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"We Have to Learn from Both Sciences": Dilemmas and Tension Concerning Higher Education of Wichí Youth in the Province of Salta (Argentina)

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This article analyzes the tension generated by the admission of Wichí youths to higher education in the province of Salta (Argentina). The main goal is to show how access to higher education generates continuities and discontinuities in the indigenous social organization. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork that examined how young Wichí undergraduate students made sense of their schooling experiences. [higher education, indigenous education, Wichí youth, indigenous organization, school trajectories]

> "We always say that school imposes on us, influences us; but that we also have to make knowledge ours. There's no other way; you have to get inside this new world and get to know it." (Pedro, young indigenous university student, September 2009)

The increasing presence of indigenous students in higher education institutions is an important issue for Social Sciences in Latin America and the Caribbean (Gigante 2011). It creates dilemmas, as youth have to migrate to cities in order to continue studying (Rockwell and Gomes 2009). But university admission also influences indigenous social organizations, conventional higher education institutions, and the production of anthropological knowledge, as those who have historically been considered objects of study enter the conversation.

This article analyzes some of the most frequent tensions noted by anthropologists studying young indigenous students' accessing higher education in Latin American contexts. The views of *young Wichí university students* (YWUS) in the province of Salta (Argentina) are explored regarding complex subjects, such as community belonging in higher education contexts, acquisition of knowledge from different cultural traditions, the circumstances of young indigenous people at universities, and the social and community value of the degrees they are working toward. The Wichí youth who participated in this study are the first from their community to have access to higher education, in contrast with other Argentine indigenous peoples among whom there are already young professionals.

Theoretically, the research combines perspectives from Latin American educational anthropology, anthropology of aging, and political anthropology. I focus on the interrelationship of ethnicity, schooling, and age to highlight the complex dynamics that locate these young students differently, both within and outside their indigenous community. In so doing, I echo critiques of the idea that indigenous youth must choose between two possible worlds—the Western and the traditional—that are seen as mutually exclusive and antagonistic universes (Henze and Vanett 1993; Czarny 2008). I view processes of negotiation and appropriation, which always take place from diverse and unequal positions, as part and parcel of indigenous schooling. My principal use of theory

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and methodology published in Spanish and Portuguese stems from an ethical and political stance as a researcher thinking, reading, and writing from the South.[1]

Educational anthropology seeks to recognize how school content and design are negotiated and disputed in real school contexts (Levinson et al. 2007). In the case of indigenous education, it is important to register how access to higher levels of formal education influences so-called traditional lifestyles. Two competing theoretical views try to explain the future of indigenous graduates (Czarny 2011; Paladino 2011): On one hand, the indigenous university graduates are expected to go back to their communities and actively contribute to the indigenous cause. From this perspective, the young indigenous university graduate would become an intellectual for the indigenous movement. The opposing view argues that urban university education contributes to indigenous youths' assimilation to Western lifestyles. This view includes a certain degree of adult fear about the likelihood of youth losing their indigenous identity. With these views in mind, this article shows how indigenous youth make their own meanings about their social and educational trajectories. For example, they theorize the very fact of being indigenous and, more specifically, being young indigenous university students.

I utilize anthropology of aging to understand the specific role of youth in maintaining and changing norms and traditions. I assume that age is a structuring dimension of social practice (Kropff 2010) and that "age otherness" places subjects in unequal positions in the processes of elaboration, acquisition, and transference of cultural resources. I see youth as a dynamic and discontinuous social group that is subject to challenge by other sectors that are better positioned but who are also challenging the established order. Anthropology's culturalist and structural-functionalist traditions have privileged the study of ethnic groups as discrete and, for the most part, homogeneous entities. Anthropologists have worked with religious leaders, shamans, and spokespeople, most of them men with important leadership roles within their groups (Urteaga 2008). In this context, the concept of socialization explained the transfer of cultural values from the older generations to children and youth. More recent studies seek to problematize this view, taking children and youth as active and creative agents and legitimate interlocutors for ethnographers (García Palacios et al. 2014; Urteaga 2008, among others).

Finally, I return to political anthropology debates, as educational processes impact established styles of leadership and accumulation of power. In the specific case of indigenous people, it should also be noted that meanings associated with politics do not correspond exactly to those usually assigned to it in Western societies (De la Cadena 2008). It is worth noting that the relationship between indigenous people and the majority of society is the subject of long-standing anthropological debates concerning what is often seen as the integration of cultural and ethnic minorities. Moreover, schooling for indigenous youth is strongly linked to larger-scale political and community projects in which indigenous communities' autonomy and right to a distinct identity are at stake (Rojas Cortés 2012).

The article is divided into six sections. The first reviews background studies about the entry of indigenous youth into higher education in different Latin American contexts. The second section presents the research methodology, a bi-sited ethnography. The subsequent sections show how YWUS made sense of their access to higher education: how they used knowledge coming from both Western and indigenous cultural traditions; the *political agenda* they follow, aiming at improving their comunity's living standards; and the intergenerational tensions within the Wichí community generated by their professionalization. Finally, I suggest recognizing cultural continuities and discontinuities in the study of indigenous youths' entry into higher education.

Research on Young Indigenous University Students

In Latin America, young indigenous students who have finally gained access to undergraduate studies at universities have to deal with the expectations that indigenous and non-indigenous adults build around their education. They have to fulfill academic requirements; that is to say, obtain a diploma (that will then make them eligible for paid work according to their professional training). But they also have to respond to what is expected from an indigenous university graduate. In this case, their ethnicity gives new meanings to college life. Scholarly literature indicates that indigenous university graduates should remain active members of the indigenous movement (cf. Rappaport 2007), to return to their community upon graduation, to put their knowledge into practice (Mato 2009), and to maintain their ethnic identity in different contexts throughout their lives. These views privilege community over individual interests.

Other authors critically review the indigenous university graduate profile (cf. Czarny 2008; Luciano 2009; Paladino 2011). Paladino (2011) wonders whether the indigenous professional must necessarily be an organic intellectual of the trans-national indigenous movement. Czarny (2008) questions whether the movement of indigenous people through academic circuits implies a unique meaning of "being between two worlds" as if both realities were not crossed by larger, intertwined, overlapping, and contradictory processes.

From the point of view of indigenous professionals, the situation is ambivalent. Those who have completed their undergraduate studies point to positive as well as negative elements of their university education. Among positive points, they note that higher education contributes to the strengthening of indigenous youths' self-esteem; moreover, it provides valuable tools that help in balancing the dialogue among indigenous people, the academy, and the state (Luciano 2009). But the university experience also limits and disappoints: indigenous students must face exclusionary university policies (content and methodologies that ignore cultural and linguistic diversity); the lack of fit between curricula and indigenous communities' expectations; and discrimination by government agencies that serve indigenous populations and continue to favor non-indigenous graduates in hiring (Luciano 2009).

Another debate in the field is whether university admission changes young indigenous professionals' relationship to their communities of origin. In this regard, different ethnographies indicate that admission to university does not cancel the youths' sense of community belonging. On the contrary, higher education often seems to renew and strengthen bonds of belonging and solidarity among young students and the indigenous collective. Collet (2006) points out that young (Brazilian) Bakairí state they go to school in order to "defend their people." The author interprets "defending" as meaning to guarantee continuity of relationship in terms of Bakairí traditional social organization (cf. Collet 2006). For Andrade (Ramos 2011), the acquisition of academic knowledge among Yecuana youth, who reside on the Brazilian side of the Venezuelan border, is related to a mythical view. They consider that in the following earth cycle they must assume the hegemonic role that currently belongs to white people. That is why the Yecuana must accumulate knowledge elaborated by Western people, specifically what is taught at school. In Czarny's (2008) words, being part of the indigenous community functions as a social bond that legitimates a group of individuals' knowledge acquisition, as long as the knowledge acquired is used in service of the community. De Souza (2010) compares young Paresí's university access with the *kula* that Malinowski (1922) described, in that both imply social alliances that work in a disinterested manner but are also obligatory.

In sum, bonds between young indigenous university students (YIUS) and their communities are complex and versatile. The relationship among the more educated youth and their communities depends on several factors like the group's internal structure,

student gender (male or female), the community's political situation, and the way in which new educational trajectories fit with (or not) each indigenous group's prior understandings about school. We will now see how access to higher education by a group of Wichí youth generated tension and reconfigurations in the indigenous communities located in the province of Salta (Argentina).

Methodology and Contexts of Study

The research was based on an ethnographic study performed over five years, focusing on three young members of the Wichí people: Pedro, Luis, and Julio.[2]

The Wichí people have inhabited the Gran Chaco area[3] for seven thousand years, approximately (Alvarsson 1988). In Argentina there are 40,036 Wichí living in the provinces of Chaco, Formosa, and Salta (INDEC 2004-2005). The Wichí used to be hunter-gatherers. Currently they combine subsistence practices (fishing, hunting, and fruit gathering) with paid work (mainly positions paid by the municipal or provincial government) and state-derived income (social assistance programs).

It is important to note that "commonsense" notions of Argentine national identity posit the nation as "white European" (Briones 2005, Segato 2007), despite the nation's ethnic diversity. The 1994 National Constitution incorporated indigenous peoples' rights, but indigenous policy has scarcely been developed. In academic circles, though there has been a continuous conversation regarding first nations, it has yet to include sustained discussion of issues deemed important in English-speaking nations, such as *self-determination, inherent sovereignty*, and *reserved rights* (McCarty et. al 2005). Similarly, discussion of indigenous schooling in Argentina is barely beginning (Rabelo Gomes 2012).

Generally speaking, the Wichí stand out among Argentine indigenous peoples in two ways: prevalence of indigenous language use (the indigenous language is the primary language of 90% of the Wichí population)[4] and lack of access to goods and services related to health, education, housing, and ownership of the territory they inhabit. It is worth pointing out that together with the Mbyà Guaraní, the Wichí have the highest indices of exclusion from the formal education system (UNICEF 2009). Consequently, while Wichí language vitality can be understood as an expression of ethnic resistance (Hecht 2006), the limited access to schooling and sanitary services highlights their structural marginalization.

Wichí inhabitants of Salta province have also faced the loss of the lands they inhabit. Indigenous villages in Salta are mainly located in *Tierras fiscales* (lands that belong to the provincial government). These lands were formerly used by Wichí to maintain their traditional hunting-gathering economy. Currently, agribusiness—principally soy farming—has overrun the indigenous landscape. In the area studied, this situation is alarming, because it is powerfully impacting both the landscape and indigenous social organization (Buliubasich 2011).

Los Troncos is a rural village with approximately 1,000 inhabitants, 98% of whom are Wichí (Abilés 2010). Currently, there are 160 indigenous families, each with between 10 to 14 members. Most of them are fishermen, craftspeople who make handicrafts with wood from the region, or they rear pigs and goats for daily use (Abilés 2010). The principal Wichí local leaders are the *caciques* (political leadership) and Pentecostal ministers (religious leadership) (Castillo 1999).

Pedro, Luis, and Julio were born in Los Troncos between 1986 and 1989. They lived there with their extended families until age 18 or 19, when they left to pursue undergraduate degrees at the National University of Salta (UNSa).[5] Pedro studied philosophy, while Julio and Luis studied educational sciences. Their educational trajectories are quite singular: they started preschool at the pre-established age (five years old) being monolingual in Wichí language; they studied at elementary and secondary rural

schools, and completed those studies at the normal age and time (despite the fact that classes were taught in Spanish by non-indigenous teachers). Finally, they were admitted to university one year after finishing high school. This was a totally new situation in Los Troncos, where most people had not completed primary school.

Research was conducted between 2009 and 2013 as part of a doctoral dissertation in social anthropology.[6] I carried out a considered multi-sited (Marcus 1995) or bi-sited ethnography (Ossola 2015a). This kind of approach considers that while the narration of the subjects' lifestyles is not limited to a geographical area, researchers should recognize actors' diverse movements and occupations in the social spaces through which they travel. This fieldwork was developed in two sites of the province of Salta: Los Troncos, located on the banks of the Pilcomayo River, and the city of Salta, where the National University of Salta is located, some 600 kilometers away.

Fieldwork took place at both locations in an effort to follow the seasonal movement of Wichí youth, who lived in the city of Salta during the academic year since 2008 but returned to Los Troncos during academic breaks. At the University, I was interested in recognizing which new academic spaces had appeared in recent years in order to integrate cultural and linguistic minorities (cf. Ossola 2015a). At Los Troncos, I sought to recognize the impact of my informants' schooling on family, social, and political reconfigurations. This article focuses on the latter aspect.

Data were gathered through diverse methods, which changed as the research progressed. In general, data were collected during two periods: 2009–2011 and 2011–2013. During the first period (2009–2011) most of my notes are fragments of in-depth interviews (Appel 2005) that took place at the university and focused on the youths' educational biographies. This strategy allowed me to establish an initial rapport with the students, especially Pedro. Through him I was introduced to his other classmates from Los Troncos. During the second period (2011–2013) data include informal conversations and field notes generated from taking part in different activities in the indigenous community and at the University. This evolved as the YWUS' presence at the university changed with time. Where at first they found themselves in less legitimate or "peripheral" positions (Czarny 2008), as objects of tutoring and "accompaniment" (Luciano 2009), in later years they played more important and active roles. I believe this change took place as they were able to connect their community's political demands—principally access to property titles, schooling, and sanitation—with their university work. Two events marked this transition: the first was the creation of an ad hoc Human Rights Committee in the university community during 2013, in which they and myself, along with other professionals, participated in calling attention to the mistreatment of Wichí people in a confrontation between Wichí communities and the police. The second—during the same year—was media coverage of the precarious living conditions of indigenous peoples in Chaco. In each case, the youths mobilized their contacts in the university and the community to call attention to their community's demands (Ossola 2015a).

An inherent difficulty of this kind of ethnography is to explain the singularity of each context and then to interpret and translate the meanings found in such different situations. An example of this challenge is the diversity of social agents with whom the youths interacted. In the community, they related to their parents, younger and older siblings, community chiefs (*caciques*), school teachers and authorities, and ministers of the Pentecostal Church. Their relationships with each of these groups varied and included many moments of tension that revealed intra- and interethnic power relationships and friction. Their parents were responsible for allowing them to go study in the city, serving as "guarantors" in their absence from the village (Ossola 2015b). For their younger siblings, they were an example to follow, as they were the first to manage to make the transition between the community's ancestral ways and modern schooling. Primary and secondary

school teachers urged them to go to the university, hoping that the youths would eventually be able to take over their jobs. Finally, it was the caciques and religious leaders who watched the youths' progress in the university with the greatest concern: while they publicly expressed their pride that young men of their community attended university, they felt their status as leaders threatened by the youths' schooling, and especially by the political and communications networks the YWUS developed in the provincial capital (Ossola 2015b). All this shows how the connections between university access and support of their communities have important consequences for those indigenous youth who are making them (Brayboy 2005).

At the university, they related to students (including several indigenous and non-indigenous identities)[7], managers, teachers, and officers. This diversity of situations and linguistic repertoires (some in Wichí, some in Spanish) were also reflected in their accounts, which expressed expectations and demands coming from different quarters. It also needs to be pointed out that my fleld notes were produced in culturally diverse and socially unequal contexts marked by colonialism, and in many of them the anthropologist and her fieldwork interlocutors stood as Others before one another. I read my field notes together with Pedro, Julio, and Luis, and told them I was open to criticism of my writing (Ossola 2013b). However, I understand that such practices do not, in and of themselves, generate equality in the unequal power relationships that pervade anthropology (Smith 1999).

On the other hand, working in two different social spaces in the same research multiplied the possible places and situations in which I could be asked about my identity and my activities. At the university, my role as teacher of anthropology and doctoral student provided me with a safe space from which to answer such questions, in the framework of scheduled activities. From there, I was able to interview several professors and academic officers, and to participate in different gatherings of indigenous and non-indigenous students. However, familiarity with the research site does not imply absence of tension or contradictions. At the university, I assumed a position of observer with little or no participation in most of the activities that included working with the indigenous students. This was because I was not part of the university faculty that taught indigenous students. One of the most complex decisions I made was to stay out of the management team as, although I had been invited to take part in it, I considered that being a member of the institutional project would place me in a hierarchic position that could deeply impact my relationship with the Wichí students.

My presence in the indigenous community was during the youths' holiday period, when they returned from the city. At first, and due to our age closeness, different community members treated me as a peer of the students at the university. Later, when I was alone, I was asked whether I was a new schoolteacher, recently arrived from the city. I answered negatively to both questions and later explained that I was a person close to the youths, an anthropologist, and that I wanted to know more about the school where they had studied. On my third trip, I would learn (through informal conversations with the sister of one of the young university students) that several people had asked whether I was her brother's partner. This produced mixed feelings in me; on one hand, I understood this view as positive, as it appeared to downplay the hierarchies, institutional commitments, suspicions, and so on associated with being a researcher. At the same time, knowing that at least some community members located me within deep social bonds also led me to reflect upon the kind of relationship I had with the youths; an approach that in one social context implied closeness or friendship, in another context could take on different meanings.

Another important methodological decision was to take the indigenous youths' schooling trajectories as the unit of analysis, recognizing the highlights of the participants' education as they themselves described them. Focusing on the most important characteristics of their education allowed me to establish a twofold position. On one hand, I was able to address the

gaps between structure and agency (considering that schooling trajectories are based on the personal and subjective account but at the same time are related to the nation's educational policies at a given time). On the other hand, it allowed me to reconstruct the complex—and often painful—collective history of the Wichí people with the school as an institution, one that has gone through long periods of cultural imposition (religious, colonial, and republican) and that is currently characterized by negotiation over curriculum (from unequal social positions), and by the active appropriation of the curricular proposals developed by the national and provincial governments.

Finally, I want to briefly explain the terminology used in this article. I use the category *young indigenous university student* (YIUS) to refer in general to subjects who claim relationship to indigenous collectives and study in conventional universities (that is to say, universities that are not exclusively for indigenous people and lack intercultural academic programs). Specifically, I use YWUS to refer to the three research participants with whom I carried out the fieldwork and whom I thank for their collaboration and the time we spent together over five years.

Schooling for the YWUS: Between Attraction and Repulsion

Indigenous children and youths' relationships to formal schooling reveal a mix of forces that attract and repel them from academic study (Hecht 2012). The YWUS expressed this by pointing out, on one hand, that school perpetuates a Western cultural imposition on indigenous people and, on the other, that the academic environment is a privileged place to acquire skills and develop strategies like the ones white people themselves use. The YWUS expressed this by pointing out that while school imposes Western culture on indigenous people, the academic environment is nonetheless a privileged place for acquiring skills and developing strategies like the ones white people themselves use.

> We always say that school imposes on us, influences us; but that we also have to make knowledge ours. There's no other way; you have to get inside this new world and get to know it. (Pedro, YWUS, September 22, 2009)

This contradictory nature of schooling pushes youth to daily generate positive meanings that legitimize their staying in school. It is a twofold process: first, YWUS must manifest some sort of self-approval and validation of academic knowledge. Indeed, it is necessary that they convince themselves that it is legitimate for a Wichí youth to go to college. Second, they must legitimize their studies before the indigenous community. If they do not perform these tasks, they risk finding themselves in a dead-end situation:

> Because here [in the city] what's most valuable is the piece of cardboard [degree] [. . .] If the young boy gets there [to the indigenous community] he wants to do his stuff: go fishing, watch the nature, go hunting, go gathering. But it is already difficult for him because he is swimming against the tide (. . .) And finally he's useless for both worlds: if you want to be from this side, from the West, you must have the degree; and if you don't have it, you get discarded. If you want to belong here [to the indigenous community], you don't know anything [. . .] And finally they make you lose. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

In order to feel they do not lose, the YWUS build new spaces for dialogue at the university and in the indigenous community. These spaces help legitimize academic knowledge and make it possible to incorporate it into Wichí knowledge. In that sense, they develop a new story in which knowledge from different cultural traditions is given value.

A *Political Agenda* to "Learn from Both Sciences"

When I started interviewing the YWUS about their decision to go to the university, they answered unanimously that it was accidental, emerging from the bond that they had developed with a group of university professors who were performing fieldwork in their community during 2007. However, I believe Wichí youths' move to higher education was part of a *political agenda* by means of which they sought to change the social, political, and educational conditions of their community. This *political agenda* consisted of three parts. The first began with a critical analysis of how politics is done in Los Troncos, in particular the caciques' exercise of power. The second part involved moving to Salta and acquiring "the piece of cardboard"—Western academic credentials. The last part included educating younger generations and eventually entering community and local politics. Next, I am going to review each stage.

The YWUS' political analysis included the educational and health conditions in the Wichí communities:

> We think education is worn out (*desgastado*) for us [. . .] we aren't taught correctly, or teachers miss classes; or if they are present they teach things you're not interested in or useless things [. . .] (Luis, YWUS, November 20, 2009)

> There are many things we see as worn out. That is, they don't work. If somebody wonders if we have a school, we do. If [somebody wonders if] there is a cacique, there's one. If [somebody wonders if] there is a health center, there's one. But the problem is what you do with those things [. . .] I mean, it's as if we have all the stuff, but everything is shaky or, as we say, worn out. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

The "shaky" or "worn-out" elements give some indication of how these youths understood the availability of goods and services in Los Troncos. The fact that there was a school or a health center does not mean it functioned well (in the sense of meeting the expectations of different community members).

Leaving Los Troncos to attend the university was a response to a devastating panorama. Higher education became a strategy to acquire useful knowledge, which later would allow them to improve community conditions. Acquiring academic degrees appeared as a new possibility that let them re-imagine their community. The YWUS' vision differed significantly from those of the adults (elders, parents, and leaders) at Los Troncos. They expressed this in their understanding of politics:

> If we talk about politics, we realize [adult] people don't know anything [. . .] It's not that they don't know. The problem is they believe what outsiders [people from the city] say. They come from [the city of] Salta and they take the cacique to a four-star hotel, and he's already contaminated. (Luis, YWUS, November 20, 2009)

> We don't think politics is bad in itself, but it's badly used, it's badly done. That's why, in the future, our project is also a political project. (Pedro, YWUS, September 22, 2009)

> In our communities there used to be *caciquismo*. But that was before, when there was, culturally, a leader, which was the cacique. But now that's worn-out, because now everybody wants to be a cacique. Nowadays, if you want to be a cacique, you gather people to get more votes. Politics seems to be about getting votes nowadays [. . .] But people need hope, they need to know that somebody is going to stand up [for them.] (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

As mentioned before, the youths viewed higher education as a tool imposed through white colonialism. However, they still intended to appropriate higher education for their own purposes, so as to defend their own communities, modifying some of the relationships they considered to be "worn out," such as the current client-based political structure. Formerly, the leadership and defense of the community was in the hands of the *niyat*, a political

leader who was in charge of protecting the community from external attacks (Métraux 1946). Consequently, it is no coincidence that Julio used the word "defense" to refer to what his people needed. The "community defender" figure does not imply a political leader; it need not even be a human:

> We have always had our defenders, which would be the people themselves. Before Belgrano or Güemes[8] we had our own defenders, which could be animals too. The defenders are all those who help the community survive, to continue [to exist.] (Luis, YWUS, November 20, 2009)

The "defender" here appears to be a collective will to sustain the Wichí people as a culturally differentiated group. Human defenders have included political leaders but also the elderly (as guardians of traditions), women (responsible for children's socialization), religious leaders, and even animals. At the present historical moment, access to university positions YWUS as the new defenders of the Wichí people. The youths suggest in their discourse that in the face of a "worn-out" reality, a new hope has to appear, in "a new era":

> So today people get together, old people get together and what do they say, what do they see? They see today's problems: they see the river getting dry [. . .] they see deforestation, they see no animals and [they wonder] "now who could defend [the community]?" Because in the past if you knew how to read, you could defend it but now that isn't enough [. . .] And now they say that the ones who stay won't be able to defend [the community]; the ones that will defend [it] are the ones that leave, and come back with the piece of cardboard [degree.] (Luis, YWUS, February 23, 2010)

> Because we are closing an era [. . .] and there will come another one [. . .] And that's why we have to learn from both sciences: from ours—the science of culture—and from the new science—the science of the university. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

> And what's important is to read well, so we can translate later [. . .] When we go back to the community, people come to us and show us the mail they get. Mail from lawyers and from the government. And we read those documents and we translate into our language for them. And we also recommend to them how best to act. (Luis, YWUS, October 6, 2012)

The preceding quotes show how the youths justified their leaving to get a degree, by positioning themselves as defenders of the community's interests. They placed themselves in charge of summarizing the knowledge of two cultural traditions: Wichí and Western. So, in order to protect the community and guarantee its survival in the face of new social and environmental problems, they learned from "both sciences." In this regard, learning the "university science" included appropriation of reading and writing skills in the official language (Spanish), so as to be able to advise community members.

A third stage of the YWUS political agenda consisted of educating their younger siblings and cousins. For many, a future project would include being in charge of passing on to their younger relatives what they had learned at the university:

> We don't know if other kids will be able to go to the university in the future. That's why we have to teach them how to help the people, how to fight together. (Luis, YWUS, February 23, 2010)

> And we don't know if other kids will be able to come [to Salta] in the future, because it is very expensive; but what's important is that what we are learning become public and that [other youth] have access to that knowledge. They need to start to be critical. They need to start reflecting and see the situation of the society. They need to be able to wonder: "Where are we? Where are we standing?" And they need to be able to be strategic and say "we say this [strikes the table with his hand] or we do this [strikes the table again] so that we get this result [strikes the table a third time]." Because it's sad, I mean, many things aren't known in the communities. And many of our problems are because of this, because of the lack of communication, the lack of information. (Luis, YWUS, November 20, 2009)

The Wichí students' political agenda summarizes the new social position indigenous university youth occupy in their communities. It was a new discourse, one in which values based in the indigenous tradition (environmental protection, respect for traditional activities, respect for elders) were linked to the need to make Western knowledge their own (to acquire better standing for addressing white people). As we will see next, the YWUS linked their political agenda to the community's educational, health, and legal needs to gain acceptance of their university education.

Political Dimension of Education

Which criteria do Wichí youth use in choosing their academic courses of study? The Wichí generally recognize three academic fields: education, health, and law (cf. Ossola 2015a). This triad serves as a guide for degree choices.

> Let's say we are interested in education, health and law. Because those are the most worn-out fields for us. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

However, these three fields are not equal. On one hand, health and education imply, respectively, degrees in Nursing and Education Sciences (the latter being the one Luis and Julio chose). The benefits of studying these fields are apparent, as completion of studies is related to the opportunity for improving educational quality in indigenous communities:

> The idea of studying education sciences is just that: to change the educational model used to teach us. (Luis, YWUS, November 20, 2009)

On the other hand, law entails broader meanings, relevant to political education for the new generations; it does not necessarily correspond to a specific degree or curriculum. In this sense, politics cuts across other fields of study a student may choose and signals the political implications of university education for indigenous youth. This is the political dimension of education: an attitude toward formal learning, associated with an indigenist discourse, that characterizes the YWUS; a guide for collective action that orients their relationship to universities and entails a certain suspicion of Western institutions; and the hope of achieving a prestigious position in a context of limited opportunities for youth. This is the political dimension of education: the YWUS embrace formal learning but use an indigenist discourse. This discourse orients their relationship to universities and imbues it with a certain suspicion of Western institutions, even as they hope to achieve positions of prestige, in a context of limited opportunities for youth.

That is why attending the university in Salta is closely related to what the community understands as *doing politics*. It includes the creation and extension of social networks—especially with creole or white people—and the appropriation of socially valued ways of using the Spanish language, both orally and in writing. Despite their use of state-sponsored formal education—a foreign system—it legitimizes their social position by enabling them to better serve the indigenous community.

The YWUS, then, do not choose their degrees based on what these represent for the non-indigenous population but on what going to the university implies for their people. For many indigenous students what is most important is not the particular career they choose but the fact that they acquired a university education (Cují Llunga 2011).

The university represents for the YWUS an avenue to social prestige within the indigenous community. This prestige is apparent in the differential treatment they get from community leaders and elders. For example, elders often ask the YWUS for advice on how to behave with white people (Ossola 2013a). An example of this took

place in April 2013, when the YWUS reported to the provincial government irregularities in the functioning of a rural school that young indigenous children attended. Their position as university students and inhabitants of the city of Salta was useful in enlisting the aid of several entities (university, dissident political parties, and the media) in support of their complaint about the dysfunctional cafeteria, which served the children meager breakfasts and lunches.

In situations such as these the YWUS functioned not simply as cultural mediators but occupied a recognized space of their own both within their community of origin and in terms that its members understood regarding power and prestige. In that context, the ability to educate younger generations (apart from recognized institutions such as family, traditional community organization, and school) is important:

> We want a lot of things to be known; we want youth to be critical, even of politics. I believe that we haven't understood politics yet [. . .] that's why you have to get into this [Western] culture to learn and to generate new relationships (*intercambios*). Because it's not possible if there's no relationship. Right now, for example. What would happen if I hadn't come here? We wouldn't be able to talk and you wouldn't know what I think. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

The establishment of new avenues of communication between the indigenous society and the majority of society appeared as a goal of university education. The youth went to the university to learn different skills they considered relevant for politics, that is, to change the relationship between their community and the majority of society. But higher education also modified relationships within the indigenous community, where the youth were subordinated to the adult-centered order:

> We are very respectful toward the caciques, and elders in general. But there are things they weren't able to do or don't know, because they weren't lucky enough to go to university and to appropriate city knowledge. So, they're right about certain things, but not about others. (Julio, YWUS, November 24, 2009)

Julio's comment shows the intergenerational divergence that YIUS university experience generates. It allowed the youth to observe community from a new perspective and frequently to be critical of adult behavior. However, their critique did not entail abandoning customs and traditions but revising them from their singular position of indigenous people and indigenous university students.

The Wichí University Students: Continuities and Discontinuities in Knowledge Transfer

Throughout this article I have argued that for YWUS, attending the university is a means of changing their people's relationship to the majority of society. However, university education also produces significant changes within the indigenous community. These changes produce intergenerational tension, particularly between the caciques and the university-educated youth. This intergenerational tension shows how the YWUS access to higher education, limited as it is, generates discontinuities and continuities within Wichí social and political organization in the province of Salta.

Foremost among the discontinuities is the YWUS' active appropriation of literacy skills. Mastering reading and writing in Spanish is a fundamental goal of their university education. This starkly reveals the problematic education of indigenous children and adolescents (who attend schools where academics are very weak, and many teenagers complete secondary school feeling incompetent in written expression). It also highlights

another politically significant aspect of Wichí youth education: the prestige associated with the ability to read and translate Spanish, the official or hegemonic language.

The YWUS' acquisition of Spanish literacy skills also produces ripples in the academic world. As they come to understand the codes and channels of academic communication (conferences, dissertations, scientific articles, books, etc.), they challenge the academics' and experts' monopoly of indigenous truth. Their ability to read work about their people (and themselves personally, as in this research), together with the ability to write themselves using the language of the social sciences, opens new spaces of interaction between researchers and subjects, and has begun to redefine how ethnographies *about* and *on* indigenous people are performed in South America. In a previous work, I pointed out the challenges of publishing ethnographies in the current Latin American context, being citizens and academics located at the south of the hemisphere[9] (cf. Ossola 2013b). This position brings us close to the research participants in a special way (the YWUS and I share citizenship, the daily use of Spanish, university, and age range), and at the same time our interactions are framed by ethnographic practices and anthropological theories originating in the Western and Northern traditions.

YWUS' literacy represents a disruption that generates tension but seems not to affect Wichí internal solidarity. The youths' acceptance, at least provisionally and rhetorically, of their subaltern status in the Wichí community reveals the continuity of a gerontocratic order in indigenous communities, as their behavior is still subordinate to elders' authority. The youths' *political agenda* (such as the education of younger) is projected into the future; that is, the changes will take place as they assume adult status. Thus, the discontinuities generated by the access to higher education have not destabilized intergenerational relationships.

This is possible because university education also produces significant continuities between the YWUS and their community. In this regard, I believe that academic education of the youths is part of a community strategy, aimed at acquiring knowledge necessary for the group's survival. The Wichí community's sending the youths to university is part of a collective maneuver that considers the knowledge the YWUS will acquire to be useful for identifying, understanding, and solving contemporary problems: the community's right to ancestral land (threatened by the expansion of soybean cultivation); preservation of its ecosystems (at risk due to continuous clearing); and the implementation of an educational model in harmony with Wichí linguistic and cultural particularities. In other words, it is not only Luis, Pedro, and Julio who are seeking alternatives for their people's future. There is also a whole community that daily bets on the three youths' acquisition of knowledge. This bet is sustained by implicit agreement in which YWUS commit to maintaining a close reciprocal relationship with their community (which entails frequent return visits to Los Troncos). At the same time, the YWUS remain committed to using academic knowledge to contribute to their people's resistance in the face of the dominant society's continuous encroachment and disrespect for their ways of being and doing.

Finally, the study of indigenous youths' long-term schooling trajectories reveals complex and nonlinear life situations. In such situations, individuals create dense and meaningful accounts, coming from different cultural traditions. Politics—in terms of their community of origin—plays a central role in these accounts, functioning as a meaningful framework through which academic learning can be translated into the language of community politics. The goal of "learning from both sciences" summarizes the challenge of elaborating stories of their own, which may harmonize Wichí cultural practices with academic knowledge.

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Notes

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1. It is important to mention northern relevant publications in this area, like McCarty et al. 2005 and Moniz 2008. The links between Latin American knowledge and North American and European theoretical and methodological positions remain to be developed in the future, by both sides.

2. The names of the participants and the indigenous community are pseudonyms in order to preserve confidentiality.

3. *El Chaco* is a broad plain located at the center of South America. It is crossed by the Tropic of Capricorn and comprises Southern Bolivia, Northeastern Argentina, and Western Paraguay. *El Chaco* is divided into three subregions: *Boreal, Central,* and *Austral*. The climate is tropical, warm, and semiarid.

4. The Wichí people speak the Wichí language, which (along with the Nivaclé, Chorote, and Maká languages) belongs to the Mataco-Mataguayan linguistic family. All these languages are currently spoken in Argentina, except Maká, which is used in Paraguay. Wichí is the most vital language in the Mataco-Mataguayan family (Censabella 1999). Traditionally, it was a non-literate language but currently several different writing systems coexist. Most of them came from Anglican missionary work in the Chaco (Acuña 2002).

5. The National University of Salta (UNSa) was founded by the Argentinean government in 1972. It has its main campus in Salta City, the province's capital. UNSa has been described as a "plebeian university" (Carli 2012) because most of the student population comes from poor segments of Salta society (Ilvento et al. 2011). In terms of cultural and linguistic diversity, the category of "indigenous students" did not exist at this university until 2008, when Wichí youth enrolled in Humanities programs. After that, academic programs for inclusion were started. Currently, the main strategy of inclusion is based on academic tutoring that promotes different activities for social, cultural, linguistic, and academic indigenous inclusion. This strategy is developed by indigenous or non-indigenous peers who accompany indigenous students during their academic careers. Known as *peer tutors for indigenous students*, they are paid by the University. Nonetheless, there remains the challenge of including indigenous languages and knowledge in the formal schooling process. This requires urgent attention (Huaman and Valdiviezo 2014, among others).

6. Social Anthropology PhD dissertation titled "Wichí Youths in Higher Education in Salta: Academic, Ethnic and Age Interpellations". This dissertation was defended at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Universidad de Buenos Aires, in March 2014. It was directed by Dr. Ana Carolina Hecht and Dr. Gabriela Novaro.

7. An important subject for future research is the link between these youth and other young people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in the city, the university, and the indigenous community.

8. Manuel Belgrano and Martín Miguel de Güemes are Argentine national heroes. They were politicians and military men who fought against the Spanish army, helping the *Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata* (currently Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay) gain independence.

9. Being *South* refers not only to a territorial and geopolitical location but also to an epistemological position that highlights and supports the local and creative analysis of Latin American social processes.

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