-making, not as "objects of study" or "human subjects" of academic research, but as knowledge creators and interlocutors of our own histories as P'urhépecha People. Indigenous pedagogies confront the coloniality of power present in institutionalized education in settler-colonial States. The hope of this article is to offer a reflection to share the experience of a community space that not only interrogates institutions of knowledge production, but that offers a seed of hope to transform educational praxis.

Indigenous Pedagogies as Decolonial and Liberatory Praxis

Community-based pedagogies are central to Ethnic Studies. In the history of Ethnic Studies, communities have been a site of knowledge production. From teach-ins to Escuelitas and community workshops, Ethnic Studies educators have facilitated spaces to share knowledge that seeks to contribute to the communities. In the case of Native and Indigenous Peoples, Sandy Grande (2015) states that Indigenous pedagogies are systems that focus on the collective while

having at the heart anti-colonial and anti-imperial forms of resistance. This collective emphasis offers a fundamental contribution to Critical Ethnic Studies to respond to the colonial attacks that we continue to experience by interrogating practices of oppression in education and engaging in Indigenous knowledges as pedagogies of resistance amid global crises.

Coloniality of Power and Decoloniality

Coloniality of Power, a term coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000), explains the interrelationship between knowledge production and colonialism. With the construction of Western universities as the *only* sites of *legitimate* knowledge production, other ways of existing, knowing, and relating to the world have been erased and excluded, particularly from school curricula. Current attacks on Ethnic Studies, for example, are founded on those same ideas that coloniality of power, as a concept and practice, discusses: European colonialism, the maintenance of racial hierarchies, the erasure of non-European and non-white systems of knowledge and existing. On the other hand, decoloniality, as discussed by authors such as Walter Minolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018), questions Eurocentric epistemic thought to prioritize alternative forms of knowledge that exist in the world. In other words, to understand life from the perspective of a pluriverse (Escobar, 2016). In that sense, Indigenous pedagogies, as the original instructions of these lands (Turtle Island and Abya Yala) debunk the logic of Western knowledge production as the only space where knowledge emerges. The Original Instructions of Indigenous Peoples are rooted in the land and have sustained Indigenous communities since time immemorial (Nelson, 2008). These Original Instructions are not standardized practices. Rather, they respond to the particularities of how Indigenous communities understand place and space. In the case of Mexico, for example, Indigenous scholars have theorized about Comunalidad as both a concept and praxis that explains what it means to live in community by highlighting ancestral systems of knowing and being (Martínez Luna, 2016). In the case of the P'urhépecha People, the network of principles and praxis that exemplifies the good living (buen vivir, comunalidad) and wellbeing can be understood as the Sési Irékani (Magaña Mejía, 2017).

Indigenous Pedagogies as Liberatory Praxis

In their article on the praxis of developing critical consciousness in Indigenous education, Pewewardy, Lees, and Clark-Shim (2018) note that Indigenous education practices existed prior to colonization and the establishment of settler-colonial states. Indigenous pedagogies stem from a millenarian relationship with the land (Nelson, 2008). Therefore, Indigenous systems of knowledge cannot be separated from what happens to the land, the people who inhabit the land, and the entire web of beings that coexists with us. Indigenous pedagogies encompass oral stories and histories, land-based teachings, cultural and spiritual practices, languages, and other central elements of Indigenous epistemologies. These systems of knowledge question but also decenter Western knowledge. In his seminal works on education as liberatory praxis and as a development of a critical consciousness, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (2000) stated the importance of acknowledging systems of oppression to transform the world. Indigenous pedagogies constitute an example of a liberatory praxis, where a focus on collective wellbeing and land-based approach, allows for an understanding of our connection and accountability to the world we live in and to everyone and everything that inhabits these lands.

Walking the Path of Colectividad as a P'urhepecha Educadora Comunitaria

I have accompanied Uekorheni since 2017. In Uekorheni, we emphasize our voices, our bodies, our minds, and our spirits as P'urhepecha women living in Huecorio to address our positionality as part of a communal collective and our community. Throughout this text, I often use "us" and "I" to talk about P'urhépecha pedagogical praxes through the experience of the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x. While I utilize "I" to emphasize my voice, I also rely on "us" because I understand that the experience I share throughout this text is a collective one. Western academia individualizes the research process. Indigenous research methods, on the other hand, emphasizes the collective and the accountability that as Indigenous scholars we have to our communities (Wilson, 2008). I am P'urhépecha. I am from Huecorio. I am an educator, a woman, a migrant, and a community broadcaster. I am also a scholar. With the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities this profession brings, I am still learning to navigate Western academic settings. But I acknowledge that who I am today is also the product of collective knowledge coming from family, community, mentors, colleagues, and friends. I also bring my roots, my ancestral knowledge, and my voice to the spaces I inhabit and embody.

Centralizing our voices as Indigenous scholars is also an act of resistance. Following an Indigenous critical autoethnographic approach that centers Indigenous (in this case, P'urhépecha) voices and disrupts individualistic and traditional academic structures (Bishop, 2020), in this article I emphasize the importance of a multidirectional relationship between the personal/individual with the collective voice in an effort to elucidate on P'urhépecha pedagogical practices that incorporate all members of the community as the Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x does. Doing so allows the continuous reclamation of Indigenous knowledges in order to resist Western narratives of power and transform educational spaces (Smith, 2022).

P'urhépecha Ethics and Knowledge

In multiple public spaces, P'urhépecha historian Pavel Ulianov Guzmán Cruz has referred to the P'urhépecha People as *un pueblo combativo* (People that fight colonial injustice. As a historian, but also as the spokesperson of the Consejo Supremo Indígena de Michoacán, Guzmán Cruz has stated the ongoing struggles that P'urhépecha People face, from colonialism, territorial encroachment, violence, language loss, and education (Torres, 2022). In that sense, a P'urhépecha-based education cannot be alienated from the territory. The P'urhépecha region is divided into four sub-regions: japundarhu (Lake Pátzcuaro), juatarhu or p'ukumendio (the P'urhépecha Highlands), Eraxamani (Eleven Towns), and Tsakapendio (Zacapu marshlands). The ecosystems found in each one of the four sub-regions, everything and everyone that inhabits those territories, and the web of interrelations that connects everything and everyone that/who co-exists in these territories (including human, non-human, and other-than-human beings) make up the systems through which the P'urhépecha People learn to live and pass down this knowledge. The Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x and the teaching pedagogies that stem from this process are grounded in P'urhépecha cultural ethics and communal praxis built through a system of reciprocal responsibilities rooted in the land. These principles include:

- **Ánchekorheni:** collective work and faenas, or *tequios*. This implies working collectively in community and prioritizing collaborative knowledge making for communal wellbeing.

- **Jarhoajpekua:** reciprocity and mutual aid by building accountable relations with the community and the territory as a whole over extractive practices. In my research and teaching, I extend this value to institutionalized education, where academia has also extracted knowledge from Indigenous communities and has worked to reproduce colonial hierarchies of power (Smith, 2022).

- **Marhoatspeni**: communal service. This principle refers to serving the needs, goals, and aspirations of the entire community and culture. P'urhépecha scholars have also discussed marhoatspekua as a central value for the reproduction of communal life in P'urhépecha communities (Cortés Máximo, 2019).

- **Jánhaskakua**: wisdom and knowledge. In the context of knowledge production and education, this can also mean enacting community-engaged practices in teaching pedagogies that center P'urhépecha-based knowledges, stories, and collective histories.

- **Jurhimpikua**: honesty or rectitude. This means conducting ourselves as individuals and communities with ethics and respect, orienting our actions towards building trusting relationships.

Although I include some reference to Indigenous/P'urhépecha scholars who talk about Indigenous ethical principles in a broader sense, the translations that I share above are approximate. Instead of basing the knowledge of these principles in scholarly texts, I emphasized an approximate definition of these P'urhépecha language terms based on experiential knowledge learned through making comunidad. The experience of the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x stresses principles such as ánchekorheni, marhoatspekua, janhaskakua, and jarhoajpekua to reproduce our own pedagogical practices.

Educador/a Comunitario/a/x

The Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x is an extension of the Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante. The Biblioteca emerged in 2015 as a family exercise to share a passion for knowledge and reading in Comachuén, a community located at the highest peak of the mountains in the P'urhépecha Highlands. Daisy and her two sons took their books and toys to the community's main plaza and invited children and families to come together. That summer of 2015, Daisy and her family brought together more than 150 children, a high number for a small community (Magaña Mejía, 2019). This communal effort turned into an itinerary library that now hosts thousands of books and travels around communities in P'urhépecha territory every year. The intercommunal networks that the library created also became the catalyst of the first Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x in 2017. Since their inception, both the Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante and the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x have accompanied self-determination projects in P'urhépecha territory. Autonomy, in the words of Magaña Mejía, must include a critical implementation of P'urhépecha pedagogies that involves all sections of the community, from women to youth and children.

As guardians of the communal library when it first arrived in Huecorio, Uekorheni organized a series of workshops that centered two central elements of current P'urhépecha political demands: autonomy and education. Daisy Asucena Magaña Mejía, organizer and coordinator of both the

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Educador/a Comunitario/a/x and Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante, states that the Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante, where the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x was born, emerged as:

> [un] como recurso pedagógico alternativo de reorganización comunitaria transformadora, ajena a fines partidistas y/o de Estado; más bien como ejercicio autonómico y autogestivo que busca recuperar los procesos comunitarios que hacen frente a las crisis planetarias.
>
> [an alternative pedagogical resource for transformative communal reorganization, apart from political parties and/or State institutions; but as an autonomous and self-sustained exercise that aims at safeguarding communal processes that confront planetary crises] (My translation)
>
> (Magaña Mejía, 2019, p. 3)

As Magaña Mejía states, P'urhépecha education, envisioned within the Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x provides hope amid global neocolonial crises and State projects that threaten the livelihood of Indigenous Peoples. P'urhépecha education through the Educador/a/x constitutes an example of action that is crucial to disrupt colonial projects by prioritizing a communal collective approach.

Figure 1.

Uekorheni emerged in Huecorio as a response to socio-political struggles for Indigenous autonomy in 2017. One of the central purposes of Uekorheni was to lead a community media project (Uekorheni, 2017). Understanding community work in Indigenous communities as processes that respond directly to the community, Uekorheni focused on establishing a workshop program for, with and by the community. Stemming from the collaborati on with the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x in Comachuen in the P'urhepecha Highlands, Uekorheni has worked with three axes to implement activities in Huecorio that follow the principles of the Educador/a/x: establishing a communal library, organizing workshops with children, coordinating talking circles with women. The guiding principles of Uekorheni focus on community-based education by working directly with the community, especially with children and women. The following sections touch on three examples through which Uekorheni has implemented community-based educational practices framed within the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x, thus centering P'urhépecha principles, such as jarhoajpekua (mutual aid), marhoatspekua (communal/community service), ánchekorheni (collective work/faenas), and jorhenpeni/jorhenkuarheni (to teach/to learn), in these activities.

Huecorio's Communal Library at Radio Uekorheni

Uekorheni became carguerx of the Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante in 2018 and 2019 (Figure 1). As a small team of women, we approached our community's local authorities to request a space for the library. Radio Uekorheni, the community media project at Uekorheni, became the site to safeguard the library in our community for a month. Inspired by the work of Daisy in Comachuén and the rest of the communities who had hosted the library, we started our own communal library. We started with a few books that each of the members of our collective donated. Eventually, the library grew, and we own hundreds of books that are currently located at Radio Uekorheni in Huecorio's communal building, a public space that hosts Radio Uekorheni, the Jefatura de Tenencia (civil authority office), the Comisariado de Bienes Comunales (communal land office), and the Secretariat of Education's public library. The communal library currently hosts a collection of P'urhépecha-language books, historical titles specific to the P'urhépecha territory, bilingual books, and formal education guides translated to the P'urhépecha language. Hosting the communal library has allowed us to coordinate multiple activities, from organizing reading sessions, reading P'urhépecha stories with the children and broadcasting them through the community radio, and utilizing the material in diverse workshops to map our territory from the vision of the children. Through the communal library, we are learning and revisiting our history as Huecorenses. For example, some of the information found in the library has led us to conduct interviews with the elders as living archives of our community. The communal library became our starting point in our collective, and this work stemmed from the relationships Huecorio established with the Educador/a Comunitario/a/x.

Acknowledging the Territory through Children's Workshops

Figure 2.

Since the summer of 2018, Uekorheni has organized summer workshops primarily aimed at working with children. The workshops range from intr oducing the P'urhepecha language, acknowledging our communal territory from multiple perspectives, talking about Lake Pátzcuaro—our main water body in the region—and art activities that centralize what the community means to them. While the communal library opened a world of possibilities to coordinate our first workshops, incorporating the voices and visions of the children has been crucial to the Educador/a/x. The first workshops that Uekorheni organized took place in Comachuén in 2018. We organized a two-hour workshop focused on the acknowledgement of our territory through the medicinal plants. The target audience were children. Throughout that morning in August of 2018, we had around thirty children over the course of the morning. As time ran out, we had to leave the classroom so that the next workshop could start. However, we stayed one more hour since the children wanted to finish decorating their codices that featured medicinal plants found in their town. This was the first workshop that Uekorheni organized after our establishment as a community collective in September 2017 (Figures 2 and 3). The enthusiasm, knowledge, and joy of the children instilled in us a sense of hope to organize similar workshops in our community, Huecorio. Since 2018, after returning from our

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first Educador/a/x, we established our summer workshops, which we have done in collaboration with children and women.

Embroidery Circles as Women's Spaces to Teach, Learn, and Share

Women are a central part of the P'urhépecha culture and territory. Self-determination and communal life do not exist without the women (Lemus Jiménez, 2022). Women have always been present in all aspects of the P'urhépecha culture and communal life. As a collective made up of women, Uekorheni acknowledges that women must be included in all spaces, including those that are publicly visible. Uekorheni/Radio Uekorheni is located within the communal building. The communal building is one of the most important spaces in the community. This is the space where political decisions are made, where communal assemblies take place, and where important cargos (social and political posts) are renewed every year. However, this has been a male-dominated space. In 2020, Uekorheni established an embroidery circle, a public space open to all people in the community. Although the circle focused on the sharing of traditional embroidery, it became much more than a space to embroider P'urhepecha traditional attire. It also became a space where women, especially during the peak of the pandemic, shared our knowledge, our fears, our dreams, our visions, our hope. It became a space for teaching, learning, and sharing, not only about embroidery as a system that encompasses cultural, social, historical, and economic knowledge, but also what goes behind the women who embroider (Figure 4). The embroidery system has allowed the women who know the art of embroidery to share their knowledge and those of us who are learners to acknowledge embroidery as a web of knowledge and relations.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Conclusion: From the Educador/a/x Comunitario/a/x to Ethnic Studies

Christine Sleeter and Miguel Zavala (2020) note Ethnic Studies as a decolonizing project and as a curriculum that contests and undoes the legacies of colonization. Furthermore, in discussing Native American and Indigenous scholars, Sleeter and Zavala point to the importance of not leaving "White settler colonialist and the logic of Native erasure untouched" (p. 4). In that sense, Ethnic Studies engages with a critique of settler colonialism in education that centers Native experiences and land-based pedagogies by recognizing that, as education institutions, we are on Native lands stolen. As seen from the Educador/a/x Comunitario/a/x workshops, they highlight

Indigenous voices and communities. In applying Ethnic Studies frameworks in my own community-engaged work, I also see the decolonizing process that authors such as Sleeter and Zavala mention as extending beyond colonial borders and acknowledging hemispheric connections. I see in the Educador/a/x a potential to continue to reconfigure our identities as Indigenous (P'urhépecha) people in education.

Sleeter and Zavala also highlight seven hallmarks that frame the teaching praxis found in Ethnic Studies classrooms: counter-narratives, criticality, intersectionality and multiplicity, reclaiming cultural identities, community engagement, pedagogy as culturally responsive and mediated, and students as intellectuals. In my own Ethnic Studies praxis, I have found that these hallmarks extend beyond traditional classrooms. The focus of Ethnic Studies as a decolonizing curriculum extends beyond colonial borders and rigid understandings of education found in mainstream curricula in Western institutions.

In my own teaching praxis, I centralize Ethnic Studies teaching praxes. But I also acknowledge that in doing so, I am bringing with me who I am as a P'urhepecha scholar, educator, and community member. My community knowledge not only comes with me into the classroom but also guides my teaching. In previous summer workshops with Uekorheni, we worked with children to create codices that would document medicinal plants. For instance, in my classroom I assign community-based discussions and write-ups, where students must attend a community event or workshop, discuss what they learned, and engage in critical writing from Ethnic Studies perspectives. From the Educador/a/x, I have learned the importance of centralizing community voices and deconstructing the idea of the traditional academic classroom. In the workshops, we inhabit public and community spaces. We learn from elders, from the youth, and from children. The community event in my Ethnic Studies courses offers a possibility such as this adapted to the university system in California. Furthermore, applying transnational Indigenous knowledge in education happens in various spaces in California. For example, the Oaxaqueño Youth Encuentro (OYE) engages with Indigenous youth (mainly Zapotec, Triqui, Mixtec, P'urhépecha, and others) in the K-12 system to offer mentorship and an extracurricular program that centralizes Indigenous land-based knowledges (oaxaquenoyouthencuentro.org). OYE brings together students in the Central Valley with mentors from California, Oaxaca, and other parts of Mexico to foster cultural connections, Indigenous resilience, and empower Indigenous youth, whose work is reminiscent of what happens in the Educador/a/x Comunitario/a/x every year.

The Educador/a/x takes place for an entire week at the end of July and early August every year. It is a self-sustained project, where marhoatspekua (communal service), jarhoajpekua (mutual aid), and ánchekorheni (collective work) make the event possible. While the children are at the workshops, families in town are hosting visitors, providing meals, and sharing stories. Despite being at a smaller scale, our summer workshops in Huecorio are an extension of the Educador/a/x, where P'urhépecha principles allow us to learn in community. The Educador/a/x speaks to collective resistance that centers education and Indigenous autonomy. In an exercise of collective writing by the Educador/a Comunitaria/o/x, various talleristas reflected on the role of community-based education. The Educador/a/x framed these reflections on the verb "abrazar" in Spanish. "Abrazar la libre determinación" (embracing self-determination), as the multiple voices of this collective text mentioned, allowed for a lens that highlighted not only accompaniment, but also with love and care in education (Biblioteca Comunitaria Ambulante, 2019).

For those who have participated at the Educador/a/x, this exercise of communal autonomy and decolonial praxis has left us with lessons learned that plants in every space of the Educador/a/x a seed of hope to envision a future full of possibilities in the midst of planetary crises. As a P'urhépecha educator, pedagogical praxis that stem from my community has allowed me to experience holistic and legitimate sites of collective knowledge production that sustain P'urhépecha People, from establishing a communal library, to learning from the children in the summer workshops, and seeing in P'urhépecha textiles an entire system of knowledge production. The Educador/a/x stresses the need to turn to other ways of knowledge, especially those coming from Indigenous communities, as fundamental lessons to exist. This is also a central principle of Ethnic Studies. Through their emphasis on collective action, community, and engagement with alternative forms of knowledge, the Educador/a/x exemplifies one tangible way in which we can resist ongoing colonial struggles while ensuring the continuation of our educational practices as P'urhépecha People.

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