

Women in Wildfire Crises: Exploring Lived Experiences of Conflict through Forum Theatre¹

Lorenza B. Fontana, Angelo Miramonti, Caleb Johnston

Wildfires of exceptional intensity have been on the rise across the globe because of climate change and human activities (UNEP 2022). In South America, wildfires affecting the Amazon basin and its frontiers are often in the news as paradigmatic examples of their devastating effects on both natural ecosystems and human lives. News portraits of crises, however, tend to be short-lived. The spotlight typically shifts once the emergency has passed and rarely is there an attempt to know more about the ordinary strategies and organising of women and men living in the aftermath of crisis. This creative intervention draws on our recent work investigating the lived experiences of poor rural communities in Bolivia's Chiquitania, a region deeply affected by wildfires in recent years. We share learning and materials from our project² situated at the interface of and combining Boal's (2002) model of Forum Theatre and social science research. The aim and hope of the project were to use Forum Theatre to open up space for dialogue on the complex and entangled gendered, social and cultural politics of wildfires.

Forum Theatre is typically designed by and with people living the issues. And so, in March 2022, our work began by bringing together 28 participants from 21 different communities affected by fires in the Chiquitania region for a 5-day Forum Theatre workshop. Participants were diverse, and included indigenous people, peasant migrants, farmers, and farm labourers – they had no prior theatrical skill; they were 'life experts' selected for their situated knowledge of the issues. Participants were guided through a series of theatrical techniques and methods designed to elicit stories and lived experiences, and ultimately, the workshop culminated in the creation of four short Forum Theatre plays. Seven workshop participants were then selected to perform in four municipalities in the Chiquitania: Roboré, San José de Chiquitos, San Ignacio de Velasco and Concepción.³ Plays were performed 14 times during a two-week tour, in varied locations, from the main town squares to remote rural indigenous and peasant communities.

In the tradition of Boal's theatrical pedagogy, plays were structured around a series of unresolved conflicts, each designed as an invitation for audience intervention. Once performed, the facilitator or 'joker' invited audience members on 'stage' to identify and to replace oppressed characters and to share thoughts about how the situation could be resolved. Audience members were invited to improvise their strategies with the help of the actors, and the joker then posed questions to the audience about whether these interventions might be successful or realistic. Our objective was to bring different people living different social positions into (potentially tense) dialogue and to explore alternatives and possibilities, with the hope that audiences might bring these rehearsals and imaginings from the theatrical 'fiction' back into their everyday lives.

The workshop and performances were not only sites for social engagement; they were also powerful opportunities for research – to gather new stories and experiences (Johnston and Pratt 2019). Public performances and post-performance discussions were video recorded, and the research team followed alongside the travels of the play to interview participants, audience members and key stakeholders in local communities. In these travels, we learned and relearned about the gendered violence produced by ecological crisis in the Chiquitania, where women are not only the direct

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³ These are among the areas most affected by fires in recent years (FAN 2021, FCBC 2021).

victims of wildfires, but also experience forms of long-term violence: dispossession, institutional corruption, critical lack of basic health services, systemic infrastructure failure, extreme inequality, and more. In what follows, we offer a behind-the-scenes understanding of two women⁴ whose experiences inspired and were used in the creation and performance of the group's theatrical work. These are not heroic stories of women rising up to stage resistance. Never pure victim, nor hero, these women offer complex stories of survival and resilience - of women enduring and weathering difficult, precarious circumstances made worse by recurrent socio-ecological crises linked to wildfires.

'The Burned House'



Figure 1. Ana and two of her children in their plot.



Figure 2. Portrait of Marta. Photos by Max Hirzel

On the 31st July 2021, Ana's home in the outskirts of San José de Chiquito, a small town at the heart of the Chiquitania, burnt to the ground. "We were left only with the cloths we were wearing," she recounts, "When I got there, I couldn't do anything, save nothing. Our animals died. I also lost the clay oven that I used to bake goods to sell, as well as the money that I had saved. My daughter was very sad because she lost her crib. I told her, 'It's OK, we will recover the material things'". Ana's neighbour offered her accommodation for a few weeks in an empty room, while she rebuilt a precarious shelter for her family using the metal roofing that survived the fire. She started to sell home-made food on the street and, with what she earned, she bought some concrete and sand to assemble the bricks and roof material she received from acquaintances: "I trained a bit in carpentry and with my older [10-year-old] son we slowly built a small room where my children could sleep. There are no windows or door yet. But I bought a bed for them."⁵

⁴ Real names were changed to maintain the privacy of participants. We narrate these stories, relying on the plots of the two plays as well as on the interviews with the biographical protagonists and 'interviews to the characters' i.e., to the actresses who impersonated those women on stage (Stanislavsky 2013 and Miramonti 2017).

⁵ All interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English by the authors.



Figure 2. Ana opens the entrance to her house.



Figure 4. The scene of the house fire. Photos by Max Hirzel

As a workshop participant, Ana offered her testimony and story as the basis for one Forum Theatre play. To protect her identity Ana was renamed Marta by one of the actors performing Ana’s story. The staging of Marta’s experience retold the tragic event of the house burning, represented by two chairs covered by orange cloth. In the play, Marta seeks help from the indigenous authority, the *cacique*. Her options are limited but she decides to go see the mayor with other community members and ask for assistance. However, the mayor is reluctant to commit any concrete help because – he says – the municipality receives no resources from the central state to assist the victims of natural disasters. In the scene, Marta cries: “What am I going to do with my children? We are all sleeping on the floor, we have no cloths!” The scene ends with Marta’s teenage son deciding that it is his duty to support his mother and his sister, and he leaves for a nearby town in search of work. The actor playing Marta’s story reflects on her feeling in that moment: “As a mother, I felt a deep pain in my chest. I didn’t want for him to leave. I wanted to support my children, for them to get all the education they deserve, so that they will be better than me.”

Beyond the theatre, and as a single mother, Ana faces persisting challenges. “I am now working in a restaurant. I don’t make much money,” she explains, “but at least my children eat three times a day. They don’t get sick very often anymore. They go to school, although they still don’t have books. I asked the school for more time. I still need 8000 Bolivianos [over 1000 USD] to repay this parcel of land. I only ask for patience to endure the things that occur to me.”

‘Juanita and Pedro’



Figure 3. Portrait of Maria dressed as her stage character – a lowland indigenous woman.



Figure 6. Junita in her indigenous highland clothes. Photos by Max Hirzel

A second Forum Theatre play we took on tour begins with a young woman preparing a quinoa soup⁶. Her name is Juanita, and she lives in an unnamed village in the Bolivian highlands.

⁶ A traditional Bolivian highland dish.

Returning from the field, her husband Pedro shows her how small their potatoes are growing comparing to past years. He is convinced things will get worse and proposes that they move to the lowlands, where it is allegedly easier to acquire more fertile agricultural land. Juanita hesitates, she is full of doubts, but reluctantly agrees to migrate with her husband to the Chiquitania. Through her conversations with the real-life Juniata during the workshop, the actress playing her experience recounts how Junita's migration to the lowlands was forced because of ecological crisis in the highlands, where it has become harder and harder for indigenous communities to sustain their agricultural practices: "The mountains are collapsing when it rains and fall on our fields." This is why Juanita and her husband came to the lowlands, where there is fertile land to plant and produce'.

Once in the lowland's capital, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, however, the couple soon realises it is not easy to obtain legal land ownership; to do so on state-owned land, they must demonstrate its productivity, for which they need to clear the existing forest and plant quickly. A neighbouring farmer encourages them to burn the forest so that they can quickly plant their crops as soon as the first rain arrives. The farmer then turns to the audience to reveal his plan to have them evicted, in order to claim the plot for himself – an action to be carried out with the complicity of his employer, a wealthy landowner. The migrant couple decides to burn immediately because they have very little money – they need to produce a crop. They soon lose control of the fire, which quickly spreads to the territory of a neighbouring indigenous community. Two community members see the smoke and rush to the migrants' parcel. The fire has spread to their land and they incensed, telling Pedro and Juanita that they will report them to the authorities for burning during the dry season and without permit. The scene speaks directly to the failure of local institutions to mitigate such conflict in the Chiquitania between migrants moving down from the highlands and more established indigenous and other farming communities. The play ends with indigenous and migrants attacking each other with machetes and hoes. The audience is left in crisis, asked to collectively improvise a solution.



Figure 4. 'Juanita and Pedro' performed in Maria's community *Nuevo Renacer*. Photo by Max Hirzel

The scene was inspired by the experience and testimony of Maria. Originally from the Bolivian highlands, she migrated to a settlement called *Nuevo Renacer*. Once a remote area, this has recently become a strategic region due to a new (Chinese-built) road connecting San José de Chiquitos and San Ignacio de Velasco, and beyond to Brazil and the Pacific coast. “I came about 10 years ago out of necessity and because I wanted to cultivate my idea,” tells Maria, “For many years we had migrated to Argentina as agricultural labourers⁷, but they treat us as slaves. My idea was to use what I learned there in my home country, to contribute to its economic development.”

Over the past years, Maria’s migrant community in *Nuevo Renacer* has experienced significant conflict with a neighbouring landowner who claims ownership over their lands. An agrarian tribunal ruled in favour of Maria’s community, upholding its tenure rights because they are settled on public land redistributed by the government as part of the Law of Agrarian Reform of 1996. And yet, much territorial ambiguity and uncertainty remains as migrants have yet to secure formal legal property titles. The confrontation has escalated, and Maria describes a tense and violent episode in 2018, when migrants’ land was affected by a fire started, she argued, by the neighbouring landowner:

The landowner reported us to the police claiming we were the ones burning living trees. But eventually he was the one that had to pay the fine because we caught one of his labourers burning. In that moment, we wanted to hit him, throw him to the same fire he was provoking, but we reacted with good sense, and we only scared him, for him to say why he was lighting the fire. [...] We almost lost some lives fighting the fire. We then called the ABT [Autoridad de Fiscalización y Control Social de Bosques y Tierra, Authority for the Fiscalization and Control of Forest and Land] and they came with the police. The labourer confessed and the landowner had to pay the fine of approximately 5000 Bolivianos [700 USD]. [...] He is involved in land trafficking in different places, he takes possession of the land and then he sells it to foreign entrepreneurs.

As is often the case in the wake of ecological crisis, Maria’s community suffered the loss of crops and income, but did not receive any state aid or compensation.



Figure 5. Forum Theatre performance in the predominantly migrant town of San Martín. Photos by Max Hirzel

The staging of Maria’s experience was developed further into a conflict with a neighbouring indigenous community. The effort being to enact a range of situations commonly experienced by local communities (and workshop participants). Conflict between indigenous and migrant (and between other) communities have become increasingly common across the Chiquitania and are directly entangled with wildfires (as many of our interviewees confirmed). Maria herself has in-depth knowledge of these conflicts, particularly the way in which highland migrants are often considered the principal culprits for uncontrolled fires, due to the fact that they are unfamiliar with

⁷ The region where Maria came from is not far from the Argentinian northern border.

lowland environments and with the risks associated with slash and burn practices during the dry season. In Maria's own words:

We suffer a lot of discrimination here. In my view this is mainly because of envy. People from the interior [the Western highland regions] they come forward with one hand in front of them, holding their luggage, and one hand behind, attached to the family. Their culture is different from the one of people from here [the Chiquitania]. There, all the family works, and it is easier to prosper that way, it's quicker than waiting for the man to bring home money. People from here, the man goes to work, and they are poorly paid [...]. They defend the big landowners because they employ them, while we fight against this [situation].

Conclusions



Figure 9. Juanita, Marta and Maria during the performance's closing ritual. Photos by Max Hirzel

Many individual stories and experiences were shared with us in the making and public performance of this theatrical work in the Chiquitania. We have shared only a few in this writing. Ana's home burning to the ground. Her desperate efforts to piece together a make-shift home for herself and her children. Maria's challenging migration to the lowlands, the corruption of landowners, and inter-communal violence. These experiences speak directly to the production and reproduction of engendered precarity in the wake of wildfire. Travelling alongside the play, we learned about the conditions felt, really felt, by many women (and men) caught up in wildfire emergencies in the Chiquitania (and beyond) – emergencies that are having a particularly devastating impact on already precarious rural livelihoods. They illustrate the critical lack of institutional support and state accountability. In the making of this Forum Theatre, we learned how Ana and Maria are working hard to affirm their rights. To rebuild their lives. To care for the children and to make ends meet. But theirs is surely an ambiguous resistance and agency. Ana and Maria's lives have been ravaged by ecological emergency; their shared precarity intensifying with climate change and environmental destruction, and their lives entangled in the wider social, legal, gendered complexities of rural inequality. The work made visible the struggles and resilience of Ana and Maria who do not belong to an organised feminist movement. For these women affected by the devastating effects of wildfires, this experience was a brief but meaningful moment to critically assess their present and collectively reimagine their futures.

In performance, Ana and Maria's experiences of hardship and violence were not designed or enacted for passive spectatorship. As a method, Forum Theatre requires spectators to physically come on stage, replace characters and re-write narratives using bodies, words and imagination. The objective is to open a space to radically re-imagine oppressive conditions, and our work provided a time and space for rethinking gendered violence and ecological crisis. Ana, Maria, and other participants' experiences also helped to spark a wider public conversation and community engagement in the Chiquitania. Our theatrical work was delivered in 14 performances in which over 55 women and men stepped on stage to explore possible resolutions to staged conflicts. These interventions were witnessed by over eight hundred audience members who critically assessed the effectiveness and realism of these improvised strategies. We hope that learning from these

performances might, even in a small way, have been carried back into everyday life beyond the staged 'fiction'. 'Forum theatre', as Boal reminds us, 'is a rehearsal for revolution'.

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