

The Price We Pay

The following is a counterstory (Delgado, 1989) whose protagonist is an Indigenous medical doctor in Argentina reflecting on the decisions made before him and by himself that allowed him to attain higher education. The protagonist recalls his grandfather's decision to move out of their Indigenous community and closer to a *criollo's*¹ town. He poignantly remembers his mother's and his own educational experiences. Following three generations, this counterstory illustrates the challenging nature of formal education for Indigenous families. Theoretically, the counterstory draws from some tenets of Tribal Critical Theory (Brayboy, 2006), specifically, the endemic nature of colonization and the role of assimilation policies towards Indigenous communities.

The purpose of this story is to gain a deeper understanding of the difficult path for Indigenous people when entering the formal educational system. While education contributes to the development of individual capacities and talents, historically it has demanded the abandonment of cultural practices, languages, and values not deemed conducive to being a member of mainstream society. However, this counterstory also highlights Indigenous agency to decide how to nurture Indigenous identity and a sense of service to our community. Last, it explores the concept of Indigenous futurities (Teuton, 2018), and the impact that our ideas about more just futures might have on present-day decision making, at the individual and societal level. The protagonist's questions invite like-minded individuals to work toward providing meaning and constructing those possible futures.

The Fire

During the days before the fire I had been home for six hours. Enough to see my mom, my sister, my lively nine-month-old niece, to eat homemade *empanadas*, and drink some *mates*. I had barely enough time to take a shower and have a brief *siesta*.² I like going home—I feel my

¹ In Argentina and throughout Latin America, *criollos* is used to refer to people who are of multi-racial descent. A *criollo* town would be a non-Indigenous town that identifies with Argentinian national identity.

² *Empanadas* is a pastry turnover filled with meat and baked. *Mate* is a popular and traditional infused drink, prepared with the yerba-mate leaves, a heritage from the

mother's pride radiating from her usually stern eyes. That Monday, the day of the fire, I had gone back to work for a 24-hour shift at the hospital when a little after midday, smoke started to come out of the vent ducts. Nurses called the emergency line and, luckily, firefighters and ambulances arrived within a few minutes. Meanwhile, in the absence of a ramp, we had to carry the patients down the stairs. I was able to carry three intensive care patients before firemen took over. When I stopped to breathe, I realized I was the only doctor among the male nurses and janitorial staff carrying patients. Do not get me wrong, I don't regret my actions, and everybody—doctors, nurses, staff—helped as much as they could. Yet, it got me thinking.³

I have carried many things in my life: logs, cement bags, furniture, a girlfriend. For money or by choice. My arms have served me well. Yet, with the fire I felt again as I have felt many times before: a nobody. As Galeano writes, those “who have no face but have arms.”⁴ I thought of my

Guaraní and Tupí Indigenous people. *Siesta* is a short nap taken after lunch and before going back to work.

³ This story is a composite. I follow Delgado's (1989) definition of counterstories as stories that challenge received wisdom, in this case problematizing the relationship between formal schooling and Indigenous populations. I invite the reader to suspend judgment and engage with other perspectives and life stories, in this case, one not frequently written about. While I model the story after Solorzano and Yosso (2000) and Leticia's counterstory, I am trying to summarize in three generations the conflicting nature of the relationship between the Argentinian state and the Indigenous peoples of Salta, a Northern state in Argentina.

Through the story I illustrate three tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education (Brayboy, 2006) and extend them to be used in Latin American contexts: “(1) Colonization is endemic to society, (2) Government policies towards Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain, and (6) Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation” (p. 429).

⁴ Poem *The Nobodies* by Eduardo Galeano (1989):

The Nobodies

Fleas dream of buying themselves
a dog,
and nobodies dream of escaping
poverty:
that one magical day
good luck will suddenly rain down on
them—will rain down in buckets.
But good luck doesn't rain down
yesterday, today,

Los Nadies

Sueñan las pulgas con comprarse un
perro
y sueñan los nadies con salir de
pobres,
que algún mágico día
llueva de pronto la buena suerte,
que llueva a cántaros la buena suerte;
pero la buena suerte no llueve ayer, ni
hoy,

friends and cousins, who are only hired when trees must be cut down to be paid a few pesos for a day's work. Who, as day laborers, become complicit in the destruction of the same forest⁵ that once provided shelter,

tomorrow, or ever.
Good luck doesn't even fall in a fine
drizzle,
no matter how hard the nobodies summon
it,
even if their left hand is tickling,
or if they begin the new day with their right foot,
or start the new year with a change of brooms.

The nobodies: nobody's children,
owners of nothing.
The nobodies: the no ones,
the nobodied,
running after the carrot, dying their lives,
fucked,
double-fucked.
Who are not, even when they are.
Who don't speak languages, but rather
dialects.
Who don't follow religions,
but rather superstitions.
Who don't do art, but rather crafts.
Who don't practice culture, but rather
folklore.
Who are not human,
but rather human resources.
Who have no face but have arms,
who have no name, but rather a number.
Who don't appear in the universal history
books,
but rather in the police pages of the local
press.
The nobodies,
the ones who are worth less
than the bullet that kills them.

ni mañana, ni nunca,
ni en lloviznita cae del cielo la buena
suerte,
por mucho que los nadies la llamen
y aunque les pique la mano izquierda,
o se levanten con el pie derecho,
o empiecen el año cambiando de
escoba.

Los nadies: los hijos de nadie,
los dueños de nada.
Los nadies: los ningunos, los
ninguneados,
corriendo la liebre, muriendo la vida,
jodidos,
rejodidos:
Que no son, aunque sean.
Que no hablan idiomas, sino
dialectos.
Que no profesan religiones,
sino supersticiones.
Que no hacen arte, sino artesanía.
Que no practican cultura, sino
folklore.
Que no son seres humanos,
sino recursos humanos.
Que no tienen cara, sino brazos.
Que no tienen nombre, sino número.
Que no figuran en la historia
universal,
sino en la crónica roja de la prensa
local.
Los nadies,
que cuestan menos
que la bala que los mata.

Galeano's poem expresses the de-humanization process through which poor communities around the globe are deprived of individuality. By referencing dialects, crafts, and folklore the author indirectly alludes to the Indigenous communities that are so present in Latin America yet who are ignored by the political and economic powers.

⁵ According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Argentina is among the ten countries in the world with the highest deforestation rate. In

sustenance, and connection to our people, the Wichí.⁶ I thought of my uncles who have to travel to the cities for temporary work in construction, are cheated of honest payment, and come back with only a few months' worth of money to buy rice, cheap noodles, and some shoes. We all share the same faceless arms.

Yet, my luck has turned quite a bit. I am doctor and half of all Wichí doctors in this country. There are only two of us.⁷ For two hundred years, the Argentine Republic did not graduate any other Wichí doctor and still has not. Instead, Cuba offered full scholarships to study medicine.⁸ In return, after graduation I was required to work for marginalized populations. So, I applied, got my passport, and travelled by plane knowing that I was going to live in a distant island for at least six years without coming back. See, the scholarship did not cover visits to my home country. I went there and many times throughout the years thought I would not make it through the program. It took me longer than expected, but I did make it. I came back.

the last 25 years, 7.6 million ha (18.78 million ac) of forest have been lost at a rate of 300,000 ha per year (approx. 740,000 ac), with a concentration in the north region where the province of Salta is situated. Main causes are intensive livestock, transgenic soybean plantation and forest fires. Although since the sanction of a forest protection law in 2007 deforestation has slowed down, in Salta particularly, illegal deforestation, irregular government approval of land use documents, and slave labor are rampant (Greenpeace, 2016; Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, 2017). Following and extending Tribal Critical Theory, I illustrate how government policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and the desire for material gain (Brayboy, 2006). However, at the same time, Indigenous people are forced to become complicit to the extractivist economic model due to poverty and lack of other possibilities to earn salaries.

⁶ The Wichí (Matacos or Wichí-Weenhyek) is one of 35 Indigenous people officially recognized by the Argentinean Government. The 2012 Census showed that 3.03% of the 40 million Argentines (i.e., approximately 1.2 million people) are considered belonging to Indigenous groups (INDEC, 2010). Among them, 50,000 declared to be Wichí-Weenhyek, which made them the sixth largest Indigenous group in the country, after the Mapuche, Qom, Guaraní, Kolla, and Quechua (Weiss, Engelman, & Valverde, 2013). However, estimates range from 40,000 up to 80,000.

⁷ To date, only two self-identified Wichí have graduated as medical doctors (Rodríguez & Martínez, 2008).

⁸ Cuba, through its Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM) [Latin American School of Medicine] funded in 1999 has granted scholarships to youth from underprivileged backgrounds to study medicine with the condition of working for marginalized populations once they graduate. It is estimated that close to 30,000 youth from 103 countries in Latin America, North America, Asia, and Africa have graduated (Dwamena, 2018; "Graduados en la ELAM más de 28 mil 500 médicos de 103 países," 2017).

Did all of me come back? Where did I come back to? And how did I change? Certainly, I did not travel alone. The strength of many that lived before me were my companions. Nor did I stay alone. I could see again the deep and extended roots of those beliefs that label me in subtle and overt ways as inferior and less-than. But there were also the open eyes and extended hands of classmates from different origins, nationalities, and races, who in their hearts knew that we all share the same faces and the same arms.⁹

I am grateful but often wonder, what price did I pay for my education? I did not pay with money, but slowly my perspective about the world shifted. I cannot think about Latin America's challenges without seeing it as the background of a fight between the evils of capitalism and the promise of socialism, as a secular re-edition of the eternal religious conflict between darkness and light. My worldview is now framed by dialectic materialism without being able to fully embrace it. I resist it because I am not able to name my Wichí words and think my Wichí thoughts. Where do my grandparents' language, stories and dreams fit in this story about class struggles? The price I paid for my education was the color of my ideas.¹⁰

My Grandfather

Was that what my grandfather had in mind when, six decades ago, he moved out of the community to a *criollos'* town? My unschooled grandfather had been beaten during his mandatory military service for not

⁹ Indigenous people face discrimination at the individual and systemic level, daily and throughout their lives. For that reason, community plays a sustaining role. In this case, the protagonist finds friendship and support from people of different racial and national backgrounds. What they have in common is a belief in the equal dignity of all human beings. I draw from Smith and Thomas' (2019) concept of the "other tradition" that identifies how, throughout American history, collaboration among people of different races based on the principle of the organic oneness and unity of humankind has contributed to transformative social action. The authors describe how this tradition has been a constant parallel to the social construction of racism in America.

¹⁰ Following Tribal Critical Theory, I pose on this story that given the endemic nature of colonization (Brayboy, 2006), access and success in the educational system demands of Indigenous students to embrace ideologies and concepts that do not address nor are equipped to answer the goal of cultural identity preservation while participating in a diverse and modern society.

obeying the Spanish commands that he did not understand.¹¹ He learned that *criollos* had arrived with no intention of leaving, and he saw how they became stronger. In his heart he both admired and despised them, he was grateful to them and scared of them.

My grandfather saw how they became owners of the land and set the rules, but he also admired how some shared their knowledge and were also worried about their common future, their lives intertwined with the Wichís. He despised the brutality and violence of others. He was both grateful for the new things that he had learned *and* scared for his children's future. It was his deep desire for his children to master Spanish, to acquire knowledge, and to be able to stand up for themselves that motivated his decision to leave behind the sacred spot where he had started his family and venture to uncharted territory. What sparked his decision, I cannot say for sure. He did not explain it to me. Times were changing, perhaps he knew that his children needed more tools, maybe a new way of being Wichí, and at the very least they had to be able to defend and protect themselves and their families.

My aunt has told me, many times, how she remembers that long eight-hour walk. It started before dawn, so they would arrive at their destination before noon. How the smallest ones got tired and had to be lifted onto their older siblings' shoulders. How, even though they came back many times to visit, from that day forward their home was transplanted closer to the White people's world, their lives bonded.¹² In my mind, that decision had the force of a catapult throwing the lives of his children and grandchildren forward in unexpected and unpredictable trajectories. The price they paid for my education was the sweet smell and warmth of our home. None of his children went back to live in the land that saw their birth.

¹¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, state agencies in Argentina aimed at the proletarianization of indigenous groups through land confiscations and forced labor recruitment, implemented assimilation policies also through the mandatory military service and religious conversion to Christian denominations. The main goal was the making of civilized subjects (Hirsch & Gordillo, 2003). As Critical Tribal Theory states, governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation (Brayboy, 2006).

¹² Forced migration from rural areas to towns and cities started in 1960 due to the expansion of the agro-industrial complex, the erosion of traditional territory, and the incorporation of Indigenous peoples to wage labor (Rodríguez Mir, 2006). These processes have accelerated since the instauration of a neoliberal economic model in the 1990. It is estimated that currently 7 out of 10 Indigenous people live in urban areas, often in the poorest conditions, and their ethnic identities are ignored or discriminated against at schools and neighborhoods (Weiss et al., 2013).

My Mother

What price did my aunts and uncles, my own mother, pay for their education? They were forbidden to speak Wichí, called names, and treated as dumb creatures. They were the first suspect of theft if anything went missing, they were hit by teachers and classmates, and forced to repeat grades. They were humiliated and shamed by their looks, smell, clothes, and accent.¹³ Some found a kind teacher, and teachers with some kind moments. Yet, most of them deserted school before a few years went by.¹⁴ Some were also captivated by the world of letters and sounds, numbers and drawings on the blackboard, the smell of paper and the color of ink. Their hearts torn between love and hate for the school. To capture the Spanish alphabet, they had to let go of the lullabies that my grandmother sang to them. The price they paid for their education was the music of Wichí sounds.¹⁵

For a while it worked, but when their arms became strong enough to work the paths that seemed to have been opened to them by the school, those paths were closed once again. Without a high school degree, they were condemned to menial jobs. My aunts became maids and cooks; my uncles masons, gardeners, or farm workers, always paid less than others. In the end, each took their own path, started their own family, and decided how to be a Wichí or not.

¹³ Since the creation of the Latin American republics, the building and strengthening of a national identity has been one of the primary goals of schooling (Hirsch & Gordillo, 2003). After a period of territorial expansion and genocide, forced assimilation followed. A monolingual assimilationist educational system was the state policy until 1990 (Hirsch & Serrudo, 2010). This is the period reference by the life experiences of this generation.

¹⁴ The Wichí-Weenhayek people have been historically marginalized, have a high poverty index, and have faced a systematic exclusion of basic governmental services (UNICEF, 2009). According to a study focused on the Wichí and Guaraní communities conducted by UNICEF in the Argentinean province of Formosa, 48.3% of the Wichí-Weenhayek Argentinean population have not completed elementary education and 19.9% do not have any formal instruction.

¹⁵ The sociolinguistic situation of the Wichí-Weenhayek people is complex. The latest comprehensive studies estimate close to 40,000 speakers and 94% of the self-identified Wichí speaking the language (Censabella, 2009). However, there is a displacement of Wichí by Spanish with pockets of high intergenerational transmission in rural areas (Ballena & Unamuno, 2017). Present day policies show a changing landscape that has made possible the formation of Wichí Intercultural Bilingual teachers and the study of how schools and Wichí families are facing the challenge of bilingual schools (Hetch, 2006).

I think my grandmother and older aunts had it worse. With little Spanish, the women in my family washed other people's clothes, cooked other people's meals, carried other people's babies, and lovingly nurtured other people's families. They also gave birth to their own children, loving them according to their situation and capacity. They tried to keep the Wichí words alive. They told and retold the story of how the celestial beings, *khates* or star-women, came from the sky to eat the fish that the men had caught, and decided to stay and start families with them.¹⁶ They kept weaving stories as they combed their daughters' hair, filling their heads with past dreams and future hopes.¹⁷

My Future Children

So here I am now, a week after the fire. Working alongside doctors, nurses, and staff to reconstruct our hospital. Cleaning and painting. Still carrying the heaviest objects and showing those that have never hammered a nail, how to do it; mistakenly addressed as a construction worker by volunteers, never seen first as a doctor.¹⁸

As I clean and paint, I think. What will the dreams and prayers of my grandfather become? Was he able to imagine a new Wichí reality, different yet connected to our ancestors, our land, our neighbors? Changing forms but keeping its essence?¹⁹ Could he see a new reality built also with others

¹⁶ There are several versions of this creation story by the Wichí people. I reference Wichí intellectual Lecko Zamora's (2009) version. In his book, he explores the need to reconnect to this knowledge and express it in actions that honor a deep sense of equality between men and women found in Wichí stories.

¹⁷ Stories within the Indigenous peoples have a central role as a source of identity, spiritual strength and theory-building. TribCrit poses that—contrary to limited views of scientific research—when working in/with Indigenous communities we must honor “stories and oral knowledge as real and legitimate forms of data and ways of beings” (Brayboy, 2006, p. 439). Also, “stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory” (p. 430).

¹⁸ In connection with the protagonist first thoughts about being perceived as faceless arms, this anecdote highlights a form of interpersonal microaggression (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009) when individuals from non-dominant ethnic groups access privileged positions, such as the social regard for a medical degree, to be mistaken for menial jobs. This type of “confusion” reinforces the idea that these individuals do not belong and are an anomaly to the social order.

¹⁹ Through this series of questions, the main character is exploring the concept of Indigenous futurities. I borrow this concept from literature studies: “Indigenous futurity” considers how indigenous revivals might be viewed as expressions of “futurity,” operating in resistance to those assumptions that consign Native American peoples and lifeways to the past . . . Whatever the form, contemporary Native poets look to oral literature and its

who can see our full and shared humanity? And built for others who also dream and yearn for justice? Like a bow that threw its arrow as far as possible, where will his decision, and our decisions, land us?

I wonder how my grandfather's dreams of knowledge—education for his children and grandchildren, education from both White culture and Wichí culture—has transformed us? Are we the protagonist of our future now? I am not sure what the future holds, in my heart there is a fire born of seeing so many injustices, but also born out of love for the ones that are no longer here and the ones that will come.

And I am not alone.

*Bright days,
they will come.
The days when the Wichí will dance,
they will come.
The flowers from the trees,
they will come.
The time of the fish,
they will come.
It is the time of the women-star.
It is now.*

*Jwala ta i'sí,
I'nam'lá.
Jwala ta Wichí i'khoyenla,
I'nam'lá.
Hálai lhawolh,
I'nam'lá.
Wahát hwai,
I'nam'lá.
Atsinay khates hway.
Jwalas ná.²⁰*

Discussion

Overall, this story explores the relationships between the past and future of a Wichí family, and the interplay between knowledge, identity, and agency through three generations. The grandparent's generation, the first one in this story, was the object of physical violence and evangelization, often denied basic rights such as education. The second generation, the

long-held understanding of language as a source of change. Such poetry not only frees Native American voices but confirms a spiritual awareness of ancestral land and community. Native American writers in all genres express an Indigenous world in all its complexity" (Teuton, 2018, p. 101). While this might look as a simple discursive intervention, by its contrasting nature with other condemnations to "disappearance" or complete assimilation, they open the possibility of constructing a different future, therefore re-signifying present-day actions. It is important to note that this discursive move should not be viewed as a negation of the difficult current material realities, such as land dispossession, poverty, exclusion, and other injustices. However, the projection of the being into the future reaffirms Indigenous communities' will to exercise individual and collective agency in pursuit of constructing a better reality for the next generations.

²⁰ Poem by Lecko Zamora, Wichí intellectual and writer.

parent's generation, was the object of an assimilation project that deprived them of their language and forced them to participate in the national economy as the poorest among the poor. The present generation, the third one in the story, has achieved the highest educational degree but neither speaks the language nor lives in their traditional territories. While the counterstory denounces the forces of assimilation, it also highlights the transformative effect of formal education opportunities and the role of Indigenous agency to sustain identity, community, and the will to build a different society.

It also highlights how we might explore the decolonization of our futures. That is, through the concepts of Indigenous futurity—expressed by the protagonist questions and the quoted poem by Wichí intellectual, writer and artist Lecko Zamora—we are invited to imagine a different future, one built outside the logic of colonization. This exercise should not be interpreted as a denial of the current unjust realities. However, drawing from the deep spiritual forces that have sustained Indigenous communities for centuries, Indigenous futurities nurture a vision of a just, prosperous and peaceful future for Indigenous and all peoples, that should directly impact present-day decisions at the individual and societal level.

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