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From body to territory: Decolonial educational practices in intercultural exchanges in Ecuador

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Abstract in English

This article is situated within Latin American debates on body-territory, critical interculturality, and epistemological pluralism, engaging with scholars such as Cabnal, Walsh, Andreotti (Machado), and Escobar. From these perspectives, it explores body-territory as a pedagogical practice within mixed cohorts of international education programs co-designed with communities in the Ecuadorian Andes and Amazon. Drawing on three focus groups (local, international, and mixed) and an intercultural interpretive analysis, we find that learning through the body activates memories, emotions, and relationships that move beyond the transmission of information to become situated, collective knowledge. Body-territory mapping functions simultaneously as a relational language and a mirror, dissolving boundaries, flattening hierarchies in dialogue, and opening possibilities for healing and shared responsibility with both the human and the more-than-human world. Our findings suggest practical implications for curriculum design, including the incorporation of ritual into educational practice, the assessment of relational learning, and the recognition of communities as co-educators. Together, these shifts invite a reimagining of international education—not as mobility detached from place, but as an act of rootedness, reciprocity, and responsibility toward the territories that receive us.

Abstract in Spanish

Este artículo se inscribe en los debates latinoamericanos sobre cuerpo-territorio, interculturalidad crítica y epistemologías plurales, y dialoga con

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autoras como Cabnal, Walsh, Andreotti (Machado) y Escobar. Desde estos marcos, explora el cuerpo-territorio como práctica pedagógica en cohortes mixtas de educación internacional codiseñadas con comunidades andinas y amazónicas ecuatorianas. A partir de tres grupos focales (local, internacional y mixto) y de un análisis interpretativo intercultural, argumentamos que aprender desde el cuerpo activa memorias, emociones y relaciones que trascienden lo informativo y devienen en conocimiento situado y colectivo. El mapeo cuerpo-territorio opera como lenguaje y espejo relacional que disuelve fronteras, horizontaliza el diálogo y habilita procesos de sanación y corresponsabilidad con lo humano y lo más-que-humano. Las implicaciones proponen currículos con ritualidad, la evaluación de aprendizajes relacionales y el reconocimiento de las comunidades como coeducadoras, transformando la internacionalización en un acto de arraigo y reciprocidad con los territorios.

Keywords

Body-territory; critical interculturality; critical internationalization; decolonial education; epistemological pluralism

Editorial note

This article is part of the Plurilingual Special Issue of *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* on Voices from Latin America. The Spanish version of the article can be accessed [here](#).

1. Introduction

This article emerged from an encounter sustained over time: mixed cohorts in international education (study abroad) who, over many years, have lived and learned alongside partner communities in the Ecuadorian Andes and Amazon. Across those seasons of shared work—in kitchens, collective community work or *mingas* (in Kichwa language), open-air classrooms, walks through the landscape, and celebrations—we began to notice patterns that theory alone could not fully name. Through this practice of being together, of living interculturality while experimenting with diverse ways of knowing, one practice gradually became central: *body-territory*. It did not arrive as an external concept, but as an embodied discovery—collectively drawn maps, gestures that think, laughter that teaches, memories finding their voice.

Our work stands at the intersection of two ongoing processes. On one hand, the *Rehearsing Change* international education program, co-designed with Indigenous and rural communities, shifts international education away from transactional exchange and toward relationship and shared responsibility. On the other, the community-led process of cultural and

educational renewal in *Píntag Amaru* affirms an insurgent educational practice grounded in memory, relationship, and care. At this meeting point, body–territory mapping functions simultaneously as a methodological tool and a ceremonial gesture: it creates space to narrate through the body, to think with the land, and to feel the histories that inhabit us.

From this place, we ask how body-territory educational practices might create the conditions for intercultural dialogue between visiting university students and host communities, and in what ways these processes might reconfigure international education when it is oriented toward social justice, critical interculturality, and epistemological pluralism. To explore these questions, we conducted three focus groups—one composed of community members, one of international students, and one mixed group—and analyzed the conversations through an intercultural interpretive lens, guided by principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and reciprocity in sharing the findings.

Finally, we propose that these learnings could inform concrete practices within university international exchange programs, particularly those rooted in community partnerships, those taking place in the Global South, and those seeking to contribute to broader transformations in higher education. We understand body–territory as an operational framework for designing curricula, accompaniment, and assessment that privilege relationship, reciprocity, and shared authorship, allowing internationalization to become something more than mobility without roots—to become a practice of responsible belonging with the territories that receive us.

2. Actors and plural approaches of authorship in the research process

2.1. Pachaysana Foundation

Pachaysana is an Ecuadorian nonprofit organization that brings together community-based education, international exchange, and socio-environmental restoration within a decolonial framework. Its name combines two Kichwa words—*pacha* (world, space-time) and *aysana* (balance)—reflecting its mission to cultivate harmony among education, knowledge, and community life.

Pachaysana serves as a bridge between Indigenous and rural communities in Ecuador and universities in the United States. Pachaysana develops study abroad programs grounded in Fair Trade Learning (Hartman et al., 2014) and decolonial methodologies (Andreotti et al., 2015; Gaztambide-

Fernández, 2012), with Rehearsing Change, its semester-long program, being the most recognized. Pachaysana's programs bring together mixed cohorts of local community members and visiting university students who co-create projects in education, community-based art, agroecology, and collective storytelling. Additionally, over the past decade, Pachaysana has developed a research agenda that challenges epistemic hierarchies and advances narrative and embodied methodologies as tools for collective action (Bryan & Viteri, 2022; Bryan et al., 2022; Noroña, 2020, 2024).

2.2. The Píntag Amaru community

Píntag Amaru is an Indigenous community collective located in the parish of Píntag, southeast of Quito, that leads processes of identity reclamation and intercultural education. Composed of young people, women, and community leaders, the collective organizes resistance to historical marginalization while advancing alternatives for development grounded in its own knowledge systems.

In partnership with Pachaysana, Píntag Amaru hosts international students, promotes alternative education projects, and supports the recovery of ancestral practices related to emotional health, agroecology, and community organizing. Developed in dialogue with Rehearsing Change, Píntag Amaru's educational approach serves as a model of insurgent pedagogy, cultivating critical interculturality (Walsh, 2017) and defending body-territory as an everyday practice (Zaragocín & Caretta, 2021; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017).

2.3. Authorship

The richness of this article lies in the convergence of its authors' trajectories, which weave together Indigenous community-based pedagogies, grassroots activism, and academic approaches to body-territory and environmental justice. This diversity embodies the pluriversal nature of the research, in which knowledge emerges from distinct but complementary locations.

Mayra Aimacaña is an architect, educator, and Indigenous activist. A co-founder of Píntag Amaru, she advances intercultural education processes centered on revitalizing Kitu Kara identity, the Kichwa language, and community emotional health. As a leader of the Waminsí women's collective, she creates spaces for healing, creativity, and resistance to everyday coloniality.

Daniel Bryan is an educator and researcher who has lived in Ecuador for more than twenty-five years and is a co-founder of Pachaysana. He develops intercultural exchange and decolonial education programs with urban and

Indigenous communities, using narrative and theatrical methodologies as tools for research and social transformation.

Belén Noroña is a political ecologist and researcher working at the intersection of territorial feminisms, decolonization, and environmental justice. Her work examines Indigenous territorial governance, the impacts of extractivism, and geographies of inequality, contributing decolonial feminist methodologies that reconfigure the production of knowledge.

The encounter among the communities, educators, and scholars who bring this research to life is not merely institutional but epistemological. From this web of relationships emerges the conceptual framework that brings together the concepts of body–territory, epistemological pluralism, and critical interculturality that guide our analysis.

3. Literature review and conceptual framework

This conceptual framework weaves together the following concepts and practices: territory as *land's body* (territorio cuerpo de la tierra), *body–territory* mapping, *epistemological pluralism*, and *critical interculturality*. By bringing these strands together, we celebrate the complexity of the relationships that sustain this work: the connections between body and land/nature, feeling and thinking, human beings and territory, and their interaction with local participants and international students. From this relational perspective, educational processes cease to be mere exchanges of information and become spaces of ontological, affective, and political transformation.

3.1. Latin America and the evolution of “Body–Territory”

In Latin America, Indigenous peoples' right to territory and its meaning exceeds understandings of land as property or geographic boundaries around land (Echeverri, 2004). It entails recognizing an ontological and spiritual relationship with the land; such a relationship sees one's body as an extension of the self and the community referred to as territory (Cabnal, 2017). However, the international legal frameworks that began recognizing these rights—such as Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (1989)—did so through non-Indigenous interpretations that understand territory primarily as a physical space or a manageable resource (Montalván & Wences, 2022). In response, various Indigenous organizations and thinkers have emphasized the need for a decolonial understanding of land or natural resources capable of restoring its symbolic, spiritual, ecological, and collective dimensions (Echeverri, 2004). This reinterpretation, found in the word *territory* has transformed the notion of land into a field of epistemological and political

struggle, in which what is contested is not only the land itself, but also the meaning of living in and with it.

Indigenous peoples, particularly women, throughout the region have organized in opposition to extractive industries, defending their territories through ancestral worldviews that understand territory as a living space in which humans and more-than-human beings—such as mountains, rivers, and animals—form part of a socio-natural fabric with both material and spiritual dimensions (De la Cadena, 2015; Noroña & Aguinda, 2025). These social movements, and the creativity of the peoples behind them, resist the commodification of nature and labor while reclaiming traditional ways of life deeply connected to territory (Gómez-Barris, 2017). Indigenous thinkers such as Lorena Cabnal (2010) and Julieta Paredes (2015) describe this connection through the concept of *territorio cuerpo de la tierra*, hereafter *land's body*, in which the land and more-than-human beings possess agency and subjectivity. From this perspective, landscapes are alive, and human beings form part of the web of living relationships that sustains the cycles of life (Echeverri, 2004).

Human bodies are understood as *body-territories*: extensions of the Earth and parts of land's body (Cabnal, 2019). This way of knowing recognizes humans as integral elements of the landscapes they inhabit and offers a decolonial tool for questioning Western divisions between culture and nature. It also shifts attention away from racial and class hierarchies, proposing more equitable and interdependent relationships among beings.

Inspired by Indigenous worldviews, activists, educators, and scholars have developed the methodology of *body-territory mapping* (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017). For Indigenous women, the body is the first territory we inhabit and the first that must be defended against capitalist and patriarchal expansion (Cabnal, 2019; Zaragocín & Caretta, 2021). Body-territory expands to encompass our relationships with the community and the more-than-human world, forming webs of relationship that sustain life and collective power. These logics become evident in communitarian storytelling.

Food, water, and natural spaces shape our bodies and our quality of life (Echeverri, 2004), just as our footprints transform territory and landscape. Relational space sustains the human and more-than-human fabric, enabling processes of reproduction and care (Kohn, 2013). This socio-environmental fabric has oral and semiotic expressions in the form of oral traditions; such traditions facilitate the transmission of knowledge (Uzendoski & Calapucha-Tapuy, 2012; Kohn, 2013). The sounds of the forest, its animals, and the river are key to the oral traditions of communities and can be read in territories and

in human and more-than-human bodies (Uzendoski & Calapucha-Tapuy, 2012). Violence against land such as water contamination simultaneously wounds the bodies that depend upon it. Thus, Indigenous women emphasize that violence against the land's is also violence against racialized and feminized human bodies (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2021). Defending communities therefore means defending the fabric of relations between humans and the more-than-human world, and communities that the extractive system devalues and exploits.

3.2. Pachaysana, critical interculturality, and international education

At Pachaysana, international education programming emerges from a community context that confronts the epistemic violence of modernity/coloniality (Escobar, 2003) by opening spaces for epistemological pluralism (Andreotti et al., 2011). Rather than placing Western academic frameworks at the center, its programs are designed together with Indigenous and local partners in the Andes and Amazon, who ground learning processes in their own histories, territories, and struggles. This approach aligns with Catherine Walsh's (2010) concept of *critical interculturality*, which insists that difference is not something to be assimilated or managed, but a source of power for reimagining new forms of knowledge, solidarity, and collaboration. Critical interculturality involves students, communities, and educators entering a process of negotiation in which diverse logics and worldviews meet on equal ground, and all participants apply their knowledge to transform their realities.

Pachaysana puts storytelling-based methodologies into practice—approaches inspired by Indigenous oral traditions and participatory and decolonial research practices (Bryan & Viteri, 2022). By engaging students and community members in collective storytelling, theatre, and body-territory mapping, these methodologies generate intercultural dialogues that reveal how bodies and territories are interconnected and how violence against the land reflects violence against people. These practices resonate with decolonial methodologies (Smith, 2023) that resist epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2015), as they affirm that knowledge is produced not only within universities but also through lived experience, oral traditions, and embodied memories. For international students, this process challenges deeply rooted binaries—nature/culture, North/South, and subject/object—and invites them to reconsider their role as learners situated not within a classroom, but within territories and communities.

In this way, the programs seek to transform international education from a transactional model into a relational exchange rooted in community.

The work emphasizes reciprocity, vulnerability, and shared authorship, creating what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) call a *pluriversal* space, or what de Sousa Santos (2007) describes as an *ecology of knowledges*, in which different epistemologies coexist and co-create. Within this pluriversal framework, Indigenous understandings of body–territory evoke *sentipensar* or feeling-thinking as a way of recognizing interdependence and plurality (Escobar, 2016). Students and community members alike are invited to learn not only through analysis, but also through their bodies, emotions, and relationships with territory. This integration of feeling and thinking, body and mind, and theory and practice reflects relational ontologies in which humans and territories co-constitute one another. For students, *sentipensar* becomes a process of unlearning: an invitation to reimagine their place in a world shaped by extractivism and inequity, and to understand intercultural relationships as tools for collective transformation.

This work contributes to a broader movement in critical international education that seeks to decolonize exchange and study abroad programs. Scholars such as Stein (2019) and networks such as the *Critical Internationalization Studies Network* call for an ethical and political re-examination of internationalization. Stein (2019), for example, critiques neoliberal trends in the internationalization of education, arguing that colonial logic in the Global North continues to shape the content of higher education programs. Others, such as Hartman et al. (2014), emphasize the need to develop methodologies and institutional structures that facilitate the implementation of ethical standards grounded in principles such as reciprocity, mutual knowledge exchange, transparency, equity, and sustainability.

Our work contributes to this field by bringing international exchanges into dialogue with Indigenous epistemologies (Noroña & Aguinda, 2025) and community-based decolonial feminisms (Lugones, 2010; Paredes, 2015; Rodriguez Castro, 2021), inviting international students to participate in processes of reflection, co-creation, and relational responsibility. These educational experiences are understood not as mobility, but as responsible belonging and commitment to the territories where knowledge flourishes.

4. Research questions and methodology

4.1. Research questions

The following research questions guide an inquiry situated at the intersection of decolonial pedagogy, critical interculturality, and international education. From this perspective, learning through the body and with the territory is understood not only as a methodological strategy, but also as

embodied knowledge that challenges the epistemic hierarchies of academia and proposes a different way of being and learning in the world.

1. How might educational practices grounded in the body and territory enable genuine intercultural dialogue between local communities and international students?
2. How might these processes contribute to rethinking international education through frameworks of social justice, critical interculturality, and epistemological pluralism?

4.2. Methodology

We used a dialogical and participatory body–territory methodology that combines qualitative tools with creative and community-based practices. This methodology centers the body as a site of epistemic expression (Cabnal, 2019) and emphasizes *sentipensar*, or thinking-feeling (Escobar, 2016). It also recognizes territory and the more-than-human world within the body (Uzendoski & Calapucha-Tapuy, 2012) and legitimizes both individual and collective embodied experience through orality and relationality, creating possibilities for flattening hierarchical relationships (Noroña, 2024). Like other arts-based research methodologies, such as Theatre of the Oppressed (Black et al., 2025) and the use of art in intercultural exchanges (Fleming, 2023), body–territory emerges from Latin American Indigenous and campesino roots. These epistemological roots not only interrogate social distinctions such as race, class, and gender, which the aforementioned methodologies have also explored, but also legitimize Indigenous and campesino relationships with the land (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017). These relationships propose non-extractive ways of relating to the land and more-than-human beings; consequently, the methodology challenges the culture–nature divide and the binaries it produces.

Three focus groups were organized. The first consisted exclusively of Píntag Amaru members who had previously participated in at least four body–territory mapping exercises, both with international students and independently. The second included only international students from the semester-long international program, representing three different semesters over the previous three years. The third was a mixed group composed of Píntag Amaru members and international students, none of whom participated in the other two groups. This design allowed us to triangulate perspectives and capture both internal experiences and the dynamics of intercultural exchange.

The discussions were organized around three thematic areas that guided a broad exploration:

1. *The impact of body–territory mapping*: how this practice affected participants bodily, emotionally, and relationally.
2. *Body–territory as a life practice*: how mapping transcends its methodological function and becomes an everyday and collective experience, including the experience of participating in the Rehearsing Change program.
3. *Intercultural exchange*: how Body–Territory influences relationships between international students and members of Píntag Amaru, and vice versa.

Methodologically, the body–territory map functions as a tool for memory and expression. By tracing the outline of a human body and filling it with drawings, words, or symbols representing connections to territory, participants articulated memories and forms of knowledge that transcend verbal language, opening a space for mutual recognition.

The focus-group analysis was based on thematic coding and an intercultural interpretive reading that identified patterns of convergence and divergence among participants' experiences. The longitudinal nature of the research—which included testimonies from participants in different semesters over the previous three years—made it possible to observe transformations in how body–territory was experienced and understood through an intercultural lens.

The thematic coding identified the following categories: 1) learning processes grounded in the body, senses, emotions, and memories, 2) processes that demonstrate a relationship with the land, 3) evidence of participation in the social or communal fabric, 4) ways in which body–territory mapping helps us recognize ourselves as mirrors of one another, 5) ways in which body–territory mapping challenges hierarchies and dualities among participants and within their relationships with the land, 6) ways in which the methodology contributes to processes of sustained transformation.

These findings were then methodologically reorganized for this article, presenting personal and intercultural reflections that clarify how the methodology enables us to learn about our bodies in relation to territory (see Section 5.2), how it enables us to learn about territory and its agency upon bodies (see Section 5.3), and how it enables us to learn about the social fabric and interculturality (see Section 5.4).

Throughout the process, careful attention was given to fundamental ethical considerations: informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for community protocols. The process sought to foster reciprocity by sharing the

findings with participants in accessible ways and ensuring shared ownership of the knowledge produced. Finally, although participants used Spanish during the focus groups for intercultural communication, certain concepts that were difficult to translate—such as recognizing the body as living territory—were expressed and facilitated through the symbolism of the maps, which made it possible to communicate epistemologies that do not always have precise equivalents across languages.

Each focus group began with a simple gesture: drawing one's own body-territory map. For fifteen minutes, bodies leaned over sheets of paper, remembering that every word originates in lived experience. Even before speaking, participants had already narrated, through colors and lines, the story of their relationship with territory and with Rehearsing Change. That initial act of collective drawing set the tone for the conversations that followed, in which knowledge emerged not from the distance of analysis, but from the intimacy of what was shared.

Before continuing to read about the dialogue that unfolded in the focus groups, it is important to mention three things. First, we want to recreate the energy experienced in the focus groups, which was neither academic nor formal, but rather a space of encounter, celebration, and dialogue. For that reason, the following section is written as a collective conversation. The short paragraphs are intended to preserve the rhythm, allowing readers to feel the dialogue rather than merely receive a presentation or summary of the dialogue. Second, to cultivate connection rather than separation, we write as though everyone had shared a single circle, even though the gatherings took place on three different days. Third, if you would like to enter the circle as the participants did, we invite you to take fifteen minutes to create your own body-territory map: draw a body—in whatever form you wish to represent it—and place within it elements showing how territory influences your body and how your body influences territory. You may refer to the body-territory map created by one of the international students at the beginning of their focus group (Figure 1). There are no fixed rules—only the intention to recognize how body and land are interrelated. When you have finished, return to the text and continue reading.

FIGURE (1)

INDIVIDUAL BODY—TERRITORY MAP



5. Living maps: A conversation between bodies and territories

We want readers to appreciate our circle and to feel it. Imagine sitting with us around a simple table or directly upon the earth, beneath a roof made of straw or the open sky. There is silence, but also murmuring, gentle laughter, and a little nervousness.

In practice, we are here to talk about our experiences with Rehearsing Change and body–territory. Metaphorically, however, we all know that our purpose is to “garden.” We are going to plant seeds in the form of ideas, memories, and stories.

5.1. Opening the focus groups

We took time to introduce ourselves, define our purpose, and reestablish trust. For some, it was a reunion with companions they had not seen for a long time. For others, it was their first encounter, as several international students had participated during different semesters. Whether or not they had met before, it felt like reuniting with distant family: recognizing interconnected stories and shared references to the program and the community.

We breathed together to situate our bodies in the place, acknowledge our surroundings, and focus our attention. This gesture marked a shift in rhythm: from speaking to listening. Each person then drew their silhouette—or whatever bodily form they preferred—and placed in it elements representing their relationship with territory: water, mountains, paths, wounds, and joys. The instructions were minimal: draw, locate, relate. Rather than seeking aesthetic beauty, we prioritized memory and meaning.

We then began the conversation, with each person choosing whether to speak. Whoever spoke displayed their map and explained one image or another while the group listened without interrupting. We concluded with a brief circle in which participants shared what they were feeling. In this way, the metaphor of gardening remained our guide: prepare, center, draw, share. With the soil ready, we began exploring the following methodological categories in greater depth: body, territory, and weavings.

5.2. Body

Everyone recalled experiences from their time in Rehearsing Change. International and local participants alike agreed that learning had remained trapped in their heads for far too long. “We spend years believing that we learn only with the mind,” says an international voice. “And during that time, we forget how to learn with the body.”

One local participant recalled how we learn by touching the earth with our fingers, while another watched the mud drying on their hands. “The body does not separate,” says another local voice. “The body connects, just as water and earth are also connected.”

The body was recognized as living territory: a space where thought and emotion, action and memory, intertwine. “When my hands touch the earth, they feel creative,” a local woman comments, “when my feet step in the mud, they become joyful.”

5.2.1. *The body as memory*

In the body–territory maps, memories appear like roots awakening. Local participants draw with confident, almost automatic gestures: mountains upon their knees, rivers across their chests, paths running along their backs. “The knees are mountains because they both support you,” a local man explains. For them, the body is a living archive of territory and time.

The international students explain that, at first, they watched in silence. Their lines were drawn more tentatively, but they soon allowed themselves to be guided by how the local participants conversed with the earth. “In Píntag, there are people who have a radically different perspective of the body and the

land,” one student says. “But that perspective and their way of life make you understand, at a visceral level, things you did not understand before, like where your food comes from. They make that connection.”

A shared understanding emerges through these memories. Amid laughter and silence, some memories are ancestral and others recent; some are collective and others intimate. “Our bodies hold scars that are not always visible,” says another local participant. “Drawing helped me recognize what I carry inside.”

The body becomes shared memory. “It made me rethink my body as something I need to care for,” one student reflects. What initially appeared to be an artistic exercise becomes a form of mutual recognition: local participants teach the international students to remember through the body, while the international participants learn to listen through their own.

5.2.2. *The body as language*

Many participants describe how words become insufficient and bodies begin speaking for themselves: a gesture, a deep breath, a hand trembling as it traces a line. “The body communicates things that words cannot,” says a local participant.

Several international students recall that “it was difficult to connect with the body, especially at the beginning,” and that they laughed a great deal. “At first, I felt strange for laughing so much,” one student comments. “I thought I wasn’t learning.” She soon realized that laughter also teaches—that learning can have the texture of joy or the trembling of a shared emotion. Another student connects laughter with dance, saying that just as laughter cannot be separated from the body, neither “can the body–territory map be separated from dancing with the land.”

Local participants speak about how the body becomes language when it moves with the land. The international students watch and imitate them, gradually discovering new languages. Some say, “There are no limits, and it is fun,” or “It is difficult to draw your feelings and difficult to recognize ourselves, but it is very important.”

A shared understanding emerges among gestures, colors, and breaths. Artistic tools—paintbrushes, clay, symbols, and textures—open a dialogue beyond spoken language. In that shared silence, as we look at the body–territory maps, we can see the bodies conversing.

5.2.3. The body as territory and a practice of decolonial action

Many voices agree that “getting out of the head” is a profoundly political act. Learning with the body, they explain, is a form of resistance to educational models that separate mind and body. “Awakening the body and turning off the head—that is a decolonial experience,” an international student commented.

Body–territory thus emerges as a practice of decolonial action because it challenges hierarchies of knowledge. It teaches us that education can be an embodied experience in which emotions, movements, and silences also produce knowledge. “We were told that learning meant thinking,” says another international voice, “but here we learn by feeling.”

By embracing feelings, knowledge moves away from the abstract classroom and toward living territory. One international student connects this experience with the presence of strong women, explaining that it caused her to rethink her relationship with her own body: “Being with strong women made me rethink my body as something I need to care for.”

Local participants describe the experience as a decolonization of leadership, explaining that knowing the territory also means knowing one’s own body. One participant, a former president of his community, says the process decolonized his mind and “helped me become a better leader in my neighborhood so I could care for our shared space.”

In the exchange between students and community members, education ceases to be a vertical process. It becomes a dialogue among living bodies and territories—a space in which knowledge is planted, nurtured, and collectively transformed.

5.2.4. The Body–Territory map as a reflection of the body

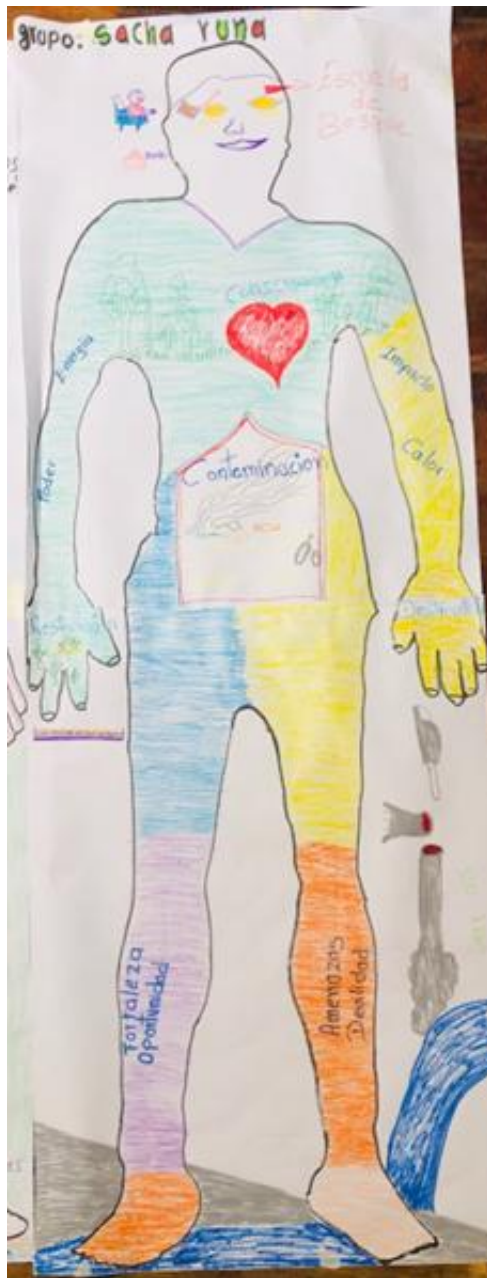
Many participants speak about the maps as though they were mirrors. Every line, color, and symbol becomes a conversation between the body and the earth. “It is a way of releasing what you carry with you through art,” an international participant comments.” For two local participants, the map was “a self-critical tool for knowing oneself,” or even “a way of nourishing the body, more than a tool.”

Bodies become landscapes from head to toe. Knees may be mountains or buildings, depending on what supports us at that moment in our history. It is not merely about art, but about recognizing that what happens in the territory leaves its mark upon the body, and what happens in the body affects the territory.

The maps thus reveal an expanded awareness: by painting their own bodies, people recognize themselves as part of a whole. “You paint yourself, but you also paint others,” says a local voice, reawakening a collective bodily memory that had been silenced. According to one local participant, learning emerges through this shared gesture from a negotiation between revealing and discovering: some conflicts are revealed within the map, while others appear along the way, emerging through the dialogue the tool provokes.

FIGURE (2)

COLLECTIVE BODY—TERRITORY MAP CREATED COLLABORATIVELY BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS. THE MAP REVEALS THE NEGOTIATION OF BELONGING AS IT MOVES FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TOWARD THE COLLECTIVE.



5.2.5. *The act of planting: sowing the body*

Planting appears frequently as both metaphor and practice. Participants spoke about seeds, but the act they described did not reflect separation or exclusion. Instead, it involved recognizing what each seed was ready for in life's cycle. One international student recalls a conversation with her host parents as they displayed ears of corn and classified the seeds: some for flour, others for roasting, others for making *chicha* (a traditional fermented drink), and still others to be saved. Each seed is ready to be transformed.

Learning feels like a process of planting within oneself. Participants speak of each part of the body as a seed; we need only recognize which one we want to sow and what we want it to become. Their collective reflection suggests that the body is a mixture of laughter, mud, and knowledge, with each element representing a seed beginning to germinate.

A phrase repeated throughout the circles therefore resonates: we are not like the land; *we are the land*. The act of planting becomes a way of unlearning the separation between the human and the natural. Body and land fertilize one another: what is transformed within one flourishes within the other.

After planting seeds, it is time to nourish the territory.

5.3. Territory

There is much discussion about how we have been taught to see land or territory as a geographic or commercial space, establishing a hierarchy that places human beings at the top of the pyramid. Participants insist upon the need to decolonize this perspective. "It helps us see ourselves and look inward," says one local participant, "while also seeing ourselves as an extension of the world itself."

This reflection recalls a text shared in *Rehearsing Change, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes, this way of seeing territory is a trap that leads us to believe that "more belongings would satisfy our hunger, when what we truly yearned for was belonging."

The land is understood as a living being that deserves care and, in return, offers healing. It is a reciprocal relationship. In this way, the land of a people becomes territory.

5.3.1. *Identity and place: Territory accompanies me*

The conversations address human mobility and how our relationship with territory changes as we move in space. One local participant insists that

everything begins with a simple question: Where do you come from? As the maps take shape, the answers expand. This question, they explain, does not seek a fixed answer, but connections. “It is not about remaining in one place, but about joining with the universe itself,” a participant from Píntag comments.

For many international students, the question awakens more uncertainty than certainty. Territory, they reflect, is not limited to the ground where one is born; it travels with us. “Wherever you go, it always speaks of where you come from,” says a local voice, reminding us that territories are also composed of absences, memories, and relationships that accompany us.

Participants agree that they do not want to reflect a polluted or unjust territory, but one undergoing transformation. “We understand that my body depends upon everything around me,” an international student says. They recognize shared wounds—mining, deforestation, dispossession—but also sources of goodness: the strength of the mountains, the water that persists, and the community that resists. “You look at your territory from a new perspective,” says a local voice. “You accept your community, your colonial thinking changes, and you understand that we are equal to nature.”

5.3.2. *Relationship and healing with territory*

The words *relationship* and *healing* appear frequently. Participants speak of how territory can become sick and can also heal, and how we can feel the pain of the earth. “It is a mistake to think that mining is something external,” says a local participant. “We feel it in our bodies, in our stomachs, as though the contamination of the water also lived within us.” At the same time, several international students expressed sadness. “There is a profound sense of powerlessness when you cannot help or do something for places that are far away,” one of them comments.

As the maps fill with rivers, mountains, and scars, participants recognize that territorial conflicts are also reflected in their own bodies. “It is not transactional; it is relational,” an international participant reflects. “When we think about reciprocity, a monetary or material exchange comes to mind, but that is not the only way.” They speak of reciprocity not as an act of giving and receiving, but as *sentipensar*—thinking-feeling—with territory. Reciprocity is an act of personal, collective, and intergenerational healing that continually remakes fragmented relationships with others, the land, the community, and memory.

One student recalls spending a great deal of time sick—due to changes in food, altitude, or climate—but says that living reciprocally with the community, her body, and the territory “created a state of healing. It made me feel better than I had ever felt in my life, even though I was sick.”

5.3.3. *Body–Territory as a practice of living*

Participants speak of body–territory not as a one-time activity, but as a way of living. While creating the maps, several local and international participants agree that Body–Territory does not remain on the paper; it remains in their lives. They perceive how the practice expands beyond the workshop and becomes a way of seeing the world. Words come alive through everyday practices: planting, cooking, stepping in mud, and harvesting. These actions teach us to listen, and territory becomes a living school.

Local and international participants reflect upon how this practice of living is transmitted, speaking of ancestry as a shared history. “All human beings have a history and an ancestral relationship,” an international participant commented. “We have to be open to searching for it.” One student describes how this practice changed her relationship with her father, who knew how to speak with plants, although she had not previously understood him. “It changed how I relate to my father. He talks to plants, and now I appreciate it. Without this body–territory practice, I would not have understood him.”

Local participants have developed an intercultural vocabulary for engaging in dialogue about ancestry, using expressions such as “Indigenous epistemology” to refer to the rituals and stories that sustain ways of living with the land. They see the land as a being that breathes, needs nourishment, moves, changes, and transforms. As one local participant explains: “If the territory is my body, I can see the territory as myself—as a being that changes, walks, and also dies.”

Local and international participants speak of Kichwa symbols such as the *chakana*—a bridge to the universe—and dances such as the *zapateo*, in which people stomp firmly upon the earth during *raymis*, or Kichwa festivals, awakening both the practice and the connection with the ground that supports them. For international participants, these rituals offered a way to learn and connect with what is invisible and inexplicable. One acknowledges that “not everything can be measured or explained.” Another comments that performing a *zapateo* changes how you feel in relation to the earth beneath your feet and reminds you of the mystery of the world in which we live.

5.3.4. *The Body–Territory map: Reflections of inhabited land*

The maps do not seek aesthetic results but instead reveal living relationships between body and land. “You can see it in your body if your territory is contaminated,” a local participant observes. The body–territory map is not merely a methodological tool; it is also a language. Participants communicate what the territory feels, using colors and lines to show the

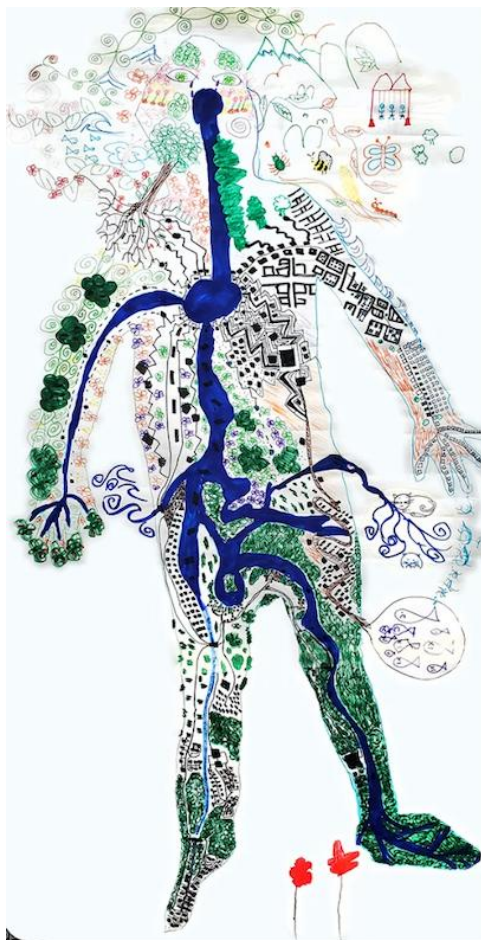
memories, violence, and resistance that inhabit it. Through dialogue between international students and community members, bodies become mirrors of the landscapes they share.

In the example shown in the accompanying image from the 2022 Rehearsing Change program, participants discovered that water—which connects everyone—also carries the traces of extractive logics. “We realized that the water connecting us is contaminated,” recalls a local voice, “and that this poison travels through our bodies.” These representations transform the map into a space of critical awareness: a way of seeing, feeling, and thinking about territory beyond geography.

In addition to revealing relationships of violence, the maps open spaces of hope. “As our awareness awakens,” says a local participant, “we realize that there are no borders, boundaries, or political divisions, and that our map is more real” than the maps governments show us. Participants express having formed a visceral relationship with their territory, recognizing it not as a fixed place, but as a living being that breathes alongside them.

FIGURE (3)

COLLECTIVE BODY–TERRITORY MAP RECOGNIZING THE BODY AS A MIRROR OF TERRITORY, WITH AN EMPHASIS ON WATER CONTAMINATION.



5.3.5. *The act of planting: nourishing the land and territory*

After sowing the body, the time comes to nourish the territory. This metaphor appears repeatedly: caring for the land is not only an agricultural act, but also a pedagogical and relational practice. “When we nourish the earth, we also nourish our relationships,” says one voice.

Participants discuss how nourishing the land is a gesture of reciprocity. It is not simply a matter of giving something back, but of sustaining the cycles that nourish us. Local participants emphasize the importance of the *minga* or *minka*—collective work carried out with the land—as a form of education in itself: learning by doing together, sharing the effort, laughing, and resting in rhythm with the earth.

International students recall the importance of composting. During the program, they witnessed violence and social and environmental injustice, evoking a text from the Rehearsing Change program, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity’s Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (2021). They observe that “you cannot plant on top of the shit,” but neither can you erase it. This is why nourishing the soil becomes essential: everything we carry can be transformed into fertility. Transformation begins by recognizing the body as territory and education as a living experience.

5.4. Weavings (or interculturality)

There is much discussion of interculturality, but not as an academic concept or something to be integrated from the outside. Instead, participants speak through metaphors, especially that of weaving. What has been sown and nourished now becomes intertwined. Phrases are repeated: *weaving knowledges, connecting learning, braiding conflicts*. Weaving emerges as a practice of complementarity, interculturality, and body–territory.

For international participants, interculturality connects to unlearning by challenging individuality and instead encourages a sowing together of parts that coloniality has fragmented. For local participants, socio-environmental fabric connects with vulnerability, living together, and the cycles that prepare the way for sowing: a collective action that plants the seeds of decolonial learning.

The dialogue resembles watching a loom in motion: difference is recognized as a collection of diverse threads that create harmony as they cross. The threads that resonated most strongly within the circles were recognition, awakening awareness, vulnerability, supporting one another in community, and interculturality.

5.4.1. Recognition and awakening awareness

Recognition is the first thread in the weaving. It means understanding that “what I do here affects what happens there; it affects the other,” as one local participant explains. Recognition is understood not as a simple acceptance of difference, but as a political act—a way of caring and dismantling hierarchies.

Another local participant responds by recalling that “my relationship with my territory is expansive; it connects me with other places. Things happen in places that we believe do not affect us, but they do.” Recognition ceases to be merely personal and becomes an awareness of the web: a way of perceiving the invisible ties that sustain life.

Another international voice observes: “I felt that I had nothing to offer this territory, but then I realized that we all have a relationship with a territory, and territories are interconnected.” A local participant returns to the body–territory map, noting that the group had placed mining within the stomach. “It makes you feel the contamination in your body,” the participant explains. “But we also feel the mountains and the water.” Through this gesture, recognition moves through the body and becomes sensory: awareness is no longer something we think; it is something we feel.

One local leader summarizes the process by saying that body–territory produces an “awakening of awareness,” which forms part of unlearning: a “universal act of knowing yourself, the other, and the universe.” Awakening awareness does not mean recognizing that we are like water or that we have water within us. It means accepting that we are the water.

5.4.2. Being vulnerable with others and supporting one another in community

Vulnerability emerges as the strongest thread. Participants emphasize that being vulnerable is not weakness; it means showing oneself as one truly is—with tears, with laughter, and with the body. They recognize that epistemologies and pedagogies from the Global North often conceal emotions, but here, emotion teaches.

Everyone mentions laughter, dance, and tears as forms of knowledge. The Body–Territory practice “allowed me to be vulnerable,” one international student explains. “It even encouraged me to embrace vulnerability.”

International students emphasize the methods through which learning occurred: sharing stories through art, theatre, dance, play, and living together. The group becomes a web; some participants say they forgot when they were supporting others and when they were being supported themselves.

Several students speak about becoming vulnerable with the earth itself, recognizing play as a nutrient, like the food the earth produces. “It means feeling that these tools are nourishment for your body,” one participant explains, “and that they connect you with the territory because you eat from it.”

5.4.3. *Critical interculturality*

“Everything I do to the air, fire, earth, or water, I also do to my body.” This statement, spoken by a local participant, condenses a worldview that runs throughout the entire weaving. Body and territory are not separate entities, but parts of the same fabric, thus part of the territory.

The conversation returns to the words of Walsh (2010): interculturality is not a superficial exchange between people from different cultures, but a profound dialogue among ways of being, undertaken for the purpose of creating something new—or something better.

Above all, interculturality is a dialogue among worldviews: a conversation between paradigms rather than simply between people. Body–territory as a methodology allows us to perceive this. By working through the body, one immediately becomes connected with other people, the territory one inhabits, the territory from which one comes, the essential elements of life, and the mysteries that sustain it.

One student therefore describes body–territory as “true decolonial education” because “you confront your own colonial *sentipensar*” and become interconnected with the whole.

5.4.4. *The Body–Territory map: The everything within me and me within the everything*

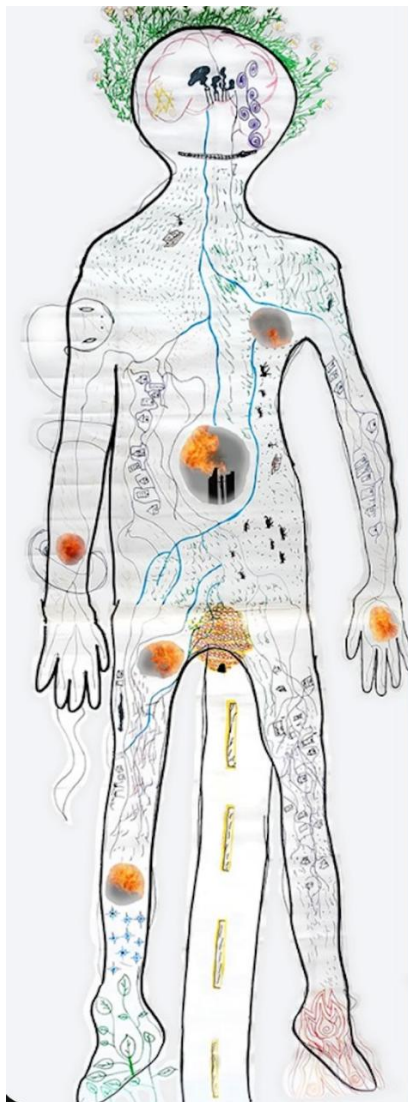
One international participant comments that the maps show us that “what unites us is stronger than what separates us.” Several participants recall the words of Luis Enrique Cachiguango (2010): “The everything within me, and me within the everything. We are *Ñucanchik*, the plural ‘I’. Therefore, you are me, and I am you.” In evoking this verse, local and international participants invoke the worldview they seek to embody: a way of living in which the “I” and the “we” are not opposed but sustain one another.

They speak of the maps as a living part of the body–territory practice. “Thinking about how to live together with the territory and with our bodies, and questioning the relationship between them,” one student says. Participants clarify that “questioning” is not an intellectual action: we must live the inquiry, feel it, and allow the body to think.

When questioning becomes experienced, the map reveals what had been dormant. “It made me embrace parts of myself that had been turned off,” an international student says. In this way, every line becomes a gesture of reconnection. It becomes clear why international and local participants speak of the body–territory map as a ceremony: an act of recognizing oneself within a territorial, social, and ancestral collective. In creating the maps, bodies draw their memories, but they also draw the possibility of a “we” that breathes with the earth.

FIGURE (4)

COLLECTIVE BODY–TERRITORY MAP IDENTIFYING VIOLENCE AGAINST TERRITORY AS LOSSES OR OPENINGS WITHIN THE BODY THAT CAN BE HEALED THROUGH CEREMONY



5.4.5. Planting in Minga

We have sown our bodies within the earth and nourished our territories, but the land must still be cultivated before food can emerge. International students and local participants speak of the *minga*, an ancestral

Kichwa practice in which many hands come together. In the *minga*, hands intertwine to support not only the work, but also everyone's dreams.

They agree that material actions cannot be separated from spiritual or affective ones. It is impossible to distinguish the work performed in the *chakras*—ancestral gardens—from the dancing that makes the ground vibrate, from drinking *chicha*—a fermented corn beverage shared amid laughter—or from the stories told by elders. Everything comes together in the *minga*: effort and joy, body and earth, individual and community. “Sometimes you do not know whether it is you or your companion who is laughing,” says an international participant.

Planting in *minga* becomes a living metaphor for decolonial education: a collective practice through which people learn to cultivate knowledge as they cultivate life, with laughter sprouting from the soil and with the profound understanding that the harvest always belongs to everyone.

6. Findings

The findings reveal that learning from the body activates the senses, emotions, and memories, generating situated knowledge that transcends the accumulation of information and becomes collective understanding. The body manifests as a living archive of territory and time, inscribed with memories, wounds, and learning. Learning also occurs through bodily experience, through recognizing that one's body is a living being interconnected with the whole and that it possesses profound knowledge.

Feeling is more than an emotion or physical sensation. To feel the river's water is to feel the water within one's own body. This changes how participants understand what it means for something to “make sense”: it no longer refers to something that fits within the mind, but to something that resonates within the body. This is *sentipensar* in practice—the experience of epistemological pluralism in which the body recognizes itself as an inseparable part of an *ecology of knowledges* (de Sousa Santos, 2007).

The body–territory map emerges as both a tool and a language that makes relationships between people and the land visible beyond political or academic boundaries. Far from being an aesthetic representation, the map functions as a tool for critically examining both body and territory. The process erases the boundaries that normally separate countries, disciplines, and ways of knowing, opening pathways for recognizing conflicts, wounds, and possibilities for change. The outcomes of these exercises are neither geographical nor artistic, but relational: they demonstrate how the body and

the land it inhabits transform one another as a socio-spatial web of life known as the territory.

The map becomes a mirror with three refractions: it reflects the living territory that sustains us; it reveals the face of the other, whether local or international, participating in the same learning process; and it reflects the self—what lives and changes within. Drawing, walking, and recognizing boundaries as permeable edges are all practices of decolonial education that do not seek correct answers, but living relationships born from uncertainty, wonder, and co-presence.

What resonated most deeply was the experience of body–territory as a practice of living. Participants describe this practice as a continuous process of discovery—a way of understanding that connection with territory is not only physical, but also emotional, spiritual, and collective. In the act of sharing situations, emotions, and memories, a collective body emerges that feels, learns, and cares. This collective body transcends the geographic distances separating participants' territories of origin, weaving reciprocal relationships between different worlds.

Learning is experienced as a cyclical process in which body and land nourish one another: what is transformed in one flourishes in the other. Education therefore emerges as an act of gardening that requires planting, tending, waiting, harvesting, and planting again. Many international students explained that this was the first time they had learned through the connection between body and land, coming to understand that knowledge is not accumulated, but cultivated. By integrating rituals, dances, laughter, and silence, the practice teaches that forests do indeed think—as Kohn (2013) suggests—and that learning requires listening to those more-than-human voices. Through this shared listening, the group becomes a collective that learns with and through other ways of being.

Participants unlearn vertical hierarchies of knowledge. Body–territory requires horizontal dialogue and shared responsibility, transforming the relationship between communities and students. No one teaches alone, and no one learns alone. Creative methods—drawing, acting, laughing, and moving—open pathways toward an education in which play and joy are not distractions, but conditions for profound learning. Recognizing that they could learn through laughter was revelatory. One student explained that when she heard the collective laughter, she could not tell whether it was her body or her companion's body that was laughing; she understood that she formed part of a collective process. Questioning academic seriousness as the only means of legitimizing knowledge represents a rupture with the "coloniality of

knowledge” (Lander, 2000): learning ceases to be a distant, analytical experience and becomes a living, affective, and relational practice.

The body–territory practice invites us to reconsider the place of international education. Students recognized that this form of learning is not transactional—it is not about “giving and receiving”—but relational. The experience dismantles the idea that knowledge flows from North to South, demonstrating that local communities possess profound knowledge found not in books, but in bodies, territories, and everyday practices. Unlearning structures of epistemic superiority creates the possibility of dialogue among equals: local participants remember with the body, while international participants listen with the body. Knowledge therefore circulates horizontally, generating new forms of educational co-authorship.

This process strengthens local leadership and community impact. By valuing the earth as a living being with knowledge of its own, those who learn to listen to it become teachers. Community members explained that body–territory gave them the confidence to take on new leadership roles, both within educational spaces and in formal positions. For them, leadership does not arise from authority, but from reciprocity and service. This form of leadership embodies critical interculturality: an ongoing process of negotiation in which distinct logics and worldviews meet on equal ground.

International students transform their understanding of leadership, recognizing that authority does not come from accumulated knowledge, but from the ability to support, listen, and care. Education becomes an act of reciprocity and a practice of collective healing. Body and territory, learning and community, laughter and reflection intertwine to produce a pedagogy that does not separate mind from earth or theory from practice, but joins them within a living fabric.

7. Implications for practice

7.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

The findings engage with Latin American debates about the decolonization of knowledge, offering practical evidence of how embodied and relational education can strengthen equity and epistemic inclusion. Following Walsh (2010) and Andreotti et al. (2011), body–territory offers a broader and more experiential understanding of interculturality and epistemological pluralism, recognizing community wisdom as a primary source of theory. This entails shifting international education away from studying “about” communities and toward experiences of living “with” communities. The connection is not transactional—it is not about bringing academic knowledge

or providing services—but about generating relationships. Learning through the body invites knowledge to enter through the senses and emotions, while allowing the mystery of the ineffable to become part of the educational process. This thinking-feeling pedagogy challenges the Cartesian logic of “I think, therefore I am” and proposes instead: “We exist because we feel together.”

7.2. A replicable and versatile tool

More than a methodology, body–territory mapping is a replicable practice that can be adapted to diverse educational and community contexts. Its power lies in the experience of “feeling” Body–Territory, through which people see themselves reflected in others and in the earth. It reduces hierarchies rooted in positionality—such as “I am a foreigner” or “I have no right to speak here”—and helps participants recognize themselves as part of a collective body. It opens a space for personal growth: confronting one’s own fears, shadows, and conflicts, but within a community framework. In this sense, body–territory not only facilitates intercultural understanding, but also cultivates the capacities for leadership, empathy, and emotional resilience needed for transformative educational processes and collective conflict resolution.

7.3. Expanding interculturality

Body–territory expands the concept of interculturality beyond dialogue among human cultures, incorporating bodily, territorial, and spiritual dimensions that Cabnal (2019) and Escobar (2016) identify as central to relational life. Learning with the land, rather than merely about it, means including mountains, rivers, animals, and forests as participants in the learning process. This form of deep listening transforms education into a practice of ontological reciprocity: knowledge is neither ranked nor compared but woven. Pedagogical practices must leave space for silence, contemplation, and embodiment as valid ways of thinking. In the process, academic discourse is decentered, opening the way for holistic experiences of healing, memory, and connection with the more-than-human world.

7.4. Pedagogical materials and educational rituality

The experiences documented here invite us to systematize the body–territory methodology in ways that extend beyond a single activity or tool. The materials—maps, guides, narratives, and visual records—should be understood as symbols of a journey of learning and unlearning rather than as finished products. Incorporating ceremonial or ritual dimensions into education—moments of opening learning spaces, asking permission, planting seeds, or providing closure—helps restore the sacred dimension of knowledge

by recognizing that every educational practice entails relationship, care, and reciprocity. In this sense, body–territory is positioned as a pedagogical device that invites us to create spaces of learning that are horizontal, collaborative, and ethically rooted in territory.

7.5. The central role of host communities

This practice reaffirms the role of communities as co-educators within international education programs. Recognizing communities as generators of knowledge dismantles the hierarchies imposed by colonial education. Local community members are best positioned to mediate tensions related to positionality and to teach others how to “ask permission” of the territory. In doing so, they replace practices of distant recognition—such as the land acknowledgments used in the Global North—with gestures of presence and reciprocity. Asking permission requires taking time to be with the earth, listen to it, and recognize oneself within it. It marks a shift from “they are from here, and I come from somewhere else” to “the everything within me and me within the everything” (Cachiguango, 2010). This relational approach rejects the separation between humans and nature and between hosts and visitors, strengthening the understanding that we all inhabit the same cycle of life.

8. Conclusion

Body–territory is an operational framework for reorienting international education toward relationships of shared responsibility, healing, and co-authorship with communities and territories. By shifting the centrality of the mind toward embodied practices—rituals, *minga*, and listening to the more-than-human world—epistemic hierarchies are disrupted, and horizontal intercultural dialogues become possible. The evidence points toward three concrete movements (1) designing curricula that incorporate moments of planting/gardening, ceremony—or ritual practices such as asking permission—and closure; (2) recognizing communities as co-educators and territory as an active participant in dialogue; and (3) evaluating learning as a relational process—through relationships, acts of care, and collective transformations—rather than as the accumulation of content. In this way, internationalization ceases to be rootless mobility and becomes a form of responsible belonging, in which “we exist because we feel together,” and leadership emerges through care, listening, and reciprocity with the earth.

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María Belén Noroña is a political ecologist whose research brings together territorial feminisms, decolonial methodologies, and grassroots collaboration with Indigenous and rural communities in Latin America. Her work examines Indigenous territorial governance, extractive industries, and the ways social differences become inscribed upon bodies and territories, highlighting co-produced responses to environmental injustice and alternative ways of living.