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Introduction: “*Mi delito es ser de aquí*”:¹

RACISM AND PLACISM IN COSTA RICAN EDUCATION

IN 1977 A LEGAL PROCESS BEGAN THAT RESULTED IN THE TOWN OF NAMBUÉ² being arbitrarily named an indigenous reservation in 1979. This was done despite the fact that Costa Rican history claims the country’s indigenous populations had become extinct in the colonial era, four centuries earlier. Nambué was one of twenty-three demarcated reservations where peoples self-identified as indigenous or where indigenous peoples were known to have lived at the time of colonization. Nambué fit the latter criterion. Although all of Guanacaste—the northernmost province of Costa Rica—is considered Chorotega territory, just one small area was selected to become the Chorotega reservation. This labeling did not make Nambué’s inhabitants suddenly Indian—a stigmatized identity in a country that projects an image of whiteness. Instead, it effectively absolved all those people outside the reservation of this stigmatized label in spite of their similar cultural heritage. With the exception of a small white settler population, the people living in the towns surrounding the reservation shared the same cultural heritage of those inside its borders.

There were no significant differences in language, religion, or worldview between people inside and outside the reservation. Thus, the defining factor for Indian identity—at least ascribed Indian identity—became place of residence. If two siblings lived on either side of the reservation’s boundary, only one might be recognized

as Indian. A sixteen-year-old commented on this when he noted, "It's not because of the race but more because of the name [of the reservation]. I'm from the indigenous reservation, and for that reason they discriminate against me." When one student not from the reservation heard that I lived in Nambué, she asked jokingly, "¿Qué, chola, profe?" (What, Teacher, are you Indian?), thus pointing out the connection between place of residence and perceived race.

In 1999 students from Nambué attended high school outside the reservation in Santa Rita de Cascia (hereafter Santa Rita), a town dominated by a small settler population whose most prominent members identify as white and Spanish. In Santa Rita High School (SRHS), also dominated by this white, economically better-off settler population, students from the reservation met with daily discrimination. That discrimination, however, was based more on place than on race. According to the school's criteria, 80 percent of the student body shared the same ethnic heritage as students from Nambué, but for the most part only students from the reservation were perceived as Indian. It is significant that in this society the label *Indian* had connotations of backwardness and even inferior intellect. Thus, place largely determined ethnicity (which was discussed as race), and ethnicity determined one's academic potential in the eyes of a handful of racist, powerful, predominantly white teachers. Therefore, according to the dominant stereotypes at work, being Indian automatically set students up for being treated as inferior.

Not surprisingly, then, on the flip side of this racist—or placist—situation is the fact that many teachers viewed individuals from the economically better-off white settler families that constituted 20 percent of the student body (according to the school's statistics) as the best students. Students who were not from white settler families but who lived in the white-dominated town and were also of a relatively more privileged social class were also considered white, regardless of their skin color. During a discussion with Isabel, an eighth grader from Santa Rita, about her perceptions of students from Nambué, she pulled up her pants legs and showed me that she was white and not the same color as students from the reservation, as I had mistakenly perceived her to be. Thus, for students from the dominant town, place was also connected to race. A student who was not white by skin color but who was relatively well-off and resided in Santa Rita could sometimes pass as white by association. In some cases, however, social class was also an issue, as I saw students who had dark skin and who were from poorer Riteño³ families chided for being Indian.

This intermingling of race, place, and class played out in the high school setting. In many cases, students from the dominant town who were too poor to be considered white were encouraged by select teachers to drop out. This was also the case for many students from the reservation. Samuel, a boy from Nambué just starting high school the year I did my fieldwork, had been the best student in his elementary school class inside the reservation. In contrast, in high school in Santa Rita he was immediately labeled (erroneously) as learning disabled and was asked by the school counselor to drop out—which he finally did at the end of the year. While explaining to his grandmother why he was always under the watchful eye of the school counse-

lor responsible for disciplinary action, he stated, "*Mi delito es ser de aquí*" (My crime is being from here).

Because he was from the reservation, his actions were watched more closely by those who expected him to do poorly in school. He was called into the counselor's office on more than one occasion and falsely accused of crimes. Among the accusations were vandalism and theft, both of which were untrue, but they were expected of an Indian student according to the dominant stereotypes at work in the high school. In one instance Samuel's grandmother was called in and told her grandson was stealing money. The counselor based this claim on the fact that she had seen the student with a large quantity of money. Evidently, she assumed a student from the reservation would have to steal to have that amount of cash. In reality, the student was the treasurer of his class, and to carry out his job he had to collect money from classmates. In effect, he was being judged and punished for participating in school activities. Indeed, most student government members were from Santa Rita.

For students from Nambué, there appeared to be two extremes with regard to identity and school success. Some students from the reservation maintained indigenous identities but did poorly in school or, in many cases, dropped out. At the other extreme, some students attained school success but rejected Indian⁴ identity and all that had to do with the reservation. Although numerous reactions existed between these two poles, for most students from the reservation, projecting an Indian identity seemed incompatible with school success. As we will see, in this setting an intricate intertwining of place, race, and class all but dictated possible school success for students from the Nambué reservation.

It is not unusual that a place and the people who reside therein come to be mutually defined.⁵ It is the process by which places become emblematic of peoples, and vice versa, that was at work for the inhabitants of the Nambué reservation. In this community, place of residence and class status mingled to determine how one's race was perceived by outsiders and, for all practical purposes, determined the level of success a child from Nambué could attain in a predominantly racist high school outside the reservation.

Given that students from the reservation confronted discrimination frequently in school, they had come up with a variety of strategies to deal with this situation. Some took on an identity other than Indian (such as athlete, class clown, or bad kid). Some dropped out. Some accepted their assigned place and participated only minimally so as to pass unnoticed. Some students, however, relied on place-based strategies to confront the placism that affected them.

These place-based strategies included pretending to be from elsewhere when asked. (Getting on the bus to Nambué at the end of the day undermined this strategy to some degree, however.) Another strategy was tied to the rejection of Indian identity. Some students and other inhabitants of the reservation had sought federal unrecognition of their land as a reservation to remove their stigmatized, ascribed, and place-based identity. To combat the stigma of being from a town designated as a reservation, which, in turn, determined their ascribed identities, some students were

involved in a small-scale movement to remove Nambué's reservation status and thus remove their stigmatized label. Given that inhabitants of the reservation had carried that label for over twenty-five years, however, this strategy was unlikely to be effective. Dropping out was one of the more popular strategies in 1999 for resisting the school's categorization of and discrimination against students from the reservation (although it may not seem beneficial in the long run).

For these students, place of residence became a limiting factor and a constricting badge. In the case of Jacobo—a poor student from the dominant town—race, class status, and being the son of a single mother may have led to his being considered Indian even though he did not live on the reservation. The limits this discrimination placed on his possible school success were evident when he dropped out. Jacobo explained to me that some teachers and one counselor had been successful in forcing him to drop out but that he wouldn't let them stop his education altogether. At the end of the school year he moved to another province, another place, where his ascribed identity was not in direct conflict with school success and educational opportunities. He also emphasized the connotations of Indianness and its opposition to school success when he told me his plans to continue studying elsewhere. He concluded with the phrase "*No me voy a quedar indio. Yo voy a seguir estudiando*" (I won't stay Indian. I'll keep studying).

The research described in this book, from its inception, has aimed to affect schooling practice and policy. Developed in conjunction with the community of Nambué throughout a six-year period prior to conducting this school-based study, in part as a result of my personal ties to the community, the project that forms the basis of this book has sought to be useful to the community of Nambué, to SRHS, and to the Ministry of Education. Thus, I contextualize this work within the parameters of applied anthropology, as well as within the bounds of critical education theory. Whereas much of the latter literature has addressed schools in the United States, mine seeks to provide a comparative perspective by providing a Latin American example.⁶ Thus, I contribute to a growing body of literature surrounding schooling in Latin America.⁷ In particular, Costa Rica's spin on nationalism and ethnic diversity proves rather different from the mix in other parts of Latin America.⁸ Although my work focuses on students, I also address as many aspects of school life as possible through attention to teachers, parents, and communities. I acknowledge the influence of each of these groups in the high school's crucial role in shaping identity.⁹ In this manner, I place my work within the context of that of more recent scholars, as I will discuss in greater detail later, who recognize the role of human agency and resistance within social reproduction theory.¹⁰ I also situate this book within the realm of critical race theory while paying particular attention to the role of place in the social constructions of race and ethnicity. Finally, I see gender not as a separate topic but as one that merits attention throughout my discussion of race, ethnicity, identity, and schooling.

I begin my analysis of schooling and identity in a Costa Rican high school by outlining the development of this research project, the methods used, and my stake

in the work described here. As an applied anthropologist linked to the reservation community through years of interaction, personal ties, and marriage yet seemingly tied to Santa Rita on the basis of my race, I confronted numerous dilemmas with regard to accountability and representation. This unique position also affected the way individuals in the high school viewed, judged, and responded to me. The theoretical works from which I draw in Chapter 1 address reflexivity in ethnographic writing,¹¹ the role of women anthropologists in the field and a women's ethnographic tradition,¹² and the tensions that can exist between female anthropologists' professional and personal, marriage-related, or gender roles.¹³ The project that forms the backbone of this book stems from 1,125 hours of participant observation in 1999, from interviews of students of various communities, teachers, administrators, family members of students, prominent community members, and Nambueseño youth who either never attended high school or who dropped out.

Following the consideration that schools often reflect and perpetuate the beliefs and attitudes found in the surrounding community,¹⁴ in Chapter 2 I provide a historical and ethnographic portrait of Santa Rita. After innumerable years of settlement by the Chorotega and their descendants, a group of white settlers—led by the local priest, Father Sánchez—"founded" the town as it is now known. These founding families continue to hold considerable power and prestige in this community that identifies itself as Catholic and Spaniard (albeit several generations removed from Spain) within what one teacher described as "an oasis" of whiteness in a province otherwise characterized by Chorotega heritage. In Chapter 2 I present early examples of ethnic conflict that underlie the rift that exists today. The chapter also addresses the founding of SRHS by the same priest to whom the community attributes its development. Here I provide examples of racist attitudes expressed by students in school that mirror those present in the surrounding community.

In Chapter 3 I portray Nambué from historical, insider, outsider, and scholarly perspectives from the social sciences. I contrast the historical account of Costa Rica as devoid of indigenous inhabitants with the legal discourse that labeled Nambueseños as such in the 1970s and with subsequent social science research that has frequently categorized the country's twenty-three reservations along a hierarchy of perceived ethnic legitimacy. The chapter addresses the tangible effects and those on personal identity of the contradictory definitions and expectations of indigenous Costa Ricans expressed by these various perspectives. I address the preconceived notions and stereotypes many outsiders hold of Nambueseños. The chapter includes excerpts of interviews with several teachers that demonstrate the stereotypes of the reservation that exist in the school. I outline the basis of the discrimination Nambué's residents faced in high school as revolving around place of residence, which in turn defines ethnicity. The chapter also draws from anthropological and other literature regarding place to elaborate upon how Nambueseños conceive of their community in light of outsiders' stereotypes.¹⁵ I examine identity as a personal and shifting construction, as Nambueseños do not agree upon the appropriateness of their community's reservation status or on the Chorotega ethnic identity imposed upon them.

Also in this chapter I consider anthropological theory regarding the social constructions of race and ethnicity. Many traditional markers of ethnicity are inapplicable to this case in which those discriminated against and many of those who discriminate share an ethnic heritage and in which *mestizaje* (the process of racial mixing resulting in the mestizo population) has erased such clear boundaries. The mechanisms of boundary maintenance used in the absence of more traditional ethnic markers are also addressed here.¹⁶ I follow García Canclini, Bonfil Batalla,¹⁷ and others in seeing ethnic identity as a dynamic process, not as a stagnant given. I relate Bonfil Batalla's notion of "*desindianización*" (de-Indianization) to the process by which social science in Costa Rica has all but erased the Chorotega from modern existence. In sum, ethnicity is socially constructed, and the maintenance of boundaries between one ethnic group and another is key to that construction. Of particular importance in this chapter is the role of place of residence as a significant aspect of racial and ethnic constructions of self and other.

In Chapter 4 I examine the numerous ways ethnic categorization took place in the absence of many traditional ethnic markers. This chapter discusses the ways teachers and students drew lines between "us" and "them" in the high school to divide students into various social groups. These methods included racial and ethnic divisions, as well as gendered ones and those related to place of residence and social class. I describe how students' place of residence and, in turn, their status, as well as other factors such as religion and social class, affected their access to school, to particular classes in the vocational track, to extracurricular activities, and more. Furthermore, I examine the way social class affected participation in school activities and basic coursework. This chapter also examines the techniques individuals in the high school used to maintain those divisions. Such strategies included tracking, favoritism by particular teachers, gossip, stereotypes, and ridicule. Some of these tactics were overt and individualized, whereas others were built into the school system. Certain teachers explained many of them as choices Nambueseños made that kept them low on the social ladder. Through various mechanisms, students learned where within the social hierarchy they were assumed to belong.

In Chapter 5 I investigate overt curriculum and teaching methods, the ways students' economic limitations affected their perceived standing as "good" or "bad" students, and who benefited most from the high school experience in Santa Rita. At SRHS, students were taught about their own national and local identity through a direct curriculum. I argue that lessons of identity were among the most lasting lessons the high school imparted. Most frequently, however, these lessons were not taught in such a direct manner. More often they were inculcated through subtle and enduring means. In this chapter I discuss the ways an official curriculum was taught to students at SRHS in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Ministry of Education.

In Chapter 6 I examine the numerous vehicles through which the relative values placed on different identities were communicated within the high school. This chapter focuses on the ways students were taught identity—both racial and gendered—

in the classroom. Whereas an earlier chapter investigated tactics such as tracking for students deemed inferior, this one focuses on lessons taught implicitly or tacitly, in most cases with regard to what is often termed *hidden curriculum*.¹⁸ I tie this to Bourdieu's concept of habitus by examining how the classroom was both constitutive of and constituted by the social categories through which students were taught their imposed identities. I discuss some of the effects of this labeling in accordance with various theories on the topic.¹⁹

With regard to the teaching of gender roles, girls were at once taught to suppress and to develop femininity. They were likewise taught to discredit ideas surrounding gendered work roles while they were placed in classes that reinforced those ideas. This sexism was both built into the school system and imposed by students.²⁰ Along with teachings of ethnic and racial identity, I address the value placed on whiteness as taught in various classes—both directly, through curriculum, and indirectly, in extracurricular activities. Finally, in this chapter I examine teachers' policing of interracial student couples, which underscored the school's agenda of promoting, prizing, and protecting whiteness. Through hidden curriculum and direct teachings, students were taught their social location within a hierarchy marked by place, race, class, ethnicity, and gender, as well as being taught which intersections of these categories were acceptable and which were not. Habitus and the naturalization of these teachings obfuscated the way they differentially opened doors or shut them to various students' futures.

Finally, in this chapter I examine what futures were available to students from Santa Rita, to those from the twenty-seven other communities served by the school (including Nambué), and for those who graduated versus those who did not. In particular, I question whether the high school experience was of value at all to students from the reservation. To discuss these issues, various theories from anthropology and education are helpful in illuminating the relationship between schooling and the workplace.

Chapter 7 centers upon the question of student resistance and human agency in the high school. After questioning what constitutes resistance and reviewing anthropological theory on the matter, I provide numerous examples of student resistance and examine tendencies within each strategy with regard to gender, ethnicity, and other variables. I pay attention to power and resistance as phenomena that go hand in hand. I include within my conceptualization of resistance smaller, less visible acts of resistance that some may dismiss as insignificant.²¹ Each aspect of schooling I address in this book—the ascription of stigmatized identities, preferential treatment in teaching, teaching style, the teaching of gendered and racial identities and the relative values of these identities, uniforms, and tracking—met with student resistance in one form or another. In this penultimate chapter, I pay special attention to dropping out as a tactic of resistance.²² I also address the frames for explaining what I consider discriminatory acts, as different students, parents, and teachers saw them.

In Chapter 8 I address possible ways to intercede and affect policy at the levels of the reservation, the school, and the Ministry of Education. I consider the contributions

of this project in terms of theory and practice, examine how it has been received by the communities involved and its potential applications to Costa Rican educational policy, and address the ethical dilemmas I faced in carrying out the project.

In short, this book explores the boundaries of race and place within and between two communities in Costa Rica and examines how race, class, place, and gender inform relationships of power dynamics both between and among students and teachers. The book addresses the dynamics at play in a high school geared toward a powerful, privileged numerical minority in which xenophobia and racism abound. What is discussed in the high school in terms of "race," however, encompasses much more than color and includes social class, place of residence, and ethnicity. Although I pay special attention to racism in school as it affects students from the reservation in particular, the book includes discussions of various school-related phenomena as they affect students of different social groups. I focus on the mutual effects of schooling and ethnicity, the institutionalized barriers to academic success for students from the reservation and others, and how ethnic, racial, and gendered identities are taught in the school to the extent that school success and professed indigenous identity seemed to be at odds at SRHS.

NOTES

1. "My crime is being from here."

2. This, like all other names of places, students, and teachers in this book, is a pseudonym.

3. Those from Santa Rita are known as Riteños. I will refer to those from Nambué as Nambueseños.

4. Some residents of Nambué prefer this term to *indigenous*. Although I use both terms and I recognize that some readers might take issue with the term *Indian*, I often use the term to draw attention to the fact that this categorization or label has had significant effects on those who bear it. I do not in any way wish to convey the pejorative connotations of the term. Many of those in favor of the label have reclaimed it, and some of those against it are not in favor of it precisely because of the constraints circumscribed upon them as a result of the labeling process. That process is of central interest to this book.

5. For other works that address this phenomenon, see Blu 1996; Casey 1993; Frake 1996; Relph 1976.

6. In this I respond to Levinson and Holland's (1996: 3–4, 15) call for increased attention to the comparative perspective.

7. See Levinson 2001 and Rival 1996 on Mexico; Luykx 1996 and 1999 regarding Bolivia; López, Assáel, and Neumann 1984 with regard to Chile; and Arnove 1986 for a focus on Nicaragua.

8. Although many Latin American countries revere an indigenous past (although they may not recognize the complex contributions and cultural borrowing of present-day indigenous peoples), Costa Rican history largely denies its indigenous past. In this manner, Costa Rica provides an interesting example through which to examine the construction of nationalist belonging as it relates to race and ethnicity.

9. Here I place my work in the same context as others who view schools as key sites of "cultural production," as Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) call it. Others who acknowledge this aspect of schooling include Yon 2000 and Luykx 1999.

10. Authors in this category include Apple 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Ferguson 2000; Levinson 2001; Levinson, Foley, and Holland 1996; Luykx 1999; MacLeod 1987; McLaren 1982; McRobbie 1978; Willis 1977; Yon 2000.

11. In this I follow Rosaldo 1993 and M. Wolf 1996.

12. I draw from the work of Abu-Lughod 1991; di Leonardo 1991; and Enslin 1994 for this analysis.

13. In this discussion I refer to the work of Tedlock 1995.

14. In this consideration I follow Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Bonfil Batalla 1990; Foley 1990; McLaren 1982; Ogbu 1978.

15. Blu 1996; Casey 1993; Kahn 1996; Relph 1976; Tuan 1992.

16. Following Barth 1969.

17. 1990 and 1989, respectively.

18. Gearing and Epstein 1982; Spindler 1982; Wexler 1989; Wilcox 1982.

19. Such as those proposed by Oboler 1995; Rist 1970; Romo and Falbo 1996.

20. This is in accordance with what Holland and Eisenhart 1990 propose.

21. Following Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Kondo 1990; McLaren 1986; and others.

22. See Thomas and Wahrhaftig 1971.