Survivance in Indigenous Schools: Wayuu Students' Resistance to Coloniality in La Guajira (Colombia)

Supervivencia resistente en la educación indígena: la resistencia de los estudiantes wayúu a la colonialidad en La Guajira (Colombia)

Survivance dans l'éducation autochtone : la résistance des étudiants wayuu à la colonialité dans La Guajira (Colombie)

Sobrevivência resistente na educação indígena: a resistência dos estudantes wayuu à colonialidade em La Guajira (Colômbia)

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Abstract

Colonial language policies and teaching practices continue to impact Indigenous people's languages and epistemologies both in and out of their territories, even when Indigenous students attend schools intended to sustain their lifeways. In this critical case study, I examine the multifaceted dimensions of coloniality that Wayuu students from La Guajira, Colombia, continue to endure in their education. However, because Indigenous peoples are not passive in their navigation of coloniality, I also describe their unwavering commitment to accessing education in their own territory and the multiple forms of resistance Wayuu students engage in to sustain their linguistic and cultural identities. This article, therefore, is not about survival, but survivance. It is about Wayuu ninth-grade students' ongoing stories of survival and resistance against the coloniality of power, being, and knowledge, which pushes for linguistic assimilation into Spanish language and dominates their schooling experience. This coloniality, which is buttressed by colonial education policies, standardized testing, and discourses of globalization and social mobility disregards their Native ways of knowing and doing. I conclude this article by arguing for the need of epistemic disobedience to challenge and transform the colonial systems enforced by educational institutions and policymakers, who continue to advance coloniality on Native lands.

Keywords: coloniality, Indigenous resistance, survivance, Indigenous languages, global South

Resumen

Las políticas lingüísticas coloniales y las prácticas de enseñanza continúan afectando las lenguas y epistemologías de los pueblos indígenas, tanto dentro como

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fuera de sus territorios, incluso cuando los estudiantes indígenas asisten a escuelas destinadas a sostener sus modos de vida. En este estudio de caso crítico, examino las dimensiones multifacéticas de la colonialidad que los estudiantes wayúu de La Guajira, Colombia, siguen enfrentando en su educación. Sin embargo, dado que los pueblos indígenas no son pasivos en su navegación de la colonialidad, también describo su inquebrantable compromiso para acceder a la educación en su propio territorio, así como las múltiples formas de resistencia en las que los estudiantes wayúu participan para sostener sus identidades lingüísticas y culturales. Este artículo, por lo tanto, no trata sobre la supervivencia, sino sobre la *supervivencia resistente* (*survivance*). Es decir, se centra en las historias de supervivencia y resistencia que continúan viviendo los estudiantes wayúu de noveno grado frente a la colonialidad del poder, del ser y del saber, que impulsa la asimilación lingüística del español y domina su experiencia escolar. Esta colonialidad, respaldada por políticas educativas coloniales, pruebas estandarizadas y discursos de globalización y movilidad social, ignora las formas nativas de conocer y hacer que tiene la comunidad wayúu. Concluyo este artículo argumentando la necesidad de una desobediencia epistémica que desafíe y transforme los sistemas coloniales impuestos por las instituciones educativas y los responsables de las políticas públicas, quienes continúan promoviendo la colonialidad en tierras indígenas.

Palabras clave: colonialidad, resistencia indígena, survivance, lenguas indígenas, Sur global

Résumé

Les politiques linguistiques coloniales et les pratiques d'enseignement continuent à influencer les langues et les épistémologies des peuples autochtones, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de leurs territoires, même lorsque les élèves autochtones fréquentent des écoles censées soutenir leurs modes de vie. Dans cette étude de cas critique, j'examine les dimensions multiples de la colonialité que les élèves wayuu de La Guajira, en Colombie, continuent à endurer dans leur parcours éducatif. Cependant, comme les peuples autochtones ne sont pas passifs dans leur navigation de la colonialité, je décris également leur engagement indéfectible envers l'accès à l'éducation sur leur propre territoire et les multiples formes de résistance dans lesquelles les élèves wayuu s'engagent pour préserver leurs identités linguistiques et culturelles. Cet article ne porte donc pas sur la survie, mais sur la *survivance*. Il s'agit des récits continus de survie et de résistance des élèves wayuu de neuvième année face à la colonialité du pouvoir, de l'être et du savoir, qui cherche à les assimiler linguistiquement à la langue espagnole et domine leur expérience scolaire. Cette colonialité, soutenue par des politiques éducatives coloniales, des tests standardisés et des discours de mondialisation et de mobilité sociale, néglige leurs manières autochtones de connaître et de faire. Je conclus cet article en plaidant pour la nécessité d'une désobéissance épistémique afin de contester et de transformer les systèmes coloniaux imposés par les institutions éducatives et les décideurs politiques, qui continuent de perpétuer la colonialité sur les terres autochtones.

Mots-clés : colonialité, résistance autochtone, *survivance*, langues autochtones, Sud global

Resumo

As políticas linguísticas coloniais e as práticas de ensino continuam impactando as línguas e epistemologias dos povos indígenas, tanto dentro quanto fora de seus territórios, mesmo quando estudantes indígenas frequentam escolas destinadas a sustentar seus modos de vida. Neste estudo de caso crítico, examino as múltiplas dimensões da colonialidade que os estudantes wayuu de La Guajira, Colômbia, continuam a enfrentar em sua educação. No entanto, como os povos indígenas não são passivos em sua navegação pela colonialidade, também descrevo seu firme compromisso em acessar a educação em seu próprio território e as diversas formas de resistência nas quais os estudantes wayuu se engajam para manter suas identidades linguísticas e culturais. Este artigo, portanto, não trata de sobrevivência, mas de *survivance*.

Ou seja, trata-se das histórias contínuas de sobrevivência e resistência dos estudantes wayuu do nono ano diante da colonialidade do poder, do ser e do saber, que impulsiona a assimilação linguística ao espanhol e domina sua experiência escolar. Essa colonialidade, sustentada por políticas educacionais coloniais, testes padronizados e discursos de globalização e mobilidade social, desconsidera suas formas nativas de conhecer e fazer. Concluo este artigo defendendo a necessidade de uma desobediência epistêmica para desafiar e transformar os sistemas coloniais impostos por instituições educacionais e formuladores de políticas, que continuam a promover a colonialidade em terras indígenas.

Palavras-chave: colonialidade, resistência indígena, survivance, línguas indígenas, Sul global

Introduction

No other process has attempted to erase Indigenous cultures and languages as powerfully as education (Cajete, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Colonial language policies and curricula have served as tools to impose European languages and cultures, and Eurocentric ideologies on Indigenous peoples, thus silencing their ways of being, knowing, and doing (McCarty & Coronel-Molina, 2017). Scholars have denounced these policies, arguing they contribute to epistemicide—the destruction of knowledge systems (Phyak, 2021)—and linguicide—the eradication of languages and their speakers (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2016), both rooted in racism and coloniality. As a result, Indigenous students globally face "obstacles, barriers, and risks that accompany [their] literacy learning" (Finders, 1997, p. 26), particularly when Native languages are ignored in favor of dominant ones like Spanish and English (Fandiño-Parra, 2021; Mercado Epieyú, 2018).

In Colombia, despite the existence of an ethno-education policy (Colombia, Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Decree 804, 1995) created to sustain Indigenous people's cultural identities, values, practices, and languages, symbolic violence persists, even in ethno-education schools meant to sustain Indigenous languages and epistemologies. In this regard, Wayuu scholar Mercado Epieyú (2018) states that colonial education in Colombia has deeply impacted Indigenous students and their linguistic and cultural identities (Gutiérrez & Frías Epinayú, 2024; Mansilla & Lima, 2020). Yet Indigenous peoples have not been passive. While Indigenous peoples have questioned ethno-education and have moved toward the development and implementation of their Own Education —*educación propia*— as a form of resistance (De Mejía et al., 2023; Triviño Garzón & Rojas Curieux, 2023; Valencia Giraldo et al., 2023), other decolonizing efforts have emerged through autonomous Indigenous universities in Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, and alternative higher education programs in Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, and Peru (Lopez, 2017).

In Colombia, sustained resistance and commitments to preserve ancestral languages and epistemologies have resulted in efforts to create a language policy to sustain Creole (Sanmiguel Ardila, 2023) and to incorporate local teaching strategies to strengthen Palenquero language (Navarro Diaz et al., 2023). More recently, Indigenous People's resistance to ethno-education led to the creation of Decree 0481 of 2025, through which their Own Indigenous Educational System (Sistema Educativo Indígena Propio—SEIP) is recognized and established as a public state policy, guaranteeing Indigenous peoples' right to an education based on their autonomy, spirituality, and worldview.

Although the presence and harmful effects of colonial education have been widely documented, as well as instances of collective forms of resistance in Colombia, less is known about the way coloniality plays out on ethno-education schools and the daily forms of survival and resistance —survivance— (Vizenor, 2008) Indigenous students engage in to sustain their linguistic and cultural identities in these school contexts. Few examples from other contexts are those described by Sabzalian (2019), who highlights Indigenous children and teachers' creative navigation of coloniality in public schools.

Inspired by this, through a critical case study, I explored how coloniality manifests itself in a school located on Wayuu territory and the creative ways ninth grade students find to challenge it. This article, therefore, is not about survival, but survivance: "Indigenous creative approaches to life beyond genocide, beyond the bareness of survival" (Morrill, 2017, p. 15). In addition to identifying the tools coloniality employs to threaten Wayuunaiki and Wayuu epistemologies, this article centers on Wayuu youth and their stories of Native sovereignty, as they subtly yet powerfully resist coloniality in schooling. To this end, I draw on the work of Anibal Quijano who describes how

the colonial matrix of power (CMP), composed of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2000), and coloniality of being (Mignolo, 2003) continue to rule the globe.

Similarly, I draw on Vizenor (2008) who insists on the importance of uplifting Native stories of survivance to shy away from harmful narratives of pain historically attached to Native peoples. In his words, "The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry." (p. 1). In this paper, I first theorize the notions of CMP and its implications for education. Similarly, I elaborate on the notion of survivance and its relevance when doing research with Indigenous populations. I then describe the research methods used in this study and elaborate on the findings to describe both the presence of coloniality in this particular context and students' resistance to it as they navigate this school context. I conclude by critiquing the limitations of ethno-education policies and argue for epistemic disobedience—the refusal to comply with the dominance of Western epistemologies (Domínguez, 2021)—to dismantle colonial structures in education.

Theoretical Framework

This critical case study is grounded on the tenets of the CMP (Quijano, 2000), and the indivisible relationship among coloniality of power, coloniality of being, and coloniality of knowledge. These notions help us understand the ongoing effects of coloniality on Indigenous communities' educational experiences globally and in Latin America. Similarly, I draw from the foundational principles of survivance, a concept coined by Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor, to highlight the active resistance Indigenous students engage in in school contexts.

Coloniality of Power

Coloniality outlives colonialism, understood as the political domination of one country over another for economic gain (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Its enduring structures form what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) call the CMP, comprising coloniality of power (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), knowledge (Lander, 2000), and being (Mignolo, 2003), all of which still shape global systems.

CMP (Quijano, 2000) refers to persistent hierarchies rooted in colonialism that continue to structure political, economic, and social life. These hierarchies rely on racialized discourses to justify domination and uphold Eurocentric norms, systematically excluding Indigenous peoples from educational decision-making. Grosfoguel (2007) extends this by pointing to a global division of labor that devalues Indigenous knowledge and reinforces their subaltern status. In education, coloniality of power appears through Western models that marginalize Indigenous pedagogies, languages, and worldviews, reinforcing systems of oppression and epistemic erasure.

Coloniality of Being

Coloniality of being refers to the lived impact of colonization on Indigenous communities—their ways of being, doing, and speaking. It reveals how colonial structures shape identity, culture, language, and social hierarchies (Mignolo, 2020). This form of coloniality involves dehumanization and the imposition of Eurocentric definitions of existence that marginalize Indigenous worldviews (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Such violence against Indigenous ontology is evident in education systems that alienate students through Western models and ideals. This symbolic violence reinforces colonial hierarchies, fostering inferiority within and beyond these communities (Grande, 2015).

In Latin America, the exclusion of Indigenous languages from curricula, the failure to integrate Indigenous cultures in schools (Oliveira & Cardoso, 2023), and the dominance of colonial languages in standardized tests (Gutiérrez & Frías Epinayú, 2024) sustain symbolic violence. Guerrero (2009) calls this an inherited disdain for Native languages. Since language and knowledge

are inseparable (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), this disdain seriously impacts Indigenous education.

Coloniality of Knowledge

Coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2000) refers to the dominance of Western epistemologies over Indigenous ways of knowing. It critiques how Indigenous and other marginalized knowledges are sidelined in favor of Western forms of knowledge in education and society (Lander, 2000; Mignolo, 2003). Walsh (2007) argues this epistemic hierarchy upholds Indigenous intellectual dependency on Western institutions, reinforcing colonial power.

In education, this hierarchy is evident in curricula that privilege Western content while excluding Indigenous knowledge—even in schools meant to preserve it. Subjects like science, art, religion, and environmental studies are typically taught from Eurocentric perspectives (Simpson, 2017). This not only devalues Indigenous knowledge but also limits the potential to enrich education through the coexistence of diverse epistemologies (Kimmerer, 2013). Yet despite these exclusions, Indigenous communities continue to tell stories of resistance, creativity, and presence. This ongoing practice is captured in Vizenor's idea of survivance.

Survivance

Indigenous scholar Vizenor (1999) coined *survivance* to describe the ongoing, active resistance and endurance of Indigenous peoples. It reframes them as present and empowered, rather than defined solely by pain or survival (Vizenor, 2008). Survivance blends resilience and defiance, allowing Indigenous communities to maintain agency, heritage, and autonomy amid colonial pressures. It emphasizes growth, adaptation, and cultural vibrancy. As Vizenor, Tuck, and Yang (2014, p. 108) state, survivance is "an intergenerational connection to an individual and collective sense of presence and resistance . . . made particularly through stories." While acknowledging continued struggles, Vizenor (2009) urges us to center Indigenous stories of joy, culture, and adaptability. He writes, "the nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions . . . and is clearly observable in narrative resistance" (p. 86).

In education, survivance appears in the reclamation of Indigenous pedagogies, language revitalization, and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in curricula (Sabzalian, 2019). It also includes resisting colonial agendas that erase Native presence through harmful stereotypes or invisibility (Sabzalian, 2019; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Survivance ensures Indigenous students and educators do more than survive—they transform schools in ways that affirm their cultures and futures.

Method

This critical case study (Bhattacharya, 2017) sought to generate a comprehensive understanding of how colonial structures influence Wayuu students' language education and the multifaceted shapes of resistance they enact. This critical approach to research was not only suitable but needed since in this study I aimed at critiquing power structures, ideologies, and the socio-political context (Bhattacharya, 2017) that influence education in Indigenous territory.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before collecting data, I followed Wayuu ethical protocols, including prior community consultation and approval from local authorities. Access to the Wayuu territory was possible thanks to Estefanía, my former Wayuunaiki teacher at the university.

Data collection included two student artifacts—an ethnic autobiography aimed to explore students' own depiction of their identity and, to some extent, gain a better understanding of the

so-called "ethnic shame" some school and community members had mentioned during the design stage of this study, and a final project reflection. I also held five semi-structured conversations (Kovach, 2010) with the school principal, one Wayuunaiki teacher, one English-Spanish teacher, and two Knowledge Keepers to gain insight of this research project and current advances in Wayuu children's education.

Two talking circles (Majin-Melenje, 2018), led by Knowledge Keepers in Wayuunaiki and attended by all students and teachers, introduced students to Wayuu cultural practices and language in the context of education. I conducted four English-class observations, analyzed the curriculum, and reviewed the textbook sometimes used in class. Some data was collected in Wayuunaiki and later translated by Estefanía, a member of the Arpushana clan, who also served as community liaison and accountability partner.

Using Mendeley, I analyzed the data following Bhattacharya's (2017) steps: (a) immersing in the data, (b) identifying key segments, (c) coding, and (d) identifying themes, while remaining aware of my positionality. The first analysis was inductive, organizing data by source and creating a living codebook (Reyes et al., 2021). Since much of the data from observations, talking circles, photovoice, and final presentations was in Wayuunaiki, Estefanía translated it.

As each segment was transcribed, we discussed initial ideas and populated the codebook with definitions and verbatim data. The codebook tracked initial and final codes—42 in total—, definitions, and insights from memos and informal conversations. I then created descriptive and analytic labels to group data by theoretical, thematic, or methodological clusters. Estefanía was central to this process, co-constructing meaning. From this analysis, two categories emerged: colonial influence on students' education and Wayuu youth's resistance.

Context and Participants

This critical case study took place in a school located in La Guajira, Colombia; a land primarily inhabited by the Wayuu people. This school follows an ethno-education model and serves grades K-11, providing the nearest middle/high school for students from numerous Wayuu hamlets or rancherías,[1] across La Guajira desert. In this school, all subjects are taught in Spanish, except for one hour of Wayuunaiki and 2 hours of English.

Most Wayuu children arrive in this school strong in their Mother tongue, Wayuunaiki, which for many of them is the only language spoken at home. This was precisely the case of the 34 ninth grade students who participated in this study who, with the exception of one student, all had Wayuunaiki as their first language and spoke it at all times during recess, among themselves during classes, and during Wayuunaiki lessons. The only exceptions were during subjects taught in Spanish, as most teachers did not speak Wayuunaiki. The students, aged 14 to 20,[2] self-identified as Wayuu and belonged to ten of the 26 Wayuu clans (see Table 1).

Other participants included the Wayuunaiki teacher, the Spanish-English teacher, the principal, and two Knowledge Keepers, one appointed to the school and one from the Arpushana clan. Table 2 describes these participants' role in the project.

It is worth noting that the participants' commitment to the sustenance of Wayuunaiki and Wayuu lifeways was directly aligned to whether they spoke this language. For instance, stronger traces of coloniality were present in the case of the school principal who, despite identifying herself as Wayuu, saw schooling as an opportunity to promote linguistic assimilation into Spanish, in the name of progress and social mobility.

1 Rancherías are small, dispersed communities where many Wayuu families live.

2 The schools' lack of support to Wayuunaiki speakers is a cause of many students being held back in their education. It is common to see older students in middle/high school as they often fail the school year.

Table 1 Students' Information

Students' Nickname	Age	Clan	First Language	Students' Nickname	Age	Clan	First Language
Nestor	14	Arpushana	Wayuunaiki	Jean Carlos	17	Ipuana	Wayuunaiki
Eleinis	18	Uriana	Wayuunaiki	Clarisbel	15	Arpushana	Spanish
Rafael	20	Pushaina	Wayuunaiki	Yender	15	Bouriyu	Wayuunaiki
Roger	20	Arpushana	Wayuunaiki	Jhonatan	17	Pushaina	Wayuunaiki
Berenice	15	Arpushana	Wayuunaiki	Elizabeth P.	15	Pushaina	Wayuunaiki
Dana	14	Epieyu	Wayuunaiki	Cilena	16	Uriana	Wayuunaiki
Jair	16	Uriana	Wayuunaiki	Aucinia	15	Urariyu	Wayuunaiki
Sheila	16	Epiayu	Wayuunaiki	Ovidio	18	Urariyu	Wayuunaiki
Hilda	15	Epiayu	Wayuunaiki	Bernando	20	Uriana	Wayuunaiki
Guillermo	18	Epiayu	Wayuunaiki	Yanelis	14	Uriana Urariyu	Wayuunaiki
Nudys	18	Epiayu	Wayuunaiki	Jose David	15	Uriana	Wayuunaiki
Dalvis	18	Epiayu	Wayuunaiki	Saideth	18	Uriana	Wayuunaiki
Lajayaleth	14	Epieyu	Wayuunaiki	Keiner	14	Uriana	Wayuunaiki
Yolimar	15	Epieyu	Wayuunaiki	Amilkar	15	Jusayu	Wayuunaiki
Darwin	18	Epieyu	Wayuunaiki	Cindy	14	Ipuana Arpushana	Wayuunaiki
Elizabeth G.	14	Arpushana	Wayuunaiki	Yulibeth	16	Ipuana	Wayuunaiki
Elizabeth V.	15	Uriana	Wayuunaiki	Edwin	16	Ipuana	Wayuunaiki

Table 2 Second Group of Participants and their Role in the Study

Participant	Role	Self-identification	Speaks Wayuunaiki?
School principal	Supported project logistics	Wayuu	No
Knowledge Keeper appointed to the school from clan Epieyu	Led talking circles and supported school curriculum initiatives. Participated in semi-structured conversation	Wayuu	Yes
Knowledge Keeper from clan Arpushana and local authority	Gave consent to develop the project. Led talking circles	Wayuu	Yes
Wayuunaiki teacher from clan Arpushana	Attended talking circles. Reinforced content learned in talking circles in her Wayuunaiki class. Participated in lesson designs.	Wayuu	Yes
English-Spanish teacher	Attended talking circles - Participated in English class transformation.	Non-Wayuu	No
Estefanía, clan Arpushana	Wayuu leader, translated data collected in Wayuunaiki, contacted Knowledge Keepers, presented consent forms and the research project in Wayuunaiki, translated consent forms from Spanish.	Wayuu	Yes

Findings

> "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?"
> Ray Gwyn Smith as quoted in Anzaldúa (1987)

This section begins with a vignette to provide a glimpse into the youths' schooling experience. Although myriad instances of how coloniality continues to impact this territory and school context emerged during data analysis—lack of running water both within and outside the school , constant strikes, lack of electricity in rancherias, influence of religion—these findings do not focus on these external factors since they are beyond the school control. Instead, I underscore how the coloniality of power and of being work to push Wayuu students to adopt Spanish, showing an impact on their academic success. Next, I describe how coloniality of knowledge shapes their schooling. Finally, I discuss students' overt and subtle resistance to colonial forces.

Vignette N.° 1: Acto Cívico

The purpose of this event is to celebrate the independence of Colombia, and teachers from grades K to 11 have chosen one student from each grade to represent the famous characters that played a part in this independence. The teacher appointed to lead this school event, or *acto civico*—civic act—, as it is referred to by the school community, begins by praying in Spanish. He then begins calling students from each grade and asks them to stand at the front of the patio, to take the microphone, and to state the name of their character and their contributions to the independence of our nation. Dressed in clothes representative of this colonial time, one by one, students do as they are told, and everyone applauds.

Not a single mention to the contributions of Black or Native peoples is made and not a single word is spoken in Wayuunaiki during this school event. To wrap up this *acto civico*, "the best" student from each grade level was called in front of everyone to be celebrated. Clarisbel, the only participant in this study who does not speak Wayuunaiki in her household, and whose command of Spanish is stronger than everyone else's in her class, was nominated as the best 9th grade student. Her sister who is in 7th grade also received this nomination. But there is no coincidence here; in this Wayuu territory, a strong command of Spanish and Western literacies places students above those who cling to Wayuunaiki and refuse to assimilate into Spanish.

Speak Spanish! Wayuunaiki is for Your Home

For Indigenous peoples in Colombia, Spanish has operated as a colonizing tool that advances colonial systems of power, knowledge, and being, even in schools located on Indigenous lands (Mercado Epieyú, 2018). Hence, for middle/high school students enrolled in this ethno-school, class instruction takes place fully in Spanish across grade levels, with the only exception being the Wayuunaiki class students take once a week for fifty minutes. During classes, students are asked to use Spanish to participate, write, give presentations, do class assignments, and ask clarifying questions when they struggle to understand their teachers' explanations while Wayuunaiki has no place in science, math, or in any other subject. This was something students consistently stated in their ethnic autobiography when asked in which situations they spoke Spanish:

> I speak Spanish here at school; I use it to answer some questions from the teachers and also to participate in [school] events. (Elizabeth, ethnic autobiography)
> Yo en mi casa hablo wayuunaiki porque mi abuela es Wayuu y mis hermanos, y en el colegio hablo español (Edwin, ethnic autobiography)
> I speak Spanish at school with the teachers who do not understand Wayuunaiki. (Cilena, ethnic autobiography)

These quotes illustrate the way most students described their school as the main site where Spanish is always privileged and enforced. Further evidence of this privileged position of Spanish vis-a-vis Wayuunaiki, was the school principal's explanation of the school's commitment to enforcing Spanish from elementary school:

> . . . Until second grade, the teacher speaks to them in Wayuunaiki, and some things are spoken to them in Spanish, by third grade, we assign a teacher who only speaks Spanish so that (each student) strengthens this language. (School principal, semi-structured conversation)

With this strategy, children who mostly communicate in Wayuunaiki in their communities and within their households are pushed to develop proficiency in Spanish. Contrary to what happens with Spanish, in this ethno-school, Wayuunaiki is not celebrated. For the school principal and some school coordinators, Wayuunaiki is seldom referred to as an asset that students bring to school. Instead, the school principal takes pride in the proficiency level students develop in Spanish when the entirety of their schooling experience is led by this school as opposed to students from other institutions where Wayuunaiki predominates. In fact, Wayuunaiki seems to be portrayed as a barrier to be overcome by the school as illustrated in the quote below:

> The student from here, at the main school site, who starts from preschool and finishes eleventh grade, speaks Spanish perfectly. Where lies the difficulty? When a student comes from another school . . . then they come here to do tenth and eleventh grade, and it's a clash because they speak very little Spanish and a lot of Wayuunaiki. (School Principal, semi-structured conversation)

This view contrasted with that of the Knowledge Keeper appointed to the school: "Here, I have noticed that there is a girl in school who does not speak Wayuunaiki. That is a difficulty that exists" (Knowledge Keeper, semi-structured conversation).

These opposing views reveal the ideological standing of these two members of the school community, with the caveat that the school principal has the power to shape the school curriculum while the Knowledge Keeper's participation in decision-making is quite restricted; something already documented in other school contexts (Shahjahan et al., 2022). In response to why Wayuunaiki was absent from the *acto civico*, the school principal explained this space was not meant for Wayuunaiki because it was about a national celebration. She, however, explained that students know how to sing the national anthem, and recite the pledge of allegiance and patriotic prayer in Wayuunaiki, as evidence of how this language is represented in this school.

> [Absence of Wayuunaiki] because it was Independence Day, they [the students] know how to sing the national anthem in Wayuunaiki, they know the patriotic prayer in Wayuunaiki, the pledge of allegiance . . . (School Principal, semi-structured conversation)

This indicates that Wayuunaiki finds a space in this school to instill a nation-state identity in Wayuu children and youth rather than to empower them to preserve and maintain their culture and language and to sustain their identity and well-being. When asked about other spaces the school offers, aside from the one hour a week for Wayuunaiki, the principal insisted there are some school events such as "Dia del Idioma" (Language Day) where Wayuunaiki is centered. This coincides with the claim by school teachers that, once a year, students get to see their language take center stage in the school; an indicator of the value and relevance given to this language.

> We hold the Language Day event. In October, [the school] also has the Cultural Day. Sometimes it lasts for a week, other times for three days, depending on whether we have missed many classes . . . if we have missed [many classes, we have], one cultural day. (English-Spanish Teacher, semi-structured conversation)

Shortening the one week in which students and their communities are actively engaged in the sustenance of their culture and language seems to speak to the value the school places on this event and on this commitment to ethno-education. Moreover, as seen in the quotes above, colonial ideologies result in ongoing efforts to suppress Indigenous languages, whether consciously or unconsciously (Kroskrity, 2018). Specifically in this school, students are coerced into leaving their ancestral language outside the school doors and to pursue the

mastery of the colonial language and to be able to navigate schooling and participate in school events.

Teaching in the Language of the Colonizer: A Gatekeeper

Coloniality in education has serious implications for Wayuu students who end up being denied the right to access and demonstrate their learning in the language in which they are more proficient. This dominance of Spanish disregards the fact that most of these Wayuu students, given their command of Wayuunaiki, have an easier time understanding information and explanations provided in this language; a fact that is not unknown by school teachers and administrators.

> Sometimes I am explaining something to them, and sometimes they do not get it, like a class instruction . . . Sometimes they do not grasp an instruction very well, but I think it's because of the vocabulary, the words. So, I tell Clarisbel, "Explain it to them" and she explains it to them in Wayuunaiki . . . (English-Spanish Teacher, semi-structured conversation)

By turning to Clarisbel to clarify class instructions and assignments, the teacher positions her as knowledgeable and reinforces the power of Spanish in this setting. This absence of Wayuunaiki during class instruction does not only affect students in the English class. Back in the *ranchería*, it was not uncommon for students in different grade levels to seek Estefania's help to understand class assignments. This indicates that Wayuu students' education is hindered by teachers not drawing on Wayuunaiki to make content accessible to them. Moreover, students' possibilities to clarify information are further hindered by teachers' lack of knowledge of Wayuunaiki and by their insistence on having students express their ideas in Spanish: "because they (teachers) don't understand Wayuunaiki, they tell us to speak Spanish, that Wayuunaiki is for our home." (Elizabeth, ethnic autobiography).

This pressure to learn Spanish was also acknowledged by the Knowledge Keeper appointed to the school and was further echoed by another Knowledge Keeper during a talking circle.

> That's what's happening here [in this school] . . . some people say it's better to learn Spanish than our language, so [students] leave their own language behind, and it's a serious difficulty because it's about [our] identity. (Knowledge Keeper Alfredo, Semi-structured Conversation)

> I see what people in Aremasahin do, everyone is Wayuu in Aremasahin, but what do they do? They discard our knowledge, displace our knowledge because of arijunas[3], because of Spanish, they're giving more relevance to Spanish than to our own [language-knowledge].[4] (Knowledge Keeper, talking circle)

These Knowledge Keepers agreed on the role of schooling in the displacement of Wayuunaiki due to colonial language ideologies that positioned Spanish above their ancestral language. Whether teachers and school administrators are aware of the harm this dominance of Spanish is causing to students is unknown. As a result, by erasing Wayuunaiki from their schooling experience, Wayuu children and youth find themselves marginalized in the classrooms in their own territory. On top of this, teachers and school administrators alike stated students often feel embarrassed to speak in Spanish; mispronouncing words or using incorrect sentence structures is often met with laughter by their peers. In the following quotes, both the Wayuunaiki teacher and the school principal acknowledge students' struggles to communicate in Spanish:

> but there are some [students] who feel ashamed to speak Spanish because they speak it tangled, they speak it poorly, they are laughed at, and that's what happens. (semi-structured conversation, Wayuunaiki teacher)
> the transition from Wayuunaiki to Spanish is not easy for them, so oftentimes they refrain from expressing some words because they feel ashamed, . . . they don't feel well [speaking in Spanish]. (Semi-structured conversion, school principal)

3 *Arijuna* is the word Wayuu people use to refer to non-Indigenous peoples.

4 Quotes typed in blue font indicate data was collected in Wayuunaiki.

A closer look at these two quotes makes apparent the colonial whirl schooling created for these Wayuu youth who refuse to abandon Wayuunaiki and adopt Spanish. On the one hand, instruction in Spanish prevents them from fully engaging in classes and, on the other hand, their attempts to participate in Spanish are met with mockery by their peers. This colonial whirl has implications for students who refrain from communicating at all during classes, thus resulting in class participation often dominated by the same students who, unsurprisingly, have a stronger command of Spanish as students consistently described:

> Well, I don't speak Spanish much. I always speak in Wayuunaiki. (Jhonatan, ethnic autobiography)
> I am quiet, others answer, It is the same two or three who always answer. The ones who always answer are those who speak Spanish, and very rarely those who speak Wayuunaiki. (Tamara, semi-structured conversation)

The English teacher and the school principal also referred to this limited class participation but relied on narratives that portrayed students as shy to account for their silence. That is, this silence was not explicitly attributed to the fact that students were not allowed to showcase their knowledge in Wayuunaiki, the language that most of them feel more confident speaking, and that allows them to better understand class instruction, as stated by students during one of the talking circles: "They [students] generally remain silent, the same students always participate . . . they are very shy, they do not participate very often" (Spanish-English teacher, semi-structured conversation).

By placing this absence of participation on the students' perceived shyness, the school does little to address the root of this imbalance in class participation and students' performance. Evidently, as Spanish displaces Wayuunaiki, this relentless erasure and marginalization of Indigenous languages is not deterred by the mere existence of language policies (McCarty & Coronel-Molina, 2017). To explain this dominance of Spanish, the school principal states that Indigenous students will have a higher chance of succeeding in higher education if schools prepare them to face an academic world that takes place in Spanish in its entirety. "And that—knowing Wayuunaiki—becomes a difficulty for them when they go to college, because at the university, no one will explain things to them in Wayuunaiki, but in Spanish" (School principal, semi-structured conversation).

In addition to colonial ideologies that position Spanish as the language of success, this quote indicates that aiming to prepare students to access higher education provides schools with arguments to displace Indigenous languages. That is, higher education becomes yet another colonial system in place to ensure Indigenous students are assimilated into the colonial language under the promise to access the possibilities of social mobility through higher education (Gutiérrez & Frías Epinayú, 2024).

For the Wayuunaiki teacher, this ideological terrain creates some tension around the sustenance of Wayuunaiki and the need to develop students' proficiency in Spanish: "We always have to, I mean, I say we should work with both languages. We have to strengthen both languages, but above all our own, our mother tongue" (Wayuunaiki teacher, semi-structured conversation).

The conflicting ambiguity surfacing in this quote stems from the Wayuunaiki teacher's commitment to preserving this ancestral language in a context where there is little room for it, as it engages in an asymmetrical relationship of power (Mignolo, 2000) with Spanish. Hence, for these Indigenous students, their bilingualism—Wayuunaiki-Spanish—is an embodiment of this asymmetry. As a result, Wayuu students see Wayuunaiki vanish in a school context that prevents them from speaking their language. Language, however, is not the only means by which coloniality surfaces in the education of Indigenous students. Informed by neoliberal agendas in education, and discourses of globalization, language and education policies, armed with standardized testing,

pressure Indigenous students into colonial models of education, as will be described in the next lines.

Furthering the Coloniality of Knowledge

There are multiple ways in which coloniality of knowledge operates and shapes the education of Indigenous Wayuu students. In this school, mostly Western content and literacies were considered in the curriculum for middle and high school students. As a result, Indigenous epistemologies are displaced from the curriculum as stated by the Wayuunaiki teacher:

> Ma'am, what I am explaining to the children about hunting, how we Wayuu hunt, is gradually being lost over time in today's world. It's not being applied because perhaps it's not taught, reinforced, or strengthened in educational institutions. (Wayuunaiki teacher, Talking Circle)

Here the Wayuunaiki teacher mentions how little by little some cultural practices such as hunting have been fading from the Wayuu territory while outlining how the absence of this content from the school curriculum is a contributing factor to this fading. This quote also signals a breach between what the ethno-education policy mandates and how schools execute such mandates. During one of the talking circles, an Elder brought up this displacement of Wayuu knowledges and ways of knowing from the school curriculum:

> . . . what happens is that knowledge is displaced, forgotten, lost . . . so that is what happens with [The school principal]. The same thing, she has to turn to books to learn about gardening, and she is Wayuu. So what she does is displace the knowledge, discard the knowledge, the Wayuu . . . they already know it from their heart . . . those [Wayuu] knowledges are preserved, let's say, in our bodies, passed down from generation to generation. (Knowledge Keeper, Talking Circle)

This quote exemplifies a persistent gap between policies intended to preserve Indigenous knowledges and the school practices taking place in schools intended to serve Indigenous children and youth. In this regard, the school principal explained they are committed to educating global citizens:

> Well, we try to ensure that the student has knowledge in all areas, that they have a global understanding, so that if they go to other countries, when they become professionals, they go with prior knowledge that will help them succeed. (School principal, Semi-structured conversation)

Looking at this quote, discourses of globalization and Eurocentric ideals seem to be informing the principal's definition of what counts as success. This statement also disregards the fact that most students never leave their territory and a vast number never make it to college on account of their performance on entrance examinations fully implemented in Spanish with a heavy reliance on writing. During our conversation, Wayuu knowledges did not surface as something that added value to the education of the student population, regardless of their ethnicity. It was as if somehow, Western and Wayuu knowledges belonged to different realms in which a clear, normalized power relation was established. The principal seemed to respond to a colonial episteme in which Wayuu students needed to fit if they wanted to access a better, globalized, colonial world.

> What is the issue with the Wayuu normative, our customs and traditions were not applied here. They teach only one culture, that is, the Western one, learning to read, learning all Western things. (Knowledge Keeper, semi-structured conversation)

In this quote, the knowledge keeper appointed to the school refers to an obedient replication of colonial systems which, even when intended to advance equity among Indigenous students, has harmful consequences for the sustenance of Indigenous peoples and their epistemologies. Looking at the content prioritized in the curriculum, the dominance of Western academic literacies is overwhelming. It is no wonder then that distinctions as the best student were not awarded to students whose Wayuunaiki and oral traditions were stronger. Despite these unrelenting messages that forcefully invite Wayuu students to assimilate into Spanish and to displace their ways of knowing, students' enactments of resistance abound, as will be described in the following section.

Enacting Resistance: Indigenous Pride

After analyzing students' responses to the questions posed in the ethnic autobiography, findings indicated that, contrary to what adults stated during the initial talking circle, there was overwhelming evidence of students' pride in their Wayuu identity.

> I feel proud to be Wayuu because it is one of the cultures that has not disappeared in Colombia (Eleinis)
> Oh well, it's an honor, I feel proud to belong to a culture that everyone would like to be a part of. I like it because we have really cool traditions. I love our stories, in fact, everything related to the Wayuu culture. (Berenice)
> The Wayuu woman represents the clan. I mean, I'm Hilda from the Epiayu clan, and I feel very proud of who I am. (Hilda)

I could go on and on providing evidence of students' pride in their identity, as reflected in their ethnic autobiography, but their pride was visible in other subtle yet subversive ways. For instance, students' reclamation of their Wayuu identity surfaced as some male-identifying students often mixed their school uniform with their traditional *waireña*; a colorful knitted type of sandal. A picture taken during the talking circle held at a community garden, offers evidence of the prevalence of *waireña* for the Wayuu people and of some students' defiance of the school uniform policy by wearing them to school (see Figure 1).

For female-identifying students, this defiance was harder as their attempt to wear their mantas—traditional Wayuu garment—to school could result in a denial of entrance; wearing their mantas was prohibited according to the school manual. In fact, female students who failed to comply with uniform policies would often have to beg to be allowed to enter the school when they arrived in the morning. This did not prevent some of them from trying as seen in the picture below (Figure 2), taken during the talking circle held with the pütchipü'ü, or palabrero:[5]

5 A *pütchipü'ü*, or *palabrero*, exercises the traditional administration of justice for the Wayuu people. This justice system was recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010.

Figure 1 Knowledge Keeper and Students in the Community Garden

Figure 2. Students Attending a Talking Circle with the Pütchipü'ü

It is worth noting that, for most Wayuu people, across all ages, *waireña*, hats, and *mantas* are part of their daily lives. This is not something they wear on special occasions or to attend cultural events; this regalia is part and parcel of the Wayuu culture. Thus, being Wayuu, for a number of students, meant wearing their regalia: "For me, [being Wayuu] it's when we as Wayuu dress in our traditional attire, eat our traditional foods, and celebrate our ancestral origin" (Jair, ethnic autobiography).

Additional evidence of the significance of their regalia for Wayuu students was found in the final project takeaways in which a number of students proposed advising this school to allow them to wear it. Based on this evidence, the fact that students still find ways to defy their school uniforms becomes a clear sign of their resistance to this schooling rule:

> The advice I would give to the institution is to talk about the Wayuu culture so that it doesn't get lost. To keep it alive, we should wear our Wayuu regalia, speak our language, and eat the foods of our ancestors. (Dana, Project Takeaways)

According to the Wayuunaiki teacher, this uniform policy has been introduced and enforced in recent years. The school went from having one day a week in which students could wear their traditional regalia to school, to once a year during the cultural day celebration, to not being allowed at all.

> . . . I mean, there used to be a day that was the Wayuu culture day, they had to come here wearing their traditional regalia, but now, they, the teacher took it away, according to the school rules, [before] the children had to come on Thursdays wearing their traditional attire and the girls with their *mantas*. (Semi-structured conversation, Wayuunaiki teacher)

Wayuu students' desire to hang on to this important part of their identity was evident as female-identifying students would always ask me to get permission from the principal to wear their *mantas*, at least on the days we held community gatherings. The significance of this was also clear when Clarisbel —whose apparent detachment from the Wayuu culture surfaced in her refusal to eat the traditional food served during gatherings and in her reference to Wayuu culture as "la cultura" [culture] as opposed to "nuestra cultura" [our culture]—suggested making *mantas* as an integral component of community gatherings. In her words, wearing her *manta* would allow her to feel more connected to her Wayuu identity: "To be honest, we could wear *mantas* for every meeting we have and thus feel, well, I could feel more identified" (Clarisbel, project takeaways).

As can be seen, the school's adoption and enforcement of uniform policies contribute to distancing students from an important part of their identity. This has repercussions for Wayuu people, as they eventually stop incorporating their regalia into their daily life, especially upon entering higher education (Bonilla-Sanchez et al., 2021). This finding illustrates that against all of the colonial systems in place to suppress Indigeneity, resistance within Indigenous communities is strong. Further evidence of this resistance is students' refusal to abandon Wayuunaiki within the school walls as I will describe next.

Refusal to Abandon Wayuunaiki

This disruption of the school uniform policy was not the only way in which students' resistance to coloniality was evident. While coloniality of being and knowledge presents them with what seems inescapable forces to assimilate into Spanish and Western ways of being, Wayuu students continue to privilege Wayuunaiki in their daily interactions. Some of these interactions are with their families who only communicate in Wayuunaiki and some are with their friends and other community members who, despite being able to communicate in Spanish, choose Wayuunaiki over and over again.

During school hours, Wayuunaiki predominates in students' conversations with one another—during class time, at recess, and in every moment of downtime at school. This finding is particularly significant when considering that, for all students—even

those whose command of Wayuunaiki was weaker than their Spanish—being Wayuu is closely tied to speaking Wayuunaiki: "I speak Spanish when non-Wayuu people don't understand the Wayuunaiki language, but I prefer to use the Wayuu language because it represents me as the Wayuu that I am" (Berenice, ethnic autobiography).

Students' predilection for Wayuunaiki is a form of resistance against the imposition of Spanish in their education. This resistance was accompanied by students' critical position vis-a-vis Wayuu people who, being Wayuu and being able to communicate in Wayuunaiki, chose to speak Spanish. As demonstrated in the quotes below, privileging Spanish in their daily interactions was seen as a sign of disrespect to their ancestral language: "I speak Spanish at school, in Riohacha, and Maicao, but I always respect my language. There are Wayuu people that I have seen everywhere, who are Wayuu, who speak a lot of Spanish, and don't respect the Wayuu language" (Edwin, ethnic autobiography).

This statement suggests that the student uses Spanish only when navigating places where it is required, such as nearby cities or at school. Otherwise, Wayuunaiki is his language of choice, spoken out of respect for his home language. This preference for Wayuunaiki was consistent among students; even when recounting experiences of discrimination, they consistently expressed their commitment to speaking Wayuunaiki, as seen in this statement by Edwin: "some [Wayuu] who also aspire greatly to being *Arijuna*, who discriminate their own language, who don't want to speak Wayuunaiki" (Edwin, ethnic autobiography).

Similarly, Cilena expresses her pride and fierce defense of Wayuunaiki when she was discriminated against in a previous school, which was attended mainly by non-Wayuu people:

> I was speaking my language in the classroom, and a classmate said things to me about my language: that it was very ugly, that it was an ugly language to speak. Well, I told her that since I am Wayuu and belong to the Wayuu people, I speak my language whenever I want, I'm not ashamed. (Cilena, ethnic autobiography)

These quotes exemplify stories or survivance and are only a few instances of the vast accounts of resistance and pride these Wayuu students demonstrated as they retain and uplift their language. This finding takes significant relevance and offers hope amidst the plethora of studies documenting the rapid decrease and extinction of Indigenous languages worldwide. Taken together, these findings are both place-based and global, as they speak to the colonial realities Native children and youth continue to face, while also shapeshifting schools through their presence and resistance.

Discussion

These findings show how the CMP permeates a Wayuu school, shaping Wayuu youths' educational experiences. They reveal how colonial education remains a tool of domination, even within Indigenous territories. Despite broader decolonizing efforts across society to confront racial, ethnic, and linguistic hierarchies rooted in European modernity (Macedo, 2019), Indigenous peoples still face pressure to assimilate into dominant languages deemed necessary for success. Education, founded on colonial ideologies, remains a violent, ongoing process of colonization (Cote-Meek, 2014).

As Barillas-Chon (2019) explains, "coloniality of power" seeks to enforce language uniformity while erasing Indigenous languages and identities (p. 18). For the Wayuu, this erasure pervades every subject and classroom. Both coloniality of power (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and coloniality of being (Mignolo, 2003) operate within these ethnoschools. Displacing ancestral languages affects Indigenous identity (Wyman et al., 2014) and community continuity. While some educators may not recognize their colonial assumptions (Kroskrity, 2018), others simply reinforce dominant norms by favoring Spanish as the "standard" language,

promoted through education and the media. Assigning market value to Spanish pressures Wayuu students to assimilate, framing their language as a barrier to academic success. As Mignolo (2000) states, "the asymmetry of languages is...a question of power" (p. 231).

Yet, these colonial forces often meet resistance. Sabzalian (2019) notes that survivance, like colonialism, appears in both "epic and everyday" forms (p. xv). For Wayuu youth, resistance emerged when they defied uniform policies by wearing their *waireñas* and *mantas*, reclaiming cultural identity in a system that seeks to suppress it. Such acts are vital, given the documented loss of Indigenous identity in Colombia (Bonilla Sanchez et al., 2021; Usma et al., 2018). These expressions of survivance reflect the global South as a site of agency and resistance, not passive victimhood (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). As McCarty (1998) states, speaking ancestral languages in colonial contexts is an act of resistance. For these Wayuu students, speaking Wayuunaiki in Spanish-dominant spaces is a bold assertion of identity.

The stories of resistance and survival, or survivance (Vizenor, 2008), described in this section, are not unique to the Wayuu people. Native students globally continue to navigate colonial school settings (Sabzalian, 2019), fighting to retain their cultural and linguistic identities. But while many Indigenous students manage to resist and survive, survivance is not enough, further support is needed to ensure their languages and epistemologies thrive amidst this colonial society.

Conclusion

Describing the multiple ways in which coloniality makes its way into the education of Indigenous students and in their communities is nothing new. Globally, Indigenous students continue to attend schools that are predominantly staffed by non-Indigenous teachers who often lack adequate training in Indigenous education (Lees, 2016). Similarly, there is nothing new in naming the fact that schools are sites of struggle for Indigenous students. In fact, "western schooling systems have long excluded Indigenous and other minoritized histories, languages, and knowledge systems". (Martinez et al., 2018, p. 333). As a result, schools advance colonial Eurocentric agendas in education that celebrate Western values, religions, languages, and ways of being and doing (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). But again, none of this is new.

The point here is that Ethno-education policies and bylaws in Colombia, and in other countries in the Global South, purport to deter this situation from happening, by giving Indigenous peoples the freedom to direct their education. But freedom without support can barely be called freedom. Granting Indigenous peoples the right and freedom to exercise their educational sovereignty while sanctioning national education and language policies that fail to account for Indigenous languages and ways of knowing creates unbalanced conditions for Indigenous peoples. This imbalance poses barriers for children and youth to thrive in schooling systems where they are measured through standardized tests that were not designed with Indigenous peoples in mind (Bishop et al., 2007).

Thus, the mere creation of ethno-education policies does not suffice to ensure the curriculum affirms Indigenous students' cultural and linguistic identities. Lack of funding, few opportunities for teacher training, governmental neglect, colonial language ideologies, among other contextual factors converge to ensure Indigenous students are not provided with the means to thrive in schools (López, 2020). For now, while these changes take place, teachers and school administrators need to continue to enact epistemic disobedience (Domínguez, 2021) to join forces with Wayuu students and teachers who refuse to give up Wayuunaiki and their Wayuu culture and identity.

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