THOUGHTS ON LATINO MORMONS, THEIR AFTERLIFE, AND THE NEED FOR A NEW HISTORICAL PARADIGM FOR SAINTS OF COLOR

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The following thoughts come from my experience as a faithful and orthodox Latter-day Saint, as a Mormon bishop, as a critic of some aspects of institutionalized Mormonism, and as an activist and scholar of faith navigating what is and has been for most of my life a complicated environment where racial/ethnic issues are ever present but rarely discussed in ways that bring closure. My particular scholarship and activism on behalf of Mexicans and Latinos is encapsulated within this setting and I admit that I have not been freed from the complication that it brings to my faith except for those moments when I immerse myself in those Latino Mormon spaces that are my Spanish-language barrios (wards).[1]

These thoughts somewhat expanded formed the foundation of a presentation that I gave at Utah Valley University's conference on "Multicultural Mormonism" sponsored by the Religious Studies program on March 29–30, 2017.

1. When I use the term "Latino" I refer to people from Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean who have made their home in the United States, though at times what I say is also applicable to people of those countries who do not make it here. These concepts and assumptions come from my understanding of scholarship on Latinos and over many years of congregating and worshiping with them. I also use the term "Saints of color" to refer to all peoples of color within Mormonism, though my thoughts are more applicable to those peoples who have at one time or another been referred to as "Lamanites": Native Americans, Latinos of indigenous origin, Polynesians,

Even there, though, I am reminded that, along with my people and other Saints of color, I am part of a larger theologically white whole.[2] Here, larger implies influence, dominance, and leadership rather than size.

For the most part, however, it comes with the caveat that the white Church loves me—us—and most of us nonwhites have reciprocated, loving this Church, finding tranquility here, creating eternal friendships within, and often receiving answers to our heartfelt prayers regardless of where we fit in the body of Christ.

I fully recognize that mine are not the feelings of everyone who studies Mormonism, but unless we understand and allow for that fundamental notion of relationship between the Church and those of color, we cannot fully understand Mormonism and why it continues to grow among Latinos and other Saints of color.

I would not have overcome my inferiority complex, lack of educational direction, and social awkwardness without the fellowship of

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and other islanders. Some non-indigenous origin Latin American Saints have also socially constructed themselves into either "Latino" or "Lamanite" and thus can lay claim to similar experiences. Black Latino Saints sometimes also see themselves more Latino than black, but that is a complicated issue not within the purviews of this essay. Other Saints of color—Asian, African, African American, and Middle Eastern people, etc.—might find that some ideas and concepts here fit their circumstances within the Church, but they are unlikely to truly speak to their experiences.

2. By a "white church" I mean that the institution itself was established on principles and encased within structures that favored the founding population group and its descendants. Because the founding members of the Church were white Americans, mostly semi-literate and unsophisticated due to the limits of their economic circumstances, they spoke of a gospel with unsophisticated but defined social, cultural, and racial boundaries. As more and more of these people converted, they brought their lived experiences and biases and transformed them into a cultural spirituality with large ambitions but little understanding of the world around them beyond the part that impacted their lives. Mormonism brought energy, creativity, communal yearnings, and spiritual awakening to its converts, but did so within contexts and structures they could understand, and Americans understood very little beyond their daily experience.

other Mormons: brown and white, male and female, with authority or without, fully active or not so much. In the Church, I learned public speaking, practiced sports, participated in theater and scouting, acquired administrative skills, and developed a love of learning both secular and spiritual material. I owe my writing and my scholarship to the early inquisitiveness that I acquired in studying Mormon scripture.

More important, the Church taught me about compassion, service, forgiveness, and, while I often struggle to attain it, humility. As a young child in poverty—and most assuredly before my personal conversion, one without a future—the Church changed the direction of my life as it did for my brother and several friends who are still within the Mormon fold. Coming from a family that fought against the alienation that comes to immigrant families torn from their country, thrust into the labor market of long days with little pay and pigeonholed in poor, service-less ethnic neighborhoods, the Church seemed an oasis to the flawed but morality-yearning García clan of four.

At the same time, I came to recognize, though not fully understand, our theology as one mired in complications and contradictions—influenced by cultural norms, racial differences, national identities, political views, and more and more economic disparities. Each of these contribute in different ways to modern Mormon theology, and though we often try hard to interpret them so as to make them work for all, we Latinos find some success only by keeping or trying to keep these external factors outside the narrative of the "true church."

LDS views of God's work became confined by American racialism, laws, and middle-class social values. The daily spiritual experience, which is often complicated and messy, became framed as one that is ordinary, consistent with a particular status quo, pigeonholed in one culture and under one political umbrella, and kept away from those experiences not neatly embraced by American ideals of order, propriety, and good old free enterprise. Whether we like to admit it or not, however, fewer and fewer Mormons of all stripes fully believe this version

of Mormonism anymore, and every new history book on Mormonism challenges its underlying cultural whiteness; yet it remains entrenched in our institutional memory, in our manuals, sometimes in our conference talks, and too often in the deep chambers of our minds and hearts, "whitening" away our institutional history from the reality of people's experiences—particularly those of color and the poor.

Because we have no creeds and because our theology often derives from reaction—sometimes prophetic and at other times not—to what our leaders perceive around them, Latter-day Saints find our beliefs sometimes grow out of varied tunnels of perception within the culture, philosophy, and lived experience of particular leaders. And because our leaders, in the modern era at least, find comfort in solidarity and in not debating publicly even when there is disagreement, many contradictions are allowed to coexist, particularly those that deal with Latinos and other Saints of color. While some members are able to unravel these illogicalities, most of the membership simply believes what is taught at the given moment by a particular leader, so as to serve and worship in peace.

I came to see these illogicalities quite clearly as I grew up, but initially I believed in the Church so passionately that they did not matter. I often argued with my senior home teaching companion, adamantly declaring that the prophet was perfect and so were most of the apostles. I believed Church leaders were at a stage of spirituality way beyond my own and that of those around me. Because the "prophet and the Brethren" were far away in some place called "Utah" and everyone testified to all that they said, it was hard for me not to think of them as living in a higher plane of existence.

I grew up, however, in the poor Mexican west side of town, and soon enough I learned about those tall, white-skinned, blue-eyed individuals who lived outside the confines of our barrio. We knew that when they came to our beloved West Side they came to lead, instruct, enforce, and to judge. I was too young then to understand, but our visiting stake

authorities also came with the same intent, even if they preempted their actions with praise for our "spirituality" and our "humility" along with hardy handshakes. Most were sincere and their teachings enlarged my faith and strengthened my fidelity to the Mormon gospel, though the speakers were often oblivious or indifferent to the asymmetric relationship between us.

Initially, I was not fully conscious of the top-down, white-to-brown dichotomy in the Church. We knew that not all our white brothers and sisters felt comfortable with us, but we tended to see the problem as that of the rank-and-file white members—those, we thought, who had not matured spiritually—and not our leaders.

That changed when I was seventeen or eighteen as I became aware of the racial and ethnic inconsistencies within some Mormon practices and of the lack of empathy of some of our white brothers and sisters toward my people. Many incidents cast doubt on the kind of relationship that I thought I had with traditional Mormonism, but two stand out as I write this.

The first occurred during the first municipal election that I can remember. The barrios of San Antonio, Texas were thrilled by the fact that we *finally* had a Mexican-American candidate not picked by any Anglo or white political group, and who spoke to our needs in the barrio. Needless to say, many of my Spanish-language ward members were also excited about the possibilities—that is, until we found out he was running against our stake president who had been in the city council for years. This troubled me and a number of our members and led to hallway discussions, sincere but sometimes pointed debates, and much self-reflection. Our hearts said we should vote for President Bremer, but our reason argued that we had voted for too many politicians like him before. While a nice and often kind man, as a politician he offered little difference from those who had governed us for so many years. Their platform had always been about honesty, business-friendly government, and a balanced budget, which we often

interpreted as the way they kept us in line, in an asymmetric relationship that always favored them and offered us only nickel-and-dime services and grudgingly slow upward mobility.[3]

Pete Torres, a young lawyer who grew up in our barrio, on the other hand, spoke about filling our potholes, providing storm drains and stop signs, and finding federal grants to fix much of the decaying housing in our area. He understood our concerns about police brutality and insensitivity in city hall. He also spoke to us in our language, both linguistically and culturally. He inspired us to imagine a better and more inclusive San Antonio, something that white politicians always spoke about being a reality in the Alamo City, but which we knew to be false.

As the campaign wore on, I reflected on the fact that, though I loved the man who shook our hands and smiled at us in church, I had little in common with him outside the Church. He was one of the "good gringos," but he was still more like them than us and he seemed quite happy and comfortable with the prejudiced and indifferent society that surrounded us outside our barrio boundaries. He appeared oblivious to our needs and very soon some of his words on Sundays rang hollow, at least they did to me, because they lacked a sincere love for the brown Saints. Shortly after the election, my home teaching companion and I ran into him at the stake center. He asked my companion if he had voted. Nervously, Roberto responded that he had forgotten and the president walked away shaking his head. My companion leaned over to me and said, "I couldn't tell him I voted for Pete," who had won.

The second incident occurred about a year later, when a new stake president had been called. I remember that it was a Saturday morning and my priest advisor and I had gone to the stake president's house to buy Church books, the only place you could get them outside of Utah in those days. We were there only a short time, attended by the all-smiles

3. Many of the following incidents are recorded in my memoir *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith* (Madison, Wis.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015).

and attentive wife of the stake president, when another white member came to look for books. I'm not sure how the conversation turned to the explosive issue of police brutality—or, in their words, law enforcement.

Only a few days earlier a young Mexican-American boy of about twelve years had entered one of the rich homes in the east side of town. The police arrived, the frightened boy ran, and one of the police officers fired six shots into his back. The death caused an uproar in the west side of San Antonio because police shootings were all too common, and we had learned at a young age to fear law enforcement. In the east side, where the police served as a line of defense to white San Antonio, the residents felt more secure that the police had responded quickly and had "taken care of" the perpetrator of the crime.

It was hard for my advisor and me not to listen, and when I heard them express their approval of the police officer's action, I stepped forward, outside my Latino zone and beyond the safe space of Mormon conversation, to speak to two white people about a social issue. "How can you justify the officer's actions?" I asked both, but my eyes were firmly fixed on the stake president's wife, whom I expected to be the adult Mormon in the backyard. Stunned, the man took a step back, but the president's wife looked me straight in the eyes and with a voice that barely contained her anger, she said, "I would have done the same thing if he had entered my home."

"But he was only a child," I managed to say as my advisor literally dragged me out of the stake president's backyard. All the way home, the man who would later be my bishop and a Church patriarch remained silent, fully aware, I'm guessing, that he had again for the umpteenth time in his life been intimidated by a white person, even one without any priesthood authority. Perhaps he was simply angry that I had crossed boundaries and embarrassed him, or worse, maybe he agreed with her as a law-abiding Mormon. I hope, though, it was the first. Many years later I would write in my memoir:

> Separated by geographic distance, we were normally spared the social interactions with our white brothers and sisters that helped us avoid situations like those at the stake president's house. In our constructed religious and spiritual sphere, we were all fellow saints with the common goal to serve the church and our fellow beings. There wasn't supposed to be any differences between us when it came to the faith, but incidents like those as well as others served to remind us that the sons and daughters of Ephraim were to rule over those of us from Manassas.[4]

Both incidents revealed a disconnect between our white brothers/sisters and us. What could we have said to the stake president/city councilman to convince him that poverty, segregation, and discrimination were killing our community? How could I explain to the next president's wife that we Mexicans were not a threat to her, and that our lives mattered more than her property? If worshipping and congregating periodically with us, or Book of Mormon promises, had not already convinced them of our spiritual siblinghood and commitment to the gospel, what could our inarticulate words do?

Many similar incidents occurred when I went into the army, college, and thereafter, and each has served to reaffirm that between us, spiritual siblinghood seemed only to appear in our constructed religious space. Except for once while in college, those encounters did not shake my faith, but they did contextualize my Mormonism away from an unwavering institutional loyalty to a more nuanced love for the gospel. I continued to listen to the counsel of the Brethren, but it made me aware that I needed to judge Church leaders' policies and actions within the context of human experience and circumstances.

I also became aware that Mormonism has a fundamentally white and American interpretation of religion and the eternal. I once heard that apostle Mark E. Petersen said the American flag would fly in heaven and that we would all speak English in our celestial home.[5] Whether he

4. García, *Chicano While Mormon,* 65.

5. This was told to me by a home teaching companion I had as a young man.

did or not, it would not be out of character. His 1954 talk at Brigham Young University was one of the most insensitive official sermons on the "black problem" given by a presiding Church authority. He implied that blacks only wanted equality so they could have sexual relationships with white women.[6] He also taught the notion that those in the tribe of Ephraim would rule over those of Manassas.[7] The fact that now some Saints of color are being assigned to the tribe of Ephraim seems to—in a backdoor sort of way—give credence to the notion that Saints of color, particularly Latino Saints, are becoming "white and delightsome" through obedience.[8]

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6. See Mark E. Petersen's talk to a convention of teachers of education at Brigham Young University, titled "Race Problems—As they Affect the Church," August 29, 1954. For his view on Mexican Saints, see his *Children of the Promise: Lamanites Yesterday and Today* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981).

7. Professor Armando Solorzano, who was the first night's keynote speaker at the "Multicultural Mormonism" conference, and I spoke the night before and he told me a story about an inconsolable woman with two daughters. One of them was light skinned and the other of darker complexion. The first one was told she came from the tribe of Ephraim while the latter was told she came from the tribe of Manassas. Mormon leaders use 1 Chronicles 5:1–2 and Jeremiah 31:9 and Doctrine and Covenants 133:26–34 to elevate those who are white above all others. The fact that the descendants of Ephraim are those who would write the Book of Mormon solidified their preferred status.

8. We see this kind of thinking in President Spencer W. Kimball's—Elder Kimball at the time—talk "The Day of the Lamanites," in which he spoke of the growth of the Church among Native Americans and how they were becoming "white and delightsome" because of their obedience and membership in the Church. Reading it now can be quite uncomfortable since many consider him a pioneer in expanding the Church, its services, and its fellowship to Saints of color. There is probably no doubt that many Lamanites at the time felt empowered and encouraged that they were shedding "the scales of darkness . . . from their eyes" (Report of the SemiAnnual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 1960 [Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual], 32–37; also available at http://scriptures.byu.edu/gettalk.php?ID=1091&era=yes.

What some members and leaders often don't appreciate is what these kinds of ideas do to the mind and thought of Latinos and other Saints of color. The fact that we now mostly reject those notions does little to erase the memories or to overlook their constant repetition for most of the Church's history.[9] Church leaders rarely explain themselves. They often just assume that people will forget all they have read or heard before, thus allowing incorrect and misleading theological notions about race and ethnicity to remain widespread.

While waiting in the Timpanogos Temple lobby for the sealing of a young couple, my ward bishop leaned over and whispered to me, "Isn't it interesting that when white people out in the world marry a Latino their children come out brown, while in the Church that same combination comes out whiter. Must be the fulfillment of prophecy." Taken aback, I was not able to respond at that moment. About an hour or so later while waiting for the couple to come out and take pictures, another committed Latino leader said to me with genuine concern, "We Latinos are not ready for more important leadership in the Church or society." He then alluded to the fact that we have not yet blossomed as foretold by prophecy.

Some Latino Mormons have clung to this unequal theology by trying to massage, filter, and re-conceptualize this white Mormon narrative so as not to find fault with the Church. Eventually, however, even the most loyal of those who question these precepts give up and simply hope that things will be different in the afterlife and that all that we have been taught which offends or demeans us will be refuted in the future or the world to come.

9. A case in point is my brother who after almost thirty years of inactivity came back to Church and became a voracious reader of Church books, but was unfortunately introduced to literature of an era gone by—mostly works from and by Saints in the Mesa, Arizona area, probably one of Mormonism's most reactionary enclaves. It has taken him years to slowly shed some of the self-blame attitudes that Saints of color get from that kind of literature.

As Latter-day Saints, we have been taught that this earthly period is a preparation for a much longer life after the grave. If that is the case, then for us Saints of color our collective preparation here has been to be good second-class citizens in the afterlife: obedient, faithful, and unquestioning. God works in mysterious ways, though the outcomes are rarely mysterious to us since they follow the pattern of the world where whites always seem to come out ahead of any discussion, conflict, reasoning, or leadership calling.

If we truly want, and I think most of us do, a multicultural Church, we must have a multicultural theology, a multicultural history, and a multicultural leadership structure, which is something we cannot easily claim to have now, nor do we seem to be preparing too rapidly for it. Multiculturalism within the Church can only happen if Saints of color have their history told, are empowered by their religious identity, and have an institutional role. If we don't, then Mormonism—a faith many of us love dearly—remains a white religion with shades of color in which Latinos and others remain governed and acted upon and not agents unto themselves in defining and constructing the future of the Church or interpreting its past.

When a Peruvian brother says he wants the Resurrection to come quickly because he wants to arise tall, blond, and blue-eyed, he reflects the fundamental default position of many Latinos who have bought into a white theology that, as uncomfortable as it might be to discuss, remains unchallenged at its core among Church officials and most intellectual critics.[10] Few white Mormon leaders realize how insidious this default position is. And they fail to understand, at least from the standpoint of Latino Mormons, that if the explanation of our final destination is unequal, then all that the Church believes of the present and of its history is suspect, unfair, discriminatory or, God forbid, a true reflection

10. This was told to me by our stake Spanish-speaking patriarch, Victor Hugo Gamero.

of a celestial pecking order which cannot be (collectively) avoided no matter our faith and our works.

Mormonism has always had a way out of its racial dilemmas because the "solution" is given in the Book of Mormon where it affirms that the "colored" righteous will someday become "fair and delightsome"—or "turn white" as we used to say when I was growing up a brown Mormon—thus eliminating any need to explain whether color or racial identity really matter in heaven or in the present Church experience. More bluntly, most white Mormons don't care what color we are in heaven because color, race, or ethnicity for them has never been an issue in their personal progression.

Even as the world around us debates and reflects on the role of racial mixing and ethnic and racial identity in society, Mormonism still clings to the Latino bishop's perceptions of "whitening" or to the "color changing in the blink of an eye" mystery. Thus, Mormon leaders have never had to confront or try to make sense of why our visions of heaven are so white and why the alchemy that justifies it remains for the most part unknown to our prophets, seers, and revelators.

In order to change this, we must take a more profound look at how we write our history, our literature, our theology, and why it must be more than just inclusive. History is important because Mormonism is fundamentally tied to historical interpretation. White Mormons are where they are and Saints of color are where they are because of how we interpret our history: white Mormons' history is about obedience and righteousness, and the others' history is about disobedience and unrighteousness. One history involves "accepting the gospel quickly," and the other involves needing time to be nurtured and to "blossom." One is a history of "purity" (whiteness), and the other is of working toward some facsimile of whiteness.

Historical geography also plays a part in the interpretation. The Church was restored in a promised land and expands from there as the righteous overtake the savage, where conquest is a fundamental

part of creating the city on the hill. Those on the outside, even when native born or people of the future, are religious immigrants raised in temporary Zions, waiting for a day to be gathered in full fellowship in the American and white bloodline of Zion.

This historical interpretation of second-class citizenship in the kingdom has been made possible by the fact that Latinos and other Saints of color have often faithfully confined themselves to what scholar David Montejano describes as a "white cultural field." In his excellent book, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986*, which deals with the wholesale segregation of Mexican Americans in the Lone Star State, he argues that one reason why segregation worked so well was that those who were "rich, clean, and loyal were seen as of one color, and the poor, dirty and disloyal of another," creating a rigid dichotomy that rationalized and thus determined—sometimes self-determined—each one's place in society.[11]

One group accepted either blatantly or privately their superiority, while too many of the other group accepted their inferiority; and those who fought against it did so as individuals, arguing that, while many of their people might be inferior, they themselves were not. Does that sound familiar to what happens with some of our more assimilated brothers and sisters of color? Self-hate like that which was expressed by the Peruvian brother is an acquiescence to a theology that privileges one group over many others, and no matter how it is constructed that self-hate, self-loathing, or simply self-limiting attitude is insidious because it sets a collective ceiling to one people. Saints of color then become potentially "exalted beings" even while remaining inferior in their version of the Church's schematic.

In my chapter of a soon-to-be-published collection of essays edited by Joanna Brooks and Gina Colvin, I argue that Latino members have

11. David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 220–34. See chapter 10, "Culture of Segregation."

been conditioned to be the stepsons and daughters of a loving God, and when they argue against that, they do so by either seeking to be seen as closer to white Mormons or by creating their own religious bubble, which rarely includes whites but which is fundamentally structured in the white way of Mormonism.[12] Unfortunately, many Latinos have swallowed this interpretation of their religious reality lock, stock, and barrel and are trapped into silent embarrassment and thus unable to fully reflect on what it means to be who they are, why they are governed or led the way they are, and why they have so little presence in their religious history and theology. Privileging white skin over colored not only led to conquest and oppression in the secular world but also to a diminished role for people of color within the Church.

This de-privileging was a direct outcome of being an ahistorical people within Mormonism, something that has come about systematically—if not always maliciously—and not randomly as we often like to believe. The Church History Department has not yet hired Latinos or Saints of color to help in writing Church history, and the BYU religion department has seen little need to discuss the issues of race and ethnicity or to recruit, mentor, and empower Latinos and other Saints of color to enter the field of Mormon studies. This lack of opportunity keeps us from being actors in the historical drama of Mormonism and prevents us from developing the analytical filters necessary to speak or write about ourselves in any meaningful way. We remain in the footnotes, endnotes, or even in the addendum of Mormonism, but never in the main text except as a complement to the larger white narrative.

Last year, I had an interesting conversation with Fernando Gomez, director of the Provo Museum of Mormon Mexican History, and his wife Enriqueta. Together they have dedicated their lives to promoting, highlighting, and teaching the history of the Mexican Saints in Mexico

12. See "Empowering Latino Saints to Transcend Historical Racialism: A Bishop's Tale," in *Toward a Post-Colonial Mormonism: Consciousness, Resistance and Adaptation* (forthcoming from University of Utah Press).

and the US and have recently begun to expand the scope of their work to include all Latino Saints. The museum is a fascinating mosaic of historical tidbits, documents, and photos of the Mexican Saints' effort to live the Mormon gospel, and there is no intent to hide the complexities of that religious journey, which at times has meant conflict between Mexican and white Mormons. More importantly, the museum attempts to correct some of the historical record that has often depicted Mexican Mormons as not quite able to live the Church experience in a correct way.

During our lunch discussion, Enriqueta said to me that it was extremely hard to get Mexican and Latino Saints out to see their exhibits and attend the occasional lectures and activities at the museum, located just across the street from BYU. Local ward leaders were unwilling to work with them. A recent attempt to conduct a regional oral history project has had a very rocky launch, as local Latino ecclesiastical leaders were ambivalent about putting much effort into it.[13] Our consensus was that Latino Mormon history is not important to too many Latino Saints because it is not important to influential cultural, social, and ecclesiastical leaders in the LDS Church. Fernando and Queta told me that they have been approached by the institutional Church to donate what they have to the Church History Department and let them decide how, when, and for how long to utilize that which is precious and critical to them.

This made me think about how white Saints rarely see beyond a superficial exoticism in the lives of Latino Mormons. A case in point is a recent "fiesta" in our stake, something that was decided on by the stake presidency, not us. I'm not sure what it was meant to be, but as good Latino Saints the members of my ward put together a dance routine, delicious food, and song performances. There was also a part in which one of the brothers told the stake members something about Latin America and Latino Mormonism, but it all turned into a crazy market

13. By the middle of 2017, over a thousand people had come to see the exhibits, but less than one per cent of those were Latino, at least according to surname. This was told and shown to me by Fernando Gomez, the museum's director.

scene with too many stake members, too much noise, and too little appreciation of what was happening because the food was "really good."

The white members left amazed at our food and dance, and Latino members left feeling good that our white brothers and sisters liked our food and dance. Now, the stake president wants to make this a yearly event in which we cook, dance, and sing for them—in all fairness some of the white sisters did bring their favorite Mexican dishes and this year it's going to be an international festival—and they will again appreciate our culinary skills and our quick feet, but not our history or our thoughts. And we will be left with the notion that our white brothers and sisters like us, maybe even love us—but nothing substantive will change except for some more comments by visiting stake leaders on how they like our food and how friendly we are.[14]

I often see Latino Saints cry at the pulpit over pioneer stories and the hardships of our early members—we had a whole month of it this year—and I reflect on all the stories of faith, sacrifice, and fidelity that remain untold about our own people and those of other Saints of color. The earlier interest in Polynesian, Native American, and Latino members within the Church leadership has faded, replaced by an interest in the "international Church" whose history, unfortunately, is still perceived in terms of the "other" as the division between white and colored continues to play out.

I applaud the women of the Church who have found ways to push back and become part of the Mormon history discussion. Unfortunately, this discussion has mostly centered around white women. Their sisters of color remain in the background or as the recipients of their white counterpart's actions. This means that if we are not careful, our history

14. Interestingly our bishop chose a public school teacher in our congregation to give the history lecture rather than me. I assume he worried that stake leaders might take exception to what I might say. That the bishop was a friend—and who knew or should have known that I would never embarrass him or the congregation—only accentuates our timidity in speaking openly about our history.

might become fully contextualized by whiteness and privilege, with all white members, regardless of gender, on the side that is recorded and all Saints of color remaining on the sketchy side where we appear as a backdrop. One solution to this problem might start with a quick visit to the Provo museum and also to the depository of Mexican Mormon history that the Church established in Mexico City where documents and stories are being accumulated from the Mexican Saints.[15]

As written today, our history privileges those who founded the Church, developed priesthood ordinances, designed temples, or dedicated new lands for missions. It also says in so many words that we people of color did not write, translate, or receive new scriptures, and we never became prophets—at least not since Samuel the Lamanite—and unless that changes soon, why should we expect to see anything different in the afterlife. Our historical and theological black holes suggest that when it comes to heaven, we will again be waiting for our turn, for our moment of merit, when the scales of our hearts will finally fall, and we become "fair and delightsome." While the Church is still young (and who knows how long humanity will abide on this earth), it is nonetheless imperative that we consider these questions because the end goal determines much of the effort and the perspective we use in our situations.

Latinos who want to write our history fear doing so because deep inside they feel that they are suspect—still in need of proving their faith and loyalty to the institution—and that writing complicated Latino Mormon history is no way to prove that fidelity. They may exaggerate their fears, but they feel they know only too well the consequences of putting themselves in that situation. They will leave the task to those whom they see as having the space—or privilege—to write Mormon history and still be perceived as people of faith.

15. See Jason Swensen, "Mexico's Rich History Preserved at Newly Dedicated Records Center," *Deseret News*, April 20, 2017, https://www.lds.org/church/news/mexicos-rich-history-preserved-at-newly-dedicated-records-center?lang=eng.

Some may argue that most rank-and-file Latino and other Saints of color really care little for this intellectualizing, given their daily struggles and their own desire to become better Mormons. Why engage in something that at the moment and for many years now has been delegitimized as a meaningful concern? Why look for stories and heroes we know exist but have rarely ever been heard of outside their homes or in the occasional ethnic ward where someone speaks about their own family or a dear friend's journey of faith? Yet, it should matter to all of us, and particularly to those who write the history, explain the theology, give the sermons, and produce the art and literature, because these stories are the tapestry through which our lives can be understood and also the links we form to the larger gospel history.

The ironic thing about our Latino Mormon story—and that of other Saints of color—is that it is a narrative of faith in the most fundamental way. So many have stayed in the Church even though they have often been seen as stepchildren in the Mormon kingdom, and even though their personal history is littered with disappointment, frustration, racial slights, and perceptions of not being ready for prime time. All while being reminded that "their time" will come.

In its early years, Mormonism attempted to diversify itself, albeit feebly, by proselyting various racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes, who were invited to partake of the gospel message. But Mormonism, like most European ethnicity in America, traded its soul for whiteness and in doing so homogenized its European and American stock into a white membership—not without some tension, of course—and distanced the racial groups or theologically subordinated them by making their experiences and their interpretations of the spiritual strange or inappropriate.[16]

16. See W. Paul Reeve's *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Spencer Fluhman's "*A Peculiar People*": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion*

I remember once asking my Sunday School class members to provide examples of miracles in their lives. After a number of traditional "miracles" one older lady raised her hand and related her miracle: She was driving from Texas to New Mexico on her way to Utah. It was a dry and very hot day as those common in the El Paso area. She was traveling with several children, though I don't remember if she mentioned a husband. Along the way, they hit a line of cars that were moving slowly, and it became clear that they were going through a border patrol checkpoint. She soon became rather nervous as her whole family was undocumented. Soon there was only one car in front of her and she fervently prayed for some deliverance as she was traveling to Zion and away from a horrible life in Mexico. As the last car in front of her moved on and the border patrolman was ready to wave her to approach, out of nowhere came this strong gust of wind and a downpour of almost nickel-size raindrops descended on the officer. Rather than get wet, the border security waved her to move on. The skies, which had been bright and sunny, had suddenly turned dark and menacing, but less than a block after the checkpoint it again turned bright and sunny.

"God gave us a miracle," said the woman, "and now my boys have gone on missions and married in the temple, and I will forever be grateful for God's hand in my coming to this land."

At that moment, you could see the shock in some middle-class, white members' faces and the silent and approving nod of the more recent arrivals, many of whom had similar stories to tell. There are many of those miracles; many have to do with church service rendered and others about simply locating to Zion. There are histories yet untold because they do not fit neatly into what has become the traditional Mormon narrative: Mormons don't break laws and they don't experience miracles outside of conversion, or they occur only when we deal with medical challenges, financial problems, or in bringing a child back to the fold.

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in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

It was after a storm of criticism for speaking out on the Church's unwillingness to tackle other issues, particularly undocumented immigration, that were confronting Latino Mormons in the Church that I received a critical but respectful e-mail from a Saint who reminded me that we Mormons strongly believed in the twelfth article of faith. He was nice enough to ask me my reasons for what I was saying and I responded respectfully and provided as much background as I could about why I thought the way I did. He thanked me and our correspondence ended.

About a month later, the man wrote to me again, but this was a different person than the one who had been critical. Shortly after we corresponded, he was assigned to the bishop's storehouse to drive several individuals from one building to another to do work, and soon enough found out that all five of the men were undocumented. He admitted to being initially uncomfortable not knowing what to expect, but soon he saw them as good Latter-day Saints, anxious about their jobs, afraid of being deported, and seeking to live the gospel as best they could. He started eating and sharing his food with them and they with him. Though his Spanish was limited, he began communicating as best he could and soon he was absorbed into the world of the Church's undocumented members. When he wrote me this last time, he said that he did not know how, but he was going to help them get their legal status resolved, and that he had no more a desire to call ICE on anyone anymore, especially his brothers in the faith.

This change of heart was similar to one I experienced as bishop. One day while I was talking to my ward clerk, the bishop of the other ward that met in our building popped his head into my office and asked me how I went about reporting to the INS those in my ward who were "illegal." I turned around and said, "If I do I will lose 70 percent of my ward council." He thought for a second, and then said, "Oh, okay." I would find out that soon he had his own undocumented ward members and he assigned a border patrolman to home teach them; the home teacher became their best friend and was soon finding ways to help them navigate

their undocumented world. We had the same situation where our own border patrolman became friends with an undocumented family and soon was scouring cemeteries to find them an identity so they could at least get social security numbers. The true history of the Church has not been written when it belongs to only one group, and when we pigeonhole it, we only see one version of Mormonism. I do not want to give the impression that Mormons of color are all breaking laws and rules. They are not. But those examples provide a glimpse of how the world sometimes frames and complicates our desire to live the faith, especially when we are or are seen as different. The poor, the colored, the disadvantaged often experience and live the gospel in manners that might seem strange to those who are not, yet those experiences are as real and legitimate as any other.

The famous Chicano intellectual Octavio Romano argued that Mexicans—and this could apply to Latino Mormons—are made ahistorical not by their lack of action but by those who write the history. He called social scientists academic mercenaries that marginalized the Mexican people by the narrative they constructed.[17] The same can be said about those who write the Church's history and provide only a footnote or a sidebar for Latino and other Saints of color, when the reality would require that their voices, stories, historical actors, and ideas be a part of the narrative. Romano argued that only by writing their own history would Mexican-Americans liberate themselves from oppression and second-class citizenship.

In my book *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos among Mexican Americans*, I argue that Chicanos had to reinterpret and write their own history—rather than just simply integrate it into the larger

17. No major work exists on Octavio Romano, but see my *Chicanismo: The Forging of a Militant Ethos among Mexican Americans* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 45–48. Another, even more extensive, discussion on Romano can be found in John Alba Cutler's *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 56–89.

narrative—in order to find the strength to liberate themselves from the marginalization of American history. Heroes, places, events, and ideas had to flow out of the Mexicano/Chicano experience, and they could only do so if we focused on them, separating fact from fiction, heroes from anti-heroes, and triumphs from defeats. This focus and sifting was not intended to exclude all others, but rather to emphasize the Chicano experience so that it could gain its own identity.

So, how do we engage in this reinterpretation of the Latino Mormon experience and create new paradigms for Mormon history? Let me share some suggestions. I think we first start by rejecting the traditional narrative that argues that whites became the core of the Church because they were destined to be and because, try as they may, they could not get people of color to live the gospel in a sustainable way. Though the early Church members were given instructions to take the gospel everywhere, and periodically did so, they failed at being steadfast in accomplishing the task because often they were looking to proselyte but not to fellowship, to gather but not to mix, and to govern but not to be governed by the "Other." Too many were more committed to fulfilling prophecy than to finding those who would come had they known where to find the truth. Mormonism has often suffered from a preoccupation with duty and institutional loyalty to the detriment of real fellowship and a spirituality based on circumstantial gospel experiences that cannot be controlled or simply created.[18] Latino members, particularly those of indigenous origin, have suffered greatly from the traditional white paradigm in which they are often depicted—even if just privately—as being on the other side of duty, civic responsibility, and capability.

18. By "circumstantial gospel experiences," I mean to acknowledge that there are historical, political, social, and other boundaries that limit, expand, or channel our beliefs. These circumstances do not change the validity of the gospel message nor excuse wrong moral choices, but knowing of them does help us to understand why different Mormon communities live the gospel the way they do.

Unlike the Book of Mormon's Ammon and the sons of Mosiah, we Mormons have allowed the hardship, general practices of society, personal prejudices, and organizational priorities to justify our lack of commitment to the full evangelization of God's children.[19] We need to question the notion that God wanted us to wait until some distant future. Whether intended or not, this idea of waiting for the right time is insidious because it separates Saints of color from the core of the gospel experience. We preach a new, inclusive, ever-expanding "universal" gospel, but often end up practicing the old Israel "chosen people" theology that was exclusive, ethnocentric, and, in the end, exhausted and self-diminishing.

Second, we need to point out and question Mormonism's historical accommodation to American exceptionalism, which formed part of a larger European colonialist effort in which whites were seen as superior to people of color. Mexico and much of Latin America has and continues to suffer from this exceptionalism that privileges American interests and those of "whites" within those nations. Led by elites, this supremacist attitude was soon embraced by the poor, the yeomen, the proletariat, and other whites whose life was a dead end unless they were able to dominate and place beneath them a whole host of others, particularly nonwhites but also foreigners who had not yet "gained their whiteness." Imperialism and American exceptionalism's most insidious effect—next to conquering and colonizing people of color—was this wholesale conversion of millions of non-elite whites to do its work, inciting in them a sense of racial superiority over those to be conquered, marginalized, and segregated.

Early Mormonism—in my view—offered no support for such a worldview, but that soon changed as white Mormonism acquiesced to its whiteness as Americans on the backs of people of color. To justify

19. By "full evangelization," I simply mean their ability to be part of the Church in all aspects, from being simple members to being allowed to write, participate, construct spaces of faith, and lead at all levels.

these actions, we developed all kinds of religious-racialist theories based on either false interpretation of scripture or selective commentary from earlier Christians who also harbored racist notions. These racial codes that developed among Mormons as they did among other Christian sects allowed them to fully integrate into white American society while still leaving a slight opening for proselyting efforts among people of color. Whether intentional or not, this fed into white racialist thinking and rationalization. I use the term "racialist" instead of supremacy because the latter has a very insidious interpretation and, while I see prejudices and racism in some of the past leaders of the Church, their actions though at times very disappointing and discriminatory were not, in my view, systematically destructive as the actions of those who preached a blatant white supremacy. Some may see this as a fine line and it may well be, or there may be no line at all, but my own commitment to the faith and my experience with Mormonism allows me to believe that there was a line and that it prevented a wholesale crossing into rampant acts of violence and destruction at levels seen among other white groups. While some Mormon scholars have acknowledged and even condemned such surrender to whiteness, few have told the tragic story from the perspective of the victimized, and even fewer have sought to find successful or at least valiant resistance to this racialism.

Third, we must see and write about the Church's opening to people of color in the last fifty years or so not as a logical evolution of God's timetable, but as an all-too-slow realization by the Church that it had failed in the past to fully grasp its racial history and its insularity within the intermountain west and American society. In other words, the time was always right for Latinos and other people of color's conversion and progression, but white members did not have their hearts and minds prepared to share the gospel space we are all trying to build. The course correction over the past few years has failed, however, to acknowledge the damage done and leaves uncorrected the theological foundations of a white Mormon superiority. This superiority continues to surface

in talks, administrative actions, and callings, and reveals itself clearly in the predominance of Utah and American Mormon traditions in the institutional culture of the Church.

Fourth, we need to look at Mormon history not in hierarchal or spatial terms—that is from top to bottom or core to periphery—but in terms of the people's ability to live the faith within their own spheres. This would validate every Mormon community that lives the gospel according to its circumstances and its particular challenges and do away with the notion that these actions have to be filtered according to some rubric developed in Salt Lake City or by one part of the body of Christ. In this way, all Saints have the space to create their faith stories and their inspiring ancestry and help contribute to the story of Mormonism.[20]

Again, I go back to the work by Fernando and Queta in bringing to light the lives and experience of Mexican Saints. The brown faces, the poorly constructed chapels, and the seeming lack of hierarchical leadership in the pictures cannot hide the vibrancy with which those Saints lived the gospel. They also had pioneers, miracle workers, prophets and a vision of what the gospel could do in their country. Yet, their story, as told by historians and writers, is either a story of ¨humility and subservience to institutional leadership," or one of rebellion and unsuccessful ministry; rarely do we interpret their lives in ways that do not reduce them to a footnote in white missionary or leaders' history. They remain props and backdrops to the stories of white Mormons' spiritual journeys. Individuals such as the Rivera sisters, Eduardo Balderas, Orlando Rivera, Dolores Torres, Emma Bautista, José García, and thousands of others who served faithfully and diligently have passed into history without much mention of their activities and without our knowledge of their thoughts and their spiritual and religious contributions to the whole, thus making their people voiceless, ahistorical, and insignificant. Without

20. I have written about the effect this hierarchical approach has had on Latinos, and many years after the circumstances I have described this approach continues to be the norm. See my "Empowering Latino Saints."

them and the countless other tales of Latinos and Saints of color we do not really know how the Mormon gospel has impacted people throughout the world. All we know of them is that they once served under or were served by white leadership and that they simply "echoed" the words of those who led them. Mormon history has been about one group speaking and all others simply repeating. All discoveries, interpretations, creative leadership, or missionary success have come from only one group if we are to believe most of Mormon history as written today.

The story of Latino Mormons is as complex as any, and because issues of race, ethnicity, national origin, and white domination are front and center in their history, our current approaches simply cannot capture the full significance of their gospel experience. The same can be said of the histories of other Saints of color. Latino history must be seen from the ground up: the focus should be on the impact the gospel principles had on their immediate lives and on the decisions they made within their own spheres. Joseph Smith, the First Vision, the Book of Mormon, the proximity of God to humanity, and other gospel teachings have to be interpreted through the lenses of "borders"—colonialism, marginalization, immigration or migration, military or hostile conquest, the dark skin/white skin binary, secular and scriptural racialism, and the often-false expectations of equality both within and without the Church. The development of native leadership, the perception of visions and miracles, and the "gathering of Saints" has been a constant struggle—though not always publicly perceived or acknowledged—between those with lived gospel experience within their communities and white leadership, which has often prioritized institutional and theological fidelity.

The story of Mormon proselytizing among Latinos and people of color may have included all of the aforementioned, but it has also been a story of personal progress; communal solidarity; social, cultural, and sometimes economic upward mobility; leadership development; stability and order—the latter important particularly for the destitute and marginalized who often need a sense of purpose and order. Religion

exacts a high price but can often deliver what secular institutions cannot. Having been a Mormon from early childhood, I have seen the promises, blessings, and benefits of Mormonism, and that is why I believe that my people and other Saints of color hold steadfastly to the LDS gospel. And, of course, as a believer I fully witness to what a truly Christian life can mean to someone searching for meaning in their lives. But we'll only fully understand that meaning when we uncover more profoundly the history of that search and better understand the lived gospel experience of more than one group.

Accepting different conceptualizations of Mormon history that recognize the experiences of Latino and other Saints of color does not in any way challenge Church doctrines or the fundamentals of our faith, but it will help us create a theology more consistent with the gospel message we preach. This approach also does not demean or lessen the significance of the early history of the Church. In fact, it affirms that what we believe has a commonality because it is a gospel message based on God's love, and that love is for people of all colors, ethnicities, and national origins—that all have a place in the mosaic of Mormon history.

At the same time, I reiterate that we cannot simply settle for an integration of our history into the "as-written" history of Mormonism, because if we do, Latino Mormon history will simply disappear into the larger narrative as did early immigrant history in this country and in the Church. Without new historical paradigms for the multiplicity of Mormon experience, the Church membership may get browner, but the history, theology, and practices will remain inherently white.

Mormonism should leave behind the melting pot metaphor and even the salad bowl one, the former because it forces Saints of color to tamper their cultural experiences to enhance the story of the dominant group and the latter because the lettuce (white Mormonism) remains the most visible within the bowl of the church and thus the most influential. We must see the worldwide membership as a vegetable garden in which each plant (ethnicity) requires its separate plot of dirt, needs its own

particular care, is allowed to develop in its own time and season, and is validated within its sphere for its contribution to the whole.

Only when we are able to write a history that encompasses but doesn't co-opt or overwhelm the past of each group of Saints will we be able to truly tell the story of the Latter-day Saint people. Then maybe one day some bishop or Relief Society president of color will turn to someone and say "Isn't it wonderful that couples of different colors, ethnicities, and national origins create such wonderful little Saints?"

Talking about a change, however, without true institutional and individual support is not enough. Current Church history has evolved over time, nurtured and supported by Church leaders, Church money, Church educational institutions, and Church publishing outlets. Given that Latinos and other Saints of color are yet to become a big buying and reading market for Mormon studies, and that few academic and intellectual Saints of color exist currently, the rest of Mormonism must help pick up the slack. We must provide funding for conferences on Latino Saints and other Saints of color, offer internships and mentorships to bring them into the field, and teach this history so it can attract new contributors.

The Church History Department must also be expanded, with new Latino staff and researchers, and other people of color hired as they become available, and, eventually but not too long in the future, the Church should seriously consider a Latino or other Saint of color for associate historian and a General Authority of color to preside over it. The reality is that Church history of the future will be about the international Church, of which Saints of color will be the overwhelming majority, and we need people who have lived, are living, feel attached to, and value that particular history—sometimes regardless of their ethnicity or color—and who support new historical paradigms in Mormon history.

Mormon intellectuals and Church leaders must vouch for this history and support its theological contributions, or white Saints and some Saints of color are likely to see it as a "dumbing down" of the heroic

history of Mormonism, and we will lose their support. Mormonism also cannot simply go from being a white religion to being an ethnic or racial one. When all things are fair, I don't believe that God cares—nor should we—about color, ethnicity, or national origin. Mormonism should strive to be—in the way it tells its story—the religion that it was intended to be when the gospel was revealed in this new dispensation. And that will only happen when we apply a historical perspective that allows all of God's children to know and tell their story in their own way. Maybe then, we won't really need to worry about color and the pecking order in heaven. After all, we'll probably all be brown anyway.