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Title: Huaytalla

When I was six years old, a white kid approached me and told me "sos fea porque sos negra" ("you are ugly because you are black"). It's important to note that Argentinians usually call indigenous people "black" because they believe "our minds are black". He introduced racism into my life, or at least, that was the first time I recognized racism. Hearing those words changed me.

My home growing up was full of elements from the Peruvian Andes. My mother was born in Chincheros, a small town in the middle of the mountains, home to the Chanka people. Her parents asked her to move to Buenos Aires in order to go to college and have a better life as they lived in poverty and in the middle of a military conflict between terrorist groups and the Peruvian state.

Moving was hard for her. She missed her home, her family, the mountains, the animals. She always tried to bring her hometown to Buenos Aires by listening to huaynos, wearing and decorating the house with llicllas and their colorful patterns, by remembering words in quechua and looking for photos of "la sierra peruana." She worked hard to bring her brothers and sisters to Argentina, so they would be able to go to university too. She married a Peruvian man and I was born a year later. My family fought to keep their traditions alive. However, it wasn't easy.

Since that incident in kindergarten, other classmates started to make fun of me. They called me "india sucia" for wearing braids; they said the llicllas and their patterns looked awful on me because of my brown skin; they mocked me every time I said a word in quechua. They repeated what their parents taught them basically: that peruvians and their culture are primitive, ugly and bad. My mom also heard those comments coming from other parents, but she never stopped loving her culture. Sadly, for me that wasn't the case.

I grew up hating everything regarding my ethnicity: I wanted to be white, European descendant, to speak French and English. I swore I would never go to my mother's hometown because it was "dirty and I belonged to the city". I hated listening to huaynos or wearing braids and bright colors. They told me to hate my ancestry, and I yielded.

When I became more conscious about social issues and systemic racism I started to realize something was wrong, but I wasn't able to unravel my thoughts. When I was seventeen years old, I started wearing braids after almost a decade of denial. I liked them. I felt good using them. My mom told me I looked like my grandmother when she was a teenager. I felt warm inside, but I wasn't close enough yet.

In April 2018, my father passed away. He told my mother that he wanted his ashes to be thrown on the Pacific Ocean by the coast of Miraflores in Lima, where he grew up. We wanted to fulfill his wish and we've saved enough money to travel for a few days, so we booked a flight. That's when my mother told me: "Sorry honey, but I can't go to Peru and not

visit Chincheros. I need to visit my home." I was hesitant at first, but we were going through hard times and I knew going to Chincheros was going to bring her some joy.

We stayed in my grandfather's house and my mom dedicated almost everyday to show me all of her hometown. On our first day, we walked around some mountains and visited a forest of eucalypti where I painted a solar system in one of the trees. I really liked the place, it was calm and peaceful. It's one of those places when you can feel a connection to everything around you. It's like a sense of belonging, but it's hard to explain. After that, we visited my grandfather's crops. He had avocado, orange, tangerine, lemon and peach trees. Some full of flowers, others of fruits. However, something I will always remember about that day is when we sit down with my mother to watch the night sky. The stars were so bright, the clouds of dust of the Milky Way's arm were covering the sky, and the full moon was the final piece of that marvelous image of the cosmos. When I was way younger, my mom used to tell me stories about the stars, how insignificant yet curious she felt while watching it. That's how it feels, and it's beautiful.

Another day, we went to my grandmother's house near the river, where we found a big avocado tree that we climbed and sat on while my mother told me about her childhood. Then, we went down to the river. We had a purple lliclla with us to sit. It was similar to the lliclla my grandmother would give me a year later. "El pampas" is the river that brings life to everything in the Apurimac region. Activists there were murdered for defending the river, the land, the animals, the plants and the small towns from polluting companies. "El río es vida" everyone repeated.

Coming back home after that trip changed me. I hated a culture I refused to know anything about, and that hatred was imposed. I started to embrace my roots slowly, but the more I found out about my ancestry the more excited I was to keep learning. Two years later, I became an indigenous' rights activist, I talk with my community constantly, they are proud of my work. I started to learn quechua and my mother is by my side on that path, revisiting her childhood. I call myself Nia Huaytalla, using the quechua last name of my great-grandfather who fought against colonialism when he was young. I needed to get close to understand my ancestors. For five hundred years my people have been oppressed. They want us to hate ourselves, to erase that legacy, but won't yield this time.