Moving beyond Co-optation

Gender, Development, and Intimacy

ABSTRACT Development discourse has centered a female entrepreneur as the savior of the developing world, while feminist development studies has been ambivalent about the focus on women as ideal development agents, as well as of market-based approaches as solutions to inequality. This dilemma has fueled debates regarding the co-optation of feminist politics for a series of state, transnational and corporate interventions that are antithetical to feminist principles of social justice. This study examines how a women’s cooperative in Costa Rica that works on entrepreneurship and technology challenges boundaries between autonomy and co-optation through a series of organizational practices and loving relationships among themselves, as well as with the communities they serve. The research is based on in-depth interviews with the cooperative’s associates, collaborators, and workshop participants, with Costa Rican government officials and administrators at national technical universities, and participant observation at the organization in San José. I found that solidarity-based organizational practices enable a feminist technopolitical praxis that challenges market-centered strategies by forging collectivized ways of living and working, and that in this context technology is localized, collectivized, and felt. These findings suggest that examining process and implementation defies fixed narratives on the relationships between gender, entrepreneurship, technology, and development.

KEYWORDS gender, neoliberalism, entrepreneurship, intimacy, technology

INTRODUCTION

Development discourse advances a particular neoliberal entrepreneurial logic that equates empowerment and well-being with individualist and market-based approaches to eradicating inequality (Roy 2010). A major current in discourse produced by the United Nations and the World Bank focuses on women and digital technologies. Digital technologies (hardware, software, mobile phones, the internet) can be connected to numerous areas of life and work, such as family, community, agriculture, health, and education, as well as to political and social rights, and thus are ideally suited for social, economic, and cultural interventions. Through digital technologies, various areas of life and work can be made into sites of potential profit. Indeed, the imagery of what I call the Third World technological woman advanced by development discourse represents an ideal neoliberal actor who will lead the developing world into the network society (Castells 1996). The Third World technological woman is savvy, hardworking, a hero of entrepreneurship, as well as loving, nurturing, and selfless. It is therefore not surprising that development projects have increasingly become fixated on integrating women as users, producers, consumers, designers, and developers.
of technologies. This essay examines one of these projects: the Sulá Batsú cooperative in Costa Rica.

After years of struggling for women and gender perspectives to be included in development institutions and policies, feminist scholars and activists alike have been ambivalent about the ways in which women have been prioritized as ideal entrepreneurial agents (Alvarez 2014; Calkin 2015a; Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2015). The developmental policy agenda, which has become increasingly corporatized, reproduces neoliberal politics based on self-efficacy, self-discipline, and individual responsibility (Arutyunova and Clark 2013; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Miller, Arutyunova, and Clark 2013; Moussie 2016; Roberts 2015). While this entrepreneurial woman has been touted as the cure for the developing world’s problems, scholars have pointed out the problems of emphasizing market-based approaches, such as microfinance, as solutions to inequality (Altan-Olcay 2014; El yachar 2002; Karim 2011; Radhakrishnan 2013; Rankin 2001, 2002, Roy 2010, 2012). The responsibility is placed on the caring, self-sacrificing, hard-working woman. The making of this "worthy neoliberal subject" (Roy 2017b:257)—a market actor and both an agent and rescued subject of development—has fueled debates in the field of gender and development regarding the co-optation of feminist politics for state, transnational, and corporate interventions that are antithetical to feminist principles of social justice (Bergeron 2003; Calkin 2015a; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall 2007, 2016; Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Jong and Kimm 2017; Roberts 2015; Roy 2012, 2017a; Wilson 2015). Feminists spent years advocating that women be included in development (Cornwall et al. 2007), but their inclusion has not transformed the institutions that produce the very inequalities that feminists struggle against. Most importantly, market-based approaches to economic development—such as entrepreneurship—obscure the need for social, political, and economic transformation.

Should then the “empowerment and technology” framework be entirely dropped? What would feminist technopolitical practices look like if we transcended the binaries of autonomy and co-optation, the individual and the collective, the feminist and the non-feminist? It seems like both a paradox and an unfortunate unintended consequence when feminist struggles and claims dovetail neatly into neoliberal rationalities (Eisenstein 2005; Fraser 2013). And yet the landscape is much more complex. As Bernal and Grewal (2014:13) point out: "Neoliberalism may . . . create a recognizably homogeneous framework for contemporary NGOs working on women’s issues, but it does not control all the practices and agendas of these organizations." Feminist development scholars (Beck 2017b; Beck and Radhakrishnan 2017; Jones, Smith, and Wills 2012; Kabeer 2005; Sanyal 2009; Sweetman and Pearson 2012), and feminist scholarship in general (Orloff and Shiff 2016; Prügl 2015; Whittier 2016), have started to contextualize some of these difficult alliances, pointing to more nuanced analyses of the intermingling of social justice principles with neoliberal rationalities. Feminist development scholars have also argued that feminist projects are embedded in power relationships (see Srila Roy’s interview with Inderpal Grewal, and Roy’s own work: (Roy 2017a, 2017b). As scholars, it is important to examine the ways in which feminist endeavors are entangled
with power, as well as to look at organizational process and implementation (Beck 2017a; Eschle and Maiguashca 2014) to understand numerous forms of political agency. In this essay, I ask: How can feminist goals coalesce with market-based approaches without inevitably being co-opted? This article offers an analysis of an “uneasy alliance” (Orloff, Ray, and Savci 2016) between principles of collective struggle, horizontality, and redistribution and the individualist entrepreneurial model, and I argue that there are opportunities for feminist politics and defiance within fairly straightforward neoliberal practices.

I build this argument through a case study of a highly unique development project and women’s cooperative in Costa Rica that embodies both the entrepreneurial model and feminist ideas of collectivism. By examining what works in this case, I demonstrate how the literature on gender and development can be more nuanced in its approaches to feminist politics and co-optation. In this article, I examine a particular version of the entrepreneur: the Third World technological woman, who is expected to use digital technologies to advance in society. In their analysis of what they consider oversimplified critiques of feminism and co-optation, Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca (2014) insist that “a movement cannot earn the title of progressive if its agents and agenda are worthy, but its practices unjustifiable.” I extend their approach to explore the feminist technopolitical praxis of Sulá Batsú. Thus, my research advances these debates by looking at the micro-level politics of activism regarding gender and technology.

In this context, thinking about intimacy as close emotional relationships—which are part of the micro-politics of organizations—offers a more complex understanding of how organizational actors implement and appropriate models that seem to contradict their principles (Cornwall 2016; Kabeer and Huq 2010). I use the term “intimacy” rather than “emotion” because intimacy is more explicitly relational: it happens with someone or something.3 Intimacy is about relationships. In my research, these relationships—specifically of love and solidarity—exist among activists, and between activists and the communities they serve, as well as in their relationships with digital technologies. The cooperative’s administrative structure, their inclusivity, reflexivity, and prefiguration (Breines 1980; Jurs 2008; Maeckelbergh 2016), their principles of sharing knowledge, participatory action research, and public art projects are all important pieces of their feminist technopolitics. But none of this would work if it were not enabled by the activists’ commitment to love, trust, solidarity, and honesty. Yet they also work within the dominant neoliberal development framework, because entrepreneurship is a market-based approach to inequality. This essay forges a new direction in gender and development studies by contributing to scholarship on co-optation and by building on feminist theories of organizational practice to understand the tensions, challenges, and possibilities in the encounters between macro-institutional development discourses and micro-level feminist politics around gender, technology, and development.

NEOLIBERAL DEVELOPMENT AND FEMINIST POLITICS

Development discourse and policy foreground women as the new ideal agents of the economy, particularly in the Third World, where economies are viewed as always needing
assistance. The World Bank’s “gender as smart economics” policy agenda, for example, pivots women as prime “untapped resources” that require immediate “investment,” and skillfully makes use of tropes of the caring and nurturing woman (Calkin 2015b; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Roberts and Soederberg 2012). The woman who emerges is a Third World heroine who will pull herself, her family, and perhaps even the entire community out of poverty thanks to her capacity as a savvy entrepreneur, and who is naturally sensitive, giving, and self-sacrificing. Digital information technologies are ideally suited to the making of this entrepreneurial neoliberal subject because they can be connected to numerous areas of life and work, from the most intimate to the most public. This Third World technological woman is the ideal embodiment of the network society’s entrepreneur.

Feminist scholars in the field of gender and development have criticized how development discourse and policy have instrumentalized women for their own agendas, and appropriated and depoliticized feminist concepts and issues (Calkin 2017; Cornwall 2007, 2016; Cornwall et al. 2007; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Kabeer 1994; Wilson 2015). Neoliberalism, corporatism, and development have recycled feminist tenets and principles of social justice, redistribution, and equality. This has caused ambivalence among activists and scholars alike. Their discomfort has led to a large body of critical feminist scholarship on the politics of co-optation and its consequences for both feminist transformative politics and critical theory (Bergeron 2003; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall 2007, 2016; Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Roberts 2015; Roy 2012, 2017; Wilson 2015). These critiques have mostly targeted the failures of gender mainstreaming, the privileging of individual empowerment over collective struggle, the corporatization of feminist principles, and the erasure of a structural analysis of power and inequality. Fraser (2013) has called the co-optation of US second-wave feminist values such as equality in the workplace by neoliberal corporate and state institutions the “cunning of history.” In the context of development, Adrienne Roberts (2015) calls feminist co-optation “transnational business feminism” in her study of how the Nike-led Girl Effect campaign uses feminist claims to boost corporate profit and competitiveness. More recently, Srila Roy (2017a) uses the term “feminist governmentality” in her study of how a feminist microfinance NGO in India employs tactics of discipline that attempt to govern young women’s sexuality under the guise of “empowerment.” In line with Janet Halley’s (2006) critique of “governance feminism,” Roy argues that feminism is always entangled with power and the “will to empower” (citing Cruikshank 1999). These tactics of discipline do not negate negotiation, resistance, or what she calls “refusals.”

Yet, feminist scholars have started to contextualize some of the “perverse alliances” (Orloff et al. 2016) between feminism and a range of seemingly antagonistic state and non-state actors in the Global South and North alike, including neoliberal politics and policies (Alvarez 2009; Beck 2017a, 2017b; Bernal and Grewal 2014; Eschle and Maiguashca 2014; Phillips and Cole 2009; Prügl 2015; Sharma 2008; Whittier 2016). Ann Shola Orloff and Talia Schiff (2016:127) assert that both Halley’s (2006) and Fraser’s (2013) critiques are “broad-brushed and over-generalized narratives concerning the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism,” and instead call for contextual analyses of
women’s and feminist endeavors. In their examination of Halley’s (2006), Fraser’s (2013), and McRobbie’s (2012) critiques of feminism and co-optation, Eschle and Maiguashca (2014:648) similarly underline that “no practice should be assumed to be progressive—or not—in advance of empirical study.” And although they argue that progressive politics would be “best served” by a radical political agenda focused on systemic change, they refuse to use radicality as the measure of feminist politics, and believe that reforms within the system could also lead to “feminist futures” (648). Alvarez (2009), for instance, revised her earlier critique of the “NGOization” of feminism, and recognized the importance of feminist NGOs in amplifying feminist public discourse in Latin America. Bergeron and Healy (2013) draw from J. K. Gibson-Graham’s (2006) radical theorizing on post-capitalist solidarity economies in arguing that the feminist critique of the “business case” for gender reifies global capitalism and “accedes political space that might be open for cultivating economic subjects-in-becoming who are guided by motivations of care, ethical concern and collectivity.” Jane Jaquette (2017) has also lamented gender and development’s anti-neoliberal rut, which, she argues, has foreclosed productive exchanges between scholars and practitioners. She states that “resistance and protest are valued, while those who argue for reforms within liberal capitalism are seen as morally compromised” (254).

Debates in the field of gender and development have overlooked facets of organizational process and implementation in critiques of co-optation. Eschle and Maiguashca’s (2014) three principles or “conceptual candidates,” inclusivity, reflexivity, and prefiguration, offer a useful framework to understand the process. They define inclusivity as “an open, engaged and generous attitude towards others” that “encourages interaction, dialogue and mutual respect.” Reflexivity “is an ongoing process of critical scrutiny on the part of participants in a political struggle with respect to their factual claims, their normative aspirations and their strategies.” And finally, citing feminist sociologist Wini Breines (1989), prefiguration means that “that the political means deployed by a movement are consonant with the aims of the movement” (648).

Inclusivity, reflexivity, and prefiguration require an important element, though, that Eschle and Maiguashca do not specify (as such): intimacy. I find that in the case of Sulá Batsú, intimacy—in the form of respect, honesty, love, solidarity, and care—is part of the cooperative’s organizational process and practice, including the ways activists organize, connect with each other and the communities they serve, and relate to technologies. Intimacy is an important part of their feminist technopolitical praxis. In Sulá Batsú, relationships with and through technology also open affective possibilities; technology is localized, collectivized, and felt. These affective relationships cannot be disconnected from broader discourses, policies, and institutions: “the personal is political,” and the political is personal (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). Therefore, intimacy is entangled with numerous forms of power, and can both challenge and reproduce injustice. These emotional ties are not equivalent to “social capital,” which is perhaps the most common term to describe human relationships in the development literature (Lin and Smith 2001; Portes 1998; Putnam 1994; Sanyal 2009; Woolcock 1998). In understanding relationships as social capital, intimacy has an
instrumental value. Therefore it should come as no surprise that international development institutions have exalted solidarity and community bonds as necessary to eradicate economic inequality (Elyachar 2005; González de la Rocha 2007; Harriss 2002; Murray Li 2007; Rankin 2002). The focus on social capital provides an ideal model for development planners and neoliberal politics: people can prosper without state protections, and at the same time, this vacuum provides a fertile terrain for potential markets (Cornwall 2003; Molyneux 2006). Intimacy, in the form of social capital, is thus instrumentalized to advance market-based economic agendas.

But intimacy is not only a mere tool, or instrument, to advance or be more efficient in society. For decades, feminists have theorized intimacy as a political space; the famous “the personal is political” is but one example (Pratt and Rosner 2012). To be clear, the study of intimacy does not undermine the importance of broader social and political structural conditions or material economic conditions of poverty and inequality. Yet, in this essay I focus on intimacy as a vital part of organizational process that has been ignored in the literature on feminism and co-optation. Following geographer Sara Wright’s (2012) contention on the importance of studying emotions in the context of development, I have found that intimacy connects the activists of Sulá Batsú, their relationships, work, and politics “as subjects who live in compelling, textured, tangled, ordinary and extraordinary, but never straightforwardly teleological or compartmentalised worlds” (1118).

This point is important because claims of progress through digital technologies are fundamental to the international development agenda, and gender is central to these plans for the future of the developing world. The stakes are high for feminist politics and for gender justice, even more so in times of increasing inequality and technological ubiquity. This essay advances the gender and development literature on feminism and neoliberalism by exploring how organizational process, implementation, and intimacy contribute to crafting forms of political agency beyond co-optation and depolitization.

METHODS AND CASE
I employ multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis. I conducted fieldwork at Sulá Batsú, in San José, Costa Rica, during the summers of 2015 and 2016. During these research trips, I was embedded in both the everyday work of the organization and the lives of the staff. I spent every weekday at their offices, conducting interviews, doing volunteer work (mostly advising on media strategies and helping with translations from Spanish to English), talking informally with activists and staff, and participating in their meetings and events. Since the summer of 2015, I have held periodic online conversations, via email, Skype, and WhatsApp, with key activists from the cooperative, to stay in touch with the organization and keep up with their projects. This online communication has helped me remain close to the co-op and their work. In 2015–16 I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with the core staff as well as members of the board, project participants, experts in gender and technology, and state officials. Interviews had a duration of approximately 1–3 hours each. I also consulted over 50 reports, studies, flyers, blog posts, presentations, guides, and news articles from or about Sulá Batsú, and the official websites of the state ministries of women and of information technologies of Costa Rica.
Sulá Batsú means “creative spirit” in the indigenous Costa Rican language Bribri. The cooperative was founded in 2005. Sulá Batsú follows a cooperative model where income is shared among the staff, in which workers “control and own the means of production as owners and workers of the business” (Instituto Nacional de Fomento Cooperativo 2004). It has 20 associates, and a core daily working staff of nine people (some of whom are also co-op associates). It is mostly constituted by women, but there are three men on the board, with one also being part of the core staff. Sulá Batsú’s main focus is supporting women’s incorporation in science and technology fields, through trainings, workshops, and advocacy at the local, national and transnational levels. Sulá Batsú staff work in marginalized communities—rural, low-income, indigenous—and also with universities, chambers of commerce, technology corporations, and local and national government agencies, and they participate in numerous international conferences on technology. Their main objective is to help women become self-employed entrepreneurs in the field of technology.

One of their most important projects in this area is TIC-as,5 funded for three years by UN Women (2013–16) and renewed for another two years by Google in 2017, which trains, guides, and supports young rural women and girls in the fields of science and technology. They have offered digital workshops to hundreds of girls, partnering with numerous municipal governments in Costa Rica and other countries in Central America. These workshops consist of trainings in basic internet skills and use, computer disassembly and reassembly, open source code development, application (app) design, and online security, as well as talks by leaders in science and technology fields on how to overcome stereotypes and gendered cultural norms.

Sulá Batsú is funded through two main sources: their grass-roots projects, which they get through proposal and grant writing to state agencies, development institutions and international NGOs; and venta de servicios (sale of services), which generates income through consultancies, workshops, and trainings in the public and private sectors. The income from these projects is collectivized: the person who gets the contract receives a bigger cut, but the salary is distributed among all the staff. Staff are also included in different phases of the projects, even when their individual skills and expertise might be stronger in one specific area. They have received funding for most of their grass-roots work from international development agencies and institutes of higher education such as Hivos, the Canadian International Development Research Center, UN Women, and the University of Toronto.

The core staff of la coope, as they affectionately call it, are Julieta, Marcela, Rosana, Marina, Ileana, Lila, Isadora, Josefa, and Carlos.6 Some of them are founding members, while others had started working there more recently when I began my fieldwork. They are all college-educated, middle-class professionals.7 Some live in the city, others in the countryside, and some commute up to two hours to la coope from rural areas.

The cooperative offered me “opportunities to learn” (Stake 2006) because it engages in multiple (sometimes overlapping) areas of work: developing women as skilled users of digital technologies through training and capacity-building; fostering entrepreneurship in the area of technology through workshops and trainings; and participating in local, regional, and transnational advocacy efforts on gender and information technologies.
This article is part of a larger multi-scalar research project that explores the discourses and policies of the United Nations, World Bank, and major technology corporations on gender, science, and technology, as well as the on-the-ground organizational practices of Sulá Batsú in Costa Rica, the NGO Colnodo in Colombia, and the transnational network and organization Association for Progressive Communications.

In the following sections, I explore the problems in the making of the Third World technological women. In the first section, I examine how Sulá Batsú’s philosophy of technology forms part of their politics of collectivization and entrepreneurship. The second section explores the ways in which intimacy is imbricated in the cooperative’s structure, process, and implementation and how it provides avenues for numerous forms of political agency that transcend the binary between feminist politics and co-optation. I conclude by stressing the important task of closely examining feminist and other social justice initiatives beyond broad-brush generalizations about what qualifies as progressive or liberatory politics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Collective Technologies

Sulá Batsú trains women to create and design technologies: “From consumption to production of technology” is one of their main slogans. They believe that having women creating and producing technologies “with a purpose” and participating in the construction of the technological/networked society will transform the social conditions of women, men, and communities. They are not interested in filling multinational technology companies with women; rather, they stress that women should be able to manage their resources and create technologies. Technology has a very particular place in this puzzle. These activists believe that through technology, collective sociality is possible. In Sulá Batsú’s guide to technology and entrepreneurship, sponsored by the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, they provide a concise description of their economic philosophy that combines redistribution with entrepreneurship:

Reflecting on the relationship between ICTs [information and communication technologies] and strategies for inclusion, ICTs and the transformation of living conditions, we have reached the conclusion that we must develop participatory action research [to improve areas] in which ICTs really have an impact in the employment of excluded communities, especially in women’s employment in the knowledge economy. Efforts should be oriented toward actions where ICTs generate employment and redistribute wealth, based on entrepreneurship. (Sula Batsú 2006:6)

Technology has the potential to level the playing field and usher in a new era of social justice. When the activists of Sulá Batsú visit marginalized communities in Costa Rica and other Central American countries—some of which are completely isolated, with no running water or electricity—to offer trainings on technology, the computer always has a place. Marcela, one of the long-term staff members of la coope, told me about one isolated fishing community, in the south of Costa Rica, where she offered a series of workshops on how to use computers. They used a solar battery to power one computer. The fisher people wanted to learn how to use technology to sell their products in local markets. Marcela hoped the
workshop would have long-term social effects beyond helping participants with their emerg-
ing business. She hoped that the skills learned and the collective use of the only computer in
the village could strengthen community ties and solidarity. Marcela told participants that
their pencils, pens, and papers were also technologies, like the computer and the internet,
in terms of being tools and spaces that could help them. Establishing this sense of closeness,
familiarity, and demystification of technology is one of Sulá Batsú’s strategies. Technology is
envisioned as an affective process through which women can achieve both individual and
collective transformation as consumers and producers. Technology opens up the possibili-
ties of exchange and creation. In one of our many conversations on the power of digital
technologies for feminist politics, amid the cool rainy season in San José, Julieta stressed
that:

If there is something marvelous about technology it is that you can create. When women
leave the field of technology, they lose a space to create solutions, to be creative, to express
themselves. I think technology gives them the ability to create, to have a voice in a society
that is based on technology. If women do not integrate this sector they will lose in this
society.

This sentiment resonates with official United Nations, World Bank, and corporate
discourse on digital technologies and women. Sulá Batsú reproduces the technological
entrepreneurial model, with the woman as a technological and scientific producer who
will have a multiplier effect on her family, community, and society. But in practice,
I find that these discourses are about much more. It is important for Sulá Batsú activists
to support women to be financially independent and make money, yes, but also to instill
principles based on solidarity, social justice, commitment, openness (free software), and
collective action. Outcomes are important, but the projects focus on process. They must
comply with the reporting requirements of funders, and offer some tangible evidence of
change through hard numbers; quantification remains a requirement. But to the activi-
lists, this is just an administrative transaction. The process of collectivization is central
to both their structure as a cooperative, and their working philosophy, as I have described,
by their collective salaries, shared tasks, and joint conceptualization and implementation
of projects.

In Sulá Batsú, entrepreneurship and technology are connected to emotions. In my first
days of fieldwork, I noticed that much of what made this project feminist was an everyday
praxis based on solidarity. This manifests in numerous ways: in how the activists feel about
each other; in how they feel about their work and mission; and in the experiences of work-
shop and training participants. “I cannot imagine not being part of this organization. I do
not see it as part of my job, I see it as an extension of my life,” longtime associate Lila said.
And Marcela described the motor of their work: “It’s part of the learning process that we
realized at some point that passion is what drives the loyalty of our associates and ourselves
with the cooperativa. For me, this is key, if there is no passion and love for the cooperativa
people leave, because it is exhausting for people and it requires an investment of the heart,
of time and life that must be very strong.” “This place is my life,” “we love each other,” and
“we support each other” are just some of the phrases I often heard during my fieldwork.
Julieta explained that their vision of entrepreneurship is connected to pleasure, to experimentation, and to accepting that they will make mistakes:

For us the pleasure of going to work should be part of business management—love, affection among your compañeros, should be part of entrepreneurship. When you analyze business theory, this is never discussed or considered. They speak of profitability, marketing, commercialization. The main pillar of our work is passion. For us, passion is part of entrepreneurship—fun, laughter. And the other thing we always consider part of our work is permission to make mistakes [meter las patas], without malicious intent, obviously. This is also part of entrepreneurship. This is our model of a solidarity-based economy.

Julieta’s approach to entrepreneurship and business integrates a politics of intimacy based on fun, laughter, and passion. Julieta is the heart of la coope. She is a fifty-something woman with an overwhelming energy and a fierce work ethic. Her high-pitched voice can crack a mirror, and that, combined with her presence, makes it difficult not to notice her. Julieta’s vision and doubts are a vital part of the organization. She is in a constant process of self-reflection; she does not take anything for granted. La coope carries this feeling of doubting whether their “experiment” is going to work today, let alone tomorrow: as Julieta said, “la coope is a permanent experiment,” and this is a manifestation of what Eschle and Maiguashca (2014) call reflexivity. Julieta has imprinted on la coope her belief in feminist principles of horizontality, redistribution, and community-building, along with an entrepreneurial philosophy, because, as she repeats, “We are a business; that’s clear.” Thus, a closer examination of organizational practices provides a lens to move beyond absolutist perspectives on what counts, and does not count, as feminist politics.

TIC-as: Working with Rural Girls and Young Women

Sulá Batsú’s TIC-as project offers workshops on computing, coding, and leadership for girls throughout their school years, and rural young women. TIC-as has become the heart of Sulá Batsú, because it has let staff form long-term relationships with many of the girls and young women and their families. It also encapsulates the cooperative’s main objective: to encourage women to study and work in science and technology fields within their communities mostly as entrepreneurs, beyond merely consuming technology. Many of the young women (ages 18–30) who have participated in TIC-as have become leaders of subsequent TIC-as workshops. TIC-as has already worked with 1,300 girls and young women in San Carlos, the northern city that Julieta identifies as having the potential to become a “technological pole”—a center for technological production and development perhaps comparable to the Silicon Valley model—in Costa Rica because of the industries and technical universities headquartered there. TIC-as has extended throughout the country, working with 2,500 participants in total, and in March 2017 Google donated USD 400,000 to Sulá Batsú to expand the project to 1,800 rural girls and 600 mothers (of these girls) in Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Panama.

In the workshops, girls (ages 10–17) learn how to dismantle old computers that have been donated, and reassemble them. Sometimes they make jewelry out of old parts. The idea is for girls to understand that computers are not mysterious black boxes (Latour 1992) but
legible and usable everyday objects. This is also a deeply emotional experience, both for Sulá Batsú activists and for workshop participants. Activists explained that girls have “fallen in love” with technology through many of these experiences. Although girls are not usually afraid of technology—Julieta argues that fear appears at a later age—the process of demystification, including the tinkering, meddling, and opening of that black box, makes the computers a part of their lives. Sulá Batsú staff also invite girls to participate in their public art projects, such as murals and graffiti, which contain messages and images that encourage girls to explore and engage with technology and science. Their workshops with young women are more focused on busting myths about women and technology, designing collaborative strategies to overcome gender barriers in higher education and the workplace, and supporting the creation of local and regional networks of women in science and technology. They also offer young women more advanced training in programming, design, and entrepreneurship, train them to become mentors for girls, and invite them to international technology conferences.

In the summer of 2015, I attended a café tecnológico (technology coffee hour), one of the meetings Sulá Batsú holds monthly with the TIC-as participants at the local technical college in rural San Carlos. In a huge conference room, about 30 college-age women were visibly eager for the tertulía (conversation) to begin. Two tech experts invited by Sulá Batsú discussed their experiences in the private sector, and a visiting professor from Spain and myself were also invited to speak. The experts’ talks focused on how to survive and thrive in the entrepreneurial and private-sector worlds in ways that reproduced heteronormative and traditional notions of gender, such as advice on how to be both a good mother and a successful businesswoman. But what captured my attention were the visible affective bonds between the young women and the Sulá Batsú activists. In subsequent encounters and interviews with some of the young women—all of whom are studying science in college, or are interested in one way or another in science and technology—many of them remarked that the relationships they had created with Sulá Batsú associates had been fundamental in helping them survive the male-dominated world of science and technology. One of the participants said, “I feel that TIC-as gives us security. They make us feel that as a woman you’re really doing valuable work. . . . I really like their attitude, how they motivate women. This has provoked a change in all of us. I have seen how we have grown.” Another remarked: “TIC-as gives you the courage to keep on going. I don’t know how to explain it. It gives you that thing, that espinita [gut feeling, inspiration], of growing, of being truly powerful, like they say.”

Beyond the personal and affective bonds between them, the TIC-as participants also frequently commented that the project had made them feel “powerful,” with technological knowledge and entrepreneurship helping them gain respect in their families and communities. I interviewed a group of TIC-as participants during a rainy and stormy afternoon in rural San Carlos. We met at a local cafe, with couches and lounge seats, amid magnificent mountains lush with infinite shades of green. They were 18–22 years of age, and eager to talk. We spent a whole afternoon together drinking coffee. One of the TIC-as participants told me: “You really feel powerful because with technology you create things, new things, and you feel, ‘Wow, I did something different, I achieved something no one has done.’”
Another young woman said: “Technology gives you both the power to believe in yourself and help others. It’s like a viral network, where one can share knowledge and do great things.” And another participant mentioned: “To be in this field makes others take you more seriously, because people do not expect you to study careers in technology. They expect you to be a teacher or something. And when you say you are studying to become a software engineer, they say ‘What?!’ You start to be taken seriously.” When I asked them, “Why technology? Why become an entrepreneur?” one participant exclaimed:

I want to have superpowers! I want to be super powerful. I want to think about doing something and be able to do it. I want to have the ability to say, “I will develop a software that many men will use, and they will have to recognize that a woman made it.” Because machismo often does not let men acknowledge that a woman actually made something.

These “superpowers” also include a commitment to their communities, to their compañeras (friends, colleagues), and to the women of Sulá Batsú, with whom they have continued to collaborate by becoming mentors to younger TIC-as cohorts even after becoming professionals. Affective bonds, cariño (affection), solidaridad (solidarity), and respect have shaped their relationships to and visions of technology.

The Collective Politics of Intimacy

Julieta laughs when she tells me that her parents, brothers, and sisters always say that no one in the family has had luck with business (suerte con los negocios), and she always responds: "But I have!" And they reply, “Nah, you’re not an entrepreneur!” Julieta explains that her family does not see her as a successful businesswoman “because my idea of entrepreneurship is not about making money; it’s about creating relationships.” In the Sulá Batsú cooperative, intimacy sustains these relationships among the staff and with the communities they work with. These affective bonds and commitment to solidaridad subvert the potentially damaging effects of focusing on entrepreneurship as a solution to poverty and inequality. For Sulá Batsú, entrepreneurship is but a method, a mechanism; the objective is to create and foster solidarity, love, honesty, and understanding.

Sulá Batsú activists believe in entrepreneurship—mostly through training women to design technologies, and more specifically through the creation of applications (apps)—for the good of the community, and built upon horizontal relationships and collaboration between women. They also believe in using digital technologies to bust stereotypes and myths and subvert traditional and machista norms and codes in communities (i.e., traditional beliefs such as that women should take care of the children, women do not understand technology, women must get married, etc.). They also stress that “women must not be afraid of the market” (Julieta, interview) and prioritize entrepreneurship as an ideal form of success and well-being. In Sulá Batsú, entrepreneurship is more of a “hybrid”—a blend of traditional market-based approaches with collaborative and feminist strategies. Activists reimage entrepreneurship as a form of cooperative politics that will offer possibilities of networking and solidarity among women, feminist interventions in technological production for “social transformation,” community-building, and political participation, as well as local collective and individual economic development. This does not
simply pay lip service to developmental discourses that deploy practically the same language and concepts. Speaking about their feminist approach to entrepreneurial collective relationships, the importance of local development, and the dangers of large technology companies, Julieta remarked:

Part of our feminist approach is that women be able to stay in their communities, contributing to solving problems with technology. . . . This is not mandatory; for those who want to leave it’s also fine. . . . Most of these girls studying technology have to move to the greater metropolitan area, because this is where the opportunities are. . . . Another part of our feminist approach is the associative element, that technology solves social problems, but also generates wealth. These women have to be able to resist these large companies, which will offer them five times more money, but only while they’re young.

Sulá Batsú’s vision of entrepreneurship is “associative,” “networked,” and concerned with solving social problems. But they also believe in helping women generate income, and be financially independent, mostly so they do not have to depend on working for technological corporations in metropolitan areas. This is the hybridity of la coope: market-oriented and collective, entrepreneurial and anti-corporate. In Costa Rica, the technology sector is dominated by multinational corporations located in urban areas, such as Hewlett-Packard, Intel, and Infosys (in both manufacturing and research and development). For Sulá Batsú, therefore, it is important to support women who want to stay in their towns and also be involved in science and technology. Some of the products girls and women have produced after their participation in the co-op’s “feminine” hackathons and other digital training workshops have been, for example, apps to help teenage mothers find resources, Amazon-style apps for buying from local stores, and an app with a glossary of words chosen and defined by girls so that the adults in their lives can understand what they mean by certain concepts, such as “stereotype,” “conflict resolution,” and “communication.”

Living the World You Imagine
To understand the internal relationships within Sulá Batsú is to understand their work. Their bonds and relationships, processes of income and knowledge collectivization, horizontality, consensus-building, and solidarity, are deeply connected with their work on technology, gender, and entrepreneurship. They envision their work as both an internal and an external process. They practice a form of their prefigurative politics, which means that they practice the world they envision: non-hierarchical, horizontal, collective, and affectionate. The office is organized as an open space, where everyone can look at each other. Every day at 3:00 pm we had coffee together, understood as an almost sacred daily ritual of bonding and communion. They work, talk, and laugh, and also have discussions and move through conflicts regarding differences in approaches, styles, and objectives. They have arguments on issues that range from funding opportunities (a project with Microsoft, for example, caused many internal debates) to discussions of religion and sexuality. Marcela told me that it had taken her a while to understand the horizontal structure of la coope, but “That is the idea of la coope, with Julieta we can sit down to talk about different aspects of la coope, and we can also have very strong discussions, with a lot of love and respect we also fight. With respect, and love, we can also say mae, I am sorry.” These affective bonds as coworkers, friends, and
entrepreneurs extend to the communities they work with. Lila explained that their work in communities was about more than teaching individuals how to use technologies:

The organization has given me a vision of thinking that if these things happen [the relationships we have at la coope] I must replicate them with the people we work with. When we work in a community, we go with some specific goal: to offer information, knowledge, the use of technologies. Although this is our mission, there is always space to talk to them. . . . The possibility of transmitting all the knowledge I have gained, not in a classroom but over the years of working in this organization.

By no means have their horizontal and affectionate politics been easy or free of contradictions. Some of them define themselves as entrepreneurs, others don’t. Some of them define themselves as activists, others don’t. They mostly do not see themselves as a political organization. “I just think we do the work we have to do,” Lila said during a group discussion. They have confronted internal fissures, conflicts, and irreconcilable differences among staff and board members, and their relationships are a product of a constant process of negotiation. In one of their staff meetings, Julieta was critical of the work of a coworker who was not at the meeting. She was disappointed and frustrated because this person had not completed some very urgent tasks. Other staff members defended their coworker. Julieta later told me: “They defended her, and that is exactly what they had to do.” This speaking up for the other, talking back, and risking confrontation and conflict are also part of their collective politics and constant reflexivity. The content goes hand in hand with the form and structure of the organization. Talking about their cooperative model, Julieta remarked: “This has not been easy. But if we change this, we change who we are. The other option is that everyone earns his or her own salary. But this is not what we want. I mean, if we get to that point, we would rather dissolve the organization.” Alejandra said that “many people simply cannot understand” the model, and leave, while Marcela believes that, generally, women have understood their collective philosophy better than men. Every time someone has left la coope, sometimes after bitter disagreements, it has implied an “affective rupture,” as Julieta explained to me:

Contrary to traditional business theory, in which everyone is considered disposable and replaceable, everyone here is indispensable. Every single person who has belonged to la coope has been indispensable, and when they leave, la coope goes through a profound restructuring process. La coope will never be the same organization after that person leaves. We have always reorganized, restructured, and changed, but the organization that emerges is different every single time. There is both an organizational transformation and an affective rupture.

One of the most difficult and conflictive moments la coope has endured was during one of their financial crises, in 2013. Julieta, along with other associates, made a radical proposal: to launch Casa Batsú, a cultural community center that would house la coope, the associate’s external projects, and other organizations, while also providing collective spaces for events such as art exhibitions, dance lessons, music concerts, and conferences, and workshops. Julieta and her partner, who has worked in the cooperative field in Costa Rica for decades and is an associate of la coope, laughed as they remembered how this disagreement almost
cost them their relationship. Her partner, along with other associates, thought that opening Casa Batsú would be a huge mistake because it would drain their already scarce economic resources. *La coope* was split. There were discussions, fights, resentment, and misunderstandings. Julieta told me: “For me it was either we do this one big thing that we had dreamed about, or it was over.” They finally voted and approved Casa Batsú. One of their longtime associates, Alejandra, gave a clear description of the cooperative’s dynamics:

Imagine that there is a pot and we’ll do the roast together, the soup together. You add the water, I add the potatoes, someone else the meat. We all eat the soup. In the end, although the water is the cheapest ingredient in the soup, you had to go get the water, and the soup cannot be cooked without water. Then you get a bowl of soup just like mine, though I was the one who brought the meat. In that sense everything is shared equally. Some people do not understand this model and leave. They say, “Púchica [damn], I brought in this big project, huge, which brings in so many thousands of dollars, and my wages did not increase, and everyone is eating my money.” Well, that is the way it is, someday you’re not going to be bringing in the money, and someone else will work so you can eat. So when people do not understand this model, they tend to leave.

Sulá Batsú’s work on entrepreneurship and technology is thus anchored in cooperation, understanding, and exchange. They embrace entrepreneurship as an ideal form of success, and do not engage in radical feminist or anti-capitalist politics. Yet their commitment to collectivization also challenges neoliberal rationalities based on self-reliance, self-discipline, and personal responsibility, and thus departs from broad-brush critiques of how neoliberalism has co-opted feminist principles. They understand that they, as members of the co-op and activists, could not do their work without each other, and this is exactly what they instill in the participants of their projects. Would international development institutions approve their work? Yes, and they have. The co-op reproduces many of the discourses that emphasize women’s entrepreneurship, technological dexterity, and knowledge as the ultimate tickets to a brave new world. These discourses obscure the historical and contemporary economic structures that have produced the inequalities that the technological woman is supposed to overcome, as well as placing the burden of the management of inequality on civil society organizations. But Sulá Batsú’s making of the technological entrepreneur also instills feminist principles of horizontality, collective awareness, and social justice among participants, facilitated by close affectionate relationships. Sulá Batsú’s politics contrasts with the basis of neoliberal development discourse.

**CONCLUSION**

“Not one of us would have been able to do any of this alone,” remarked Julieta during a session with *la coope* where I presented this research. We were discussing what it meant to them to be part of a collective, to share knowledge, tasks, time, space, and income—and also affection, **solidaridad**, conflict, and pain. They did not understand when I told them that there seemed to be a contradiction in focusing on entrepreneurship as their primary feminist technopolitical project while also working toward collective strategies, and strengthening local autonomy and knowledges. “In *la coope* there are some profound levels of defiance of
socioeconomic neoliberal models,” she added when mentioning their work toward building a solidarity-based economy. Inclusivity, reflexivity, and prefiguration (Eschle and Maiguashca 2014), together with solidarity, love, care, and honesty, make much of these “levels of defiance” possible.

To date, scholarship has mostly formulated broad-brush critiques of the institutional co-optation of feminist principles and values. The findings I have presented suggest that it is vital to examine the subtleties of everyday organizational processes and forms of implementation to understand the polymorphous manifestations of feminist politics. I propose that relationships, what I have called intimacy, are a fundamental part of both process and project implementation. In the case of Sulá Batsú, feelings of love and solidarity are imbricated in the very fabric of the organization. Intimacy is not isolated, of course, it is relational, and in this case it enables a feminist praxis based on principles of horizontality, redistribution, knowledge exchange, collective struggle, and consensus. This shatters static notions of co-optation and development, and the neoliberal focus on individualism. In Sulá Batsú, relationships with and through technology are also entangled with intimacy; technology is localized, collectivized, and felt. Technology—considered the ultimate sign of the globalized network society—is bundled in affective relationships that make market/non-market boundaries tenuous. Sulá Batsú’s intimate politics provides a map for imagining alternative feminist politics, if we dare to embrace “notions of multiplicity and contestation” (Orloff and Shiff 2016:14). The micro-politics of their “uneasy alliance” (Orloff et al. 2016) reveals that while Sulá Batsú focuses on a Third World technological woman, their feminist practice—supported by close emotional relationships—also challenges neoliberal development agendas.

This essay stands by the feminist critiques of entrepreneurship as an individualist and market-based approach to inequality (Altan-Olcay 2014; Radhakrishnan 2015; Rankin 2001; Roy 2010). At the same time, it offers an alternative vision for feminist theory and politics. The recent iteration of the individualist, entrepreneurial, and market-driven, as well as nurturing and selfless, developmental subject is perfectly embodied in the Third World technological woman. Given the current fixation on entrepreneurial and technology, carving out spaces for a feminist technopolitics is an urgent task. Sometimes, opportunities for resistance lie within frameworks that are, or seem, perverse, and “when those people who are considered ‘subjects of feminism’ (or subjects of any other kinds of politics) do not act in expected ways, they may normatively question feminist or other forms of politics” (Orloff et al. 2016:8). In this context, we can imagine a feminist technopolitical praxis that mobilizes close emotional relationships to construct collective communities of affect, solidarity, and care between activists, the communities they serve, and the technologies they use. Of course, intimacy does not exist in a vacuum. In the case of Sulá Batsú, there are various organizational efforts, such as their cooperative administrative structure, prefigurative politics, and beliefs in redistribution and consensus, that are central to their project. They are also savvy activists who have been able to survive financial turmoil and precariousness, and who have learned to use institutional language to advance their projects. But their close emotional relationships are the glue that holds them, and their vision, together. And not only them: these affectionate relationships have also inspired groups of young rural women to support
each other, to continue Sulá Batsú’s work in their communities, and to think about technologies in ways that are feminist and progressive.

This research offers insights into the complex lives of organizational actors and their relationships to development and digital technologies. Development plans, in this case for the Third World technological woman, encounter challenges in many forms, sometimes even unbecknownst to the actors. Intimacy can remain under the radar, seeping through relationships, lives, and work, to disrupt categories. This is why as scholars we need to pay close attention to the consequences of intimacy. But intimacy can also be based on fear, hatred, conflict, and pain, and future research should explore the implications of these forms of intimacy for organizational actors in contexts of development.

Sulá Batsú is not an anti-capitalist, post-neoliberal or anti-development organization. Staff members affirm that “women cannot be afraid of the market,” and that la coope is an “enterprise.” Yet their project also challenges market logics based on individualism, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility as solutions to inequality and injustice, even when they operate within those same dynamics. They defy established categories.

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REFERENCES


NOTES


2. I use the contested concept of the Third World to show that the “othering” this term represents is still a fundamental aspect of contemporary asymmetrical global power relations.


5. “TIC-as” is a play on the Spanish acronym for information and communication technologies (TICs) and the informal word used to describe Costa Ricans, ticos for men, and ticas for women.

6. I use pseudonyms for the staff of Sulá Batsú, but I use the real name of the organization because I think it is important to recognize their work. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish; the translations into English are mine.

7. Participants came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. At the time of this study, they all self-identified as “middle-class” and mestiza (racially mixed). In terms of education, all participants held at least an undergraduate degree. Demographic questions were open, and I did not include income ranges or racial categories to be sensitive to different regional and local cultural norms and sociopolitical histories.