RUBIK'S PALIMPSEST: SEARCHING FOR MY INDIGENEITY

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From my youth I was blessed with a God-shaped hole in my identity. I knew I came from somewhere, that my ancestors were whole and bore a cultural armor that it was my right to claim. But knowledge about those people, without whom in Mormon theology I cannot be made perfect, was obscured as surely as an ancient manuscript whose text has been scraped away, leaving only the barest impressions in stubborn particles of clinging ink. I am a man searching for what once was, seeking for what was lost in darkness to shine forth as light.

Sensing that I did not live in a community that could give this to me, I followed a lifelong strategy of seeking what light and knowledge I could find. Most of what I have has come through conversations with family, decades of study, pursuit of partnership with the divine, meditation on tiny details from my life, and plain old intuition. Learning the vocabulary that would enable me to talk about this pursuit and ask the right questions is an enterprise that taught me to recognize that nationality, ethnicity, race, spirituality, ideology, and economic orientation would likely be entangled in this search, and that while they are significant parts of the story, indigeneity is still something discrete.

My indigeneity is the part of my identity conferred on me by my ancestors from the Andes Mountains. Centuries of invasion and colonization nearly extinguished it. It has survived in some form and I carry it in my body, spirit, and practice. I find traces of my family's past in fragments of language, in pain and in pride, and in longing.

Even today, after decades of seeking, I haven't reached solid conclusions about every aspect of my roots so much as assembled a small fleet

of possible identities to connect me to the past and orient me in the present: Lamanite, Aymara, person of color. All of which are identities I love, all of which bring insights that have nurtured me, all of which sometimes turn their guns on each other. People who think they know their history, perhaps, can never grasp the scale of my hunger. Talking tenderly about the role of the identifier Lamanite in my family history, for example, has brought me ridicule or pity from academic circles. Owning my Aymara roots once triggered the person with whom I was speaking to launch into a microaggressive analysis of my brow and nose, clear giveaways that I was not like her.

These are my body's stories.

Lamanite—I have been given much

Right around the time when I was six or seven I noticed that whenever my mother would go up to bear her testimony, she would cry. This made me uncomfortable, of course, since I associated her crying with me or someone else in the family having hurt her through our misbehaviors, and I initially wondered if we had done something to cause her to cry in front of the congregation. Listening to her during these moments was always tough for me, and I came to realize after a while that my siblings shared in my discomfort. For years I would squirm, grumble, or doodle monsters on any available paper—anything to block out the actual content of her testimony each time she approached the pulpit. At some point, though, my curiosity finally won out and I began to listen, trying to understand what it was she would say that was so difficult that caused her to cry. In almost every testimony she bore, she would eventually say the words "I am proud to be a Lamanite." This was the utterance that always made her voice tremble, usually bringing her to tears.

Sometimes she would say it like she was melting down with emotions. A couple of times she said it with defiance, as though the

congregation were about to shower her with arrows. Once she said it as a call-out in direct response to another congregant's less-than-sensitive remarks at the pulpit. Another time, following a sister who publicly wrestled with shame and anguish for what she perceived as personal shortcomings owing to her own Indigenous upbringing, my mother swiftly rose to bear her Lamanite testimony as though it were a blessing of healing. Every time, she cried.

Why did this make her cry? Why did this count as part of her testimony? The woman who raised me with hopes that I become a missionary, who guided me to the temple, left her family on another continent in the wake of a bloody coup d'état. One of the first lessons she taught me was that for her, believing in God meant publicly acknowledging being a Lamanite. I internalized this, and along with it, I absorbed another lesson that holds sway over me to this day: to declare my Lamanite heritage to anyone else is an act of vulnerability. It invites admiration, skepticism, derision, discomfort, colonization, and/or rejection.

Another important facet of my identity came into focus not at church but through a regular practice in our home. Among the cassette tapes and already outdated 8-tracks that filled a corner of my childhood home, there was an aging stack of records near our stereo. I was generally forbidden from playing with them, although I would occasionally pull them out to just look at the artwork. From time to time, usually on Sunday afternoons, my parents would put on one of their old, treasured records and give it a spin. During these moments, our whole family would sit together in the living room, sometimes intently listening to the music, sometimes playing, drawing, or writing with it in the background. Radio and cassettes were for fun and entertainment, but records were a family event that felt like my parents were trying to communicate something to us, be it the beginning of the Christmas season, a great find at a garage sale, or an important artist that they felt charged to introduce to us.

In the collection there was a 45 from Chile that sat protected by nothing more than a blank white sleeve but found its way with the greatest of care to the record player at least once a year. With every playing, time slowed down in our household as my father wrapped his arm around my mother and they both seemed to look off into some horizon we kids couldn't see. We only knew that we needed to be respectful—there was no mocking or parodying of these songs, as happened with so many of the tracks on other albums.

On one side there was a tune that clearly imitated the folk song "500 Miles," sung with all due mournfulness, but by an ethereal choir. A couple times throughout, the slow rhythm was jarred to life with a furious *quena* solo before settling down once again to its standard meditation. I was told that my mother sang on this disc. Her participation in the local youth group afforded her the opportunity to travel over one thousand miles to a national church youth conference, where her group won a songwriting contest for their version of the song, and the prize was to record it in a professional studio. The words included lines such as:

No debes avergonzarte como ayer (You shouldn't be ashamed like before)

Debemos estar unidos y luchar (We should be united and fight)

Satanás no podrá contra ti y tu poder (Satan won't be able to withstand you and your power)

Lucha fuerte, joven santo y entenderás (Fight well, young saint, and you will understand)

Si entendiste la razón del color tu piel (If you understood the reason for the color of your skin)

Se humilde y progresa por tu bien (Be humble and seek progress for your own good)

Lamanita, lamanita, lamanita ese soy yo (Lamanite, Lamanite, Lamanite, that's me)

Y a los ojos de mi Cristo el mejor (And in the eyes of my Christ, the best)

For her, the value of identifying as Lamanite went well beyond the nostalgia of thinking back to her youth. Over years of conversation and eavesdropping, I pieced together a larger picture of how she grew up. After her father was killed at work when she was only months old, the family survived poverty and trauma through the resolve of her iron-willed mother and an extended family network that clung to their indigenous roots at a time when doing so was stigmatized. Schools were still trying to kill the *indio*, the entertainment industry was only interested in emulating the Euro-fantasy, and the state was a distant and shadowy entity that cared little for the welfare of the northernmost region. Every institution with which she interacted assailed her with the message that she ought to be ashamed of her indigenous roots, to adapt to the modern ways.

When my mother met with Mormon missionaries at age fourteen, it was the first time that she heard a contrasting message. Prior to this encounter, the history she had learned conferred on her a story of inferiority, failure, and defeat, preparing her to accept the erasure and assimilation of her people. But as she studied the Book of Mormon, years of pain and violence were put into new light as she learned about and embraced her identity as a Lamanite. She came to see herself as a descendant of people who enjoyed an ancient divine promise, a tradition of prophets, social experiments, written language, wondrous miracles, and a personal visit from the resurrected God she had grown up worshipping. Previously seeing no place for herself in the modern world, she had planned on finding refuge as a nun, but the promises given to the Lamanites infused her with hopes for a normal life.

The words of the song from that old 45, which she helped pen and bring to life in the studio, were an indelible part of her testimony—the same testimony she bore in tears born of prejudice, poverty, and iron resolve not to be cut off from the past: "I am a Lamanite."

If Lamanite was belief and hope, however, it lacked a materiality I longed for. I couldn't touch the culture of the Lamanites. No one

finding an object buried beneath the earth could promise us it had been touched by a hero like the Anti-Nephi-Lehi. I could hear Lamanite in my mother's voice, but I wanted something I could see laid out in photographs.

Aymara—What I have found

I was looking for lost treasures.

Sometime during my kindergarten year, my childhood fascination with treasure hunting found focus through a PBS children's show whose title I never knew. In it, a group of friends raced around the globe in a rickety sky ship in search of an ancient artifact. Picking up on my obsession, and combining it with my growing love for reading, my parents gave me *The World's Last Mysteries*, a hardbound Reader's Digest volume consisting of twenty-five beautifully illustrated chapters on various archeological sites around the world, for the rites of passage associated with my eighth birthday. The embossed Maya calendar on the glossy hardbound cover won me over before I could even crack it open. I had some books in my collection, but this was the first book that felt important. By receiving it at the time of my baptism, I felt initiated into a group of treasure hunters. In hindsight, I now see that the pull to find things hidden or lost is something I had in common with Joseph Smith. Like him, I ended up finding vastly different treasures than what I initially set out for.

It took me years to actually read the book's words, since every time I cracked it open, I got absorbed in the photos, drawings, and captions. Some of the content bordered on Illuminati/Heyerdahl-level speculation, especially the chapter on the Tunguska event titled "Did a Black Hole Hit Siberia?" complete with a nightmare-inducing illustration. But all sensationalism aside, these were my first proper introductions to Egypt's pyramids, Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, Zimbabwe, Harappan civilization, Teotihuacan, the giant Olmec heads dotting Mesoamerican

jungles, and the prehistoric settlement at Çatalhöyük. Along with these chapters, I found readings that introduced me to the moai of Rapa Nui, majestic Machu Picchu high up in the Andes, and the mammoth geoglyphs in the Nazca desert. As they spied me reading these chapters, my parents took special care to assert that each of these sites was a part of our tradition. They did not know much about them, had never visited any of them, but wanted me to feel connected to indigenous sites in South America.

Rapa Nui sits nearly 2,300 miles from Chile but was annexed in 1888. Ethnically and historically, its people have little in common with my Chilean ancestors. As much as anyone else, I stand in awe of the joyous beauty and ambition of Inca architecture, exemplified by Machu Picchu's terraces and the startling precision with which Sacsahuamán's gargantuan stones were cut and placed; yet I know that they were empire builders who demanded exhausting tributes from subjects. I still know embarrassingly little about the Nazca, only hearing about them when I must explain yet again to a neighbor or student that the lines they left were not in fact created by ancient extraterrestrials. But even though I have no direct ancestral claim on the accomplishments of these magnificent civilizations, I swell with pride when I tell others about these places and their builders. My connection to them and to the land felt even more complete and tangible when in 2002 I went to visit my grandmother after she was forced to relocate from a city neighborhood in Arica to Azapa Valley just a few miles away. Her home sat at the base of Sombrero Hill, which had its own set of petroglyphs whose ancient purpose is unknown. It turned out that the makers of this monument (ca. 1000–1450 CE) probably weren't my ancestors either.

Things came even more into focus when during the fall quarter of my first year at college, in an introduction to cultural anthropology course, I was assigned to write a paper on a cultural group of my choice. My initial desire to focus on the Incas was rejected due to a lack of ethnographic sources, but digging through what I was able to find in the

campus library, I came across the Aymara. As I read and learned about them, I felt as though the scales fell off my eyes. I had been mistaken in claiming the Incas. Having seen maps of the Inca Empire that included northern Chile, I concluded that my ancestors were the Incas, failing to make the connection that an empire includes conquered people. The Aymara were one of many ethnic groups forced into vassalage in the Inca Empire, and a quick phone call home confirmed that this was our tribe.

Somehow, I made it through eighteen years of my life without the word Aymara making an impression on me, without even knowing the right word to name my indigeneity. I went through several emotional stages at this realization, including embarrassment at my own ignorance, grief for the experiences lost during this gap, and resentment toward the institutions that hid this from me. I gradually found some comfort in the realization that most people I know in the US live with a similar hole in their lives, scooped out to make way for other modern identities. Still, I was eager not to accept the losses history hands us, but to continue my learning.

And as I studied, I began to recognize traces of Aymara left in our lives. With time, I was able to recognize that some pieces of our language and culture had survived, infiltrating the colonizers' tongue. Whenever a baby was near our family, we never heard the Spanish word *bebé* and instead heard everyone in the family using *guagua*. Often while my mother scrubbed the collars on my father's business shirts, she referred to the stains as *chuño*, a traditional freeze-dried potato, usually ground up and used to thicken soups. On one trip where we took a bus tour approaching the Altiplano, I sampled a coca leaf tea at the exhortation of our guide (the folk wisdom maintains that it helps adapt to the thinner atmosphere at that altitude). My Abuelita Elena, who lived in this harsh environment until she was well into her teens, saw me sipping on my tea. Later she shared with me a few other preparations one can make with coca, including poultices and topical ointments. Just as fascinating

as the knowledge of how to make them were the conditions that called for them.

When we were children my mother shared stories about her family, and these often included elements of the supernatural, especially the ones that took place up in the mountains. Some time after I learned to speak Spanish, I approached my Abuelita for more stories. She sat me down and took me on a tour of the Andes in prehuman times, when only the moon and stars shone over the earth. I learned of little people who walked the earth then, who had to go into hiding when the sun was created. She told me how they sneaked into the house seeking her firstborn one day while her husband was away and she was doing housework, but they scattered from sight when they realized that she saw them. These stories connected me to a worldview I had been missing, and her telling them to me bound me to a family tradition that my cousins had grown up with.

Javier Mamani was one of these cousins who helped me in my quest. I first met Javier during a family trip to Arica in 1987. At first he was just one face among a crowd of family members at a memorable Sunday gathering. So much happened during the dinner, and my inability to speak Spanish at the time prevented me from connecting meaningfully with any family members. It wasn't until 1996, when Javier came to visit me during my mission in Santiago, that we forged a bond. He had served in the same mission a few years before and wrote to me a lengthy but unassuming letter asking if we could meet up. I arranged to have him over to our apartment in the heart of the metropolitan area, a stone's throw from the temple. I was so wrapped up in being a missionary in the big city that I initially didn't see him walking among the crowd when he approached. There he was all of a sudden, much shorter than me, slight of build, jet black hair grown out just barely bushy, carrying a package from my Abuelita. As we ate and swapped stories I noted that the woman whom we paid to regularly come in and prepare our meals (and who gladly agreed to prepare a little extra for

my cousin) was disappointed and even a little disdainful to see that I had brought an *indio* into our fifteenth-floor apartment. I ignored the missionary practice of eating according to a schedule and moving on to the next thing, prioritizing family over the rigid obedience that I had learned to prize by then.

We met again a year later, this time at his home in the desert north. He gave me a traditional Aymara shirt, complete with multicolor embroidery near the collar and pocket. Javier died not long after—he suffered from epileptic seizures, and one eventually overpowered him. Beside the bed where they found him, there was a handwritten poem that his mother shared with me, expressing hope for the future as a child of God. Over two decades later the shirt still hangs in my closet, and I treat it with the utmost care, wearing it only a couple of times a year on special occasions. Of all my cousins, Javier was the one who most shared my intense love and hunger for a renewal of our indigeneity. His loss hurt me deeply and heightened my sense of responsibility to carry on with our search for the pieces of identity that we've lost over the years.

My parents once arranged for us to take a day trip up into the mountains along with Abuelita Elena. The highlight destination was supposed to be Chungará Lake, but it wasn't until the dinner stop in rustic Putre that the excursion took on personal significance. I never knew until that day that this town tucked away in the mountains was my Abuelita's childhood home. After a memorable dinner at a humble restaurant on the plaza, we ambled around town, heading east, then north. I was so struck by the age and weariness of the streets, trying to take it all in, that I couldn't even think of a single question to ask her.

Now I have no shortage of them. The small school near the plaza bearing features of modern mass-produced educational architecture couldn't have been around when she lived there. Did she even have access to a school? As we walked past fifty or so homes, buildings, and workplaces, there didn't appear to be anyone on the streets. Did she

know her neighbors? Did she have time and desire to play in the streets? What did children play? What had changed? Was it always like this? Did her family play a role in civic or economic matters? I saw no design in our wandering up and down the streets other than just getting to know the town, and I felt perfectly fine with this. And then suddenly we stopped in front of a dirt-colored brick wall with a rusted metal door and Abuelita declared that she was pretty sure this was her childhood home. We snapped a photo and then turned around and started wandering back to the plaza where our vehicle awaited us. Part of me wishes that we had stayed a lot longer at Putre and that I had knocked on that door and found out who was living there at that moment, what they were doing. My soul reaches out to that door, and I dream of returning to Putre someday, although I don't know who my guide would be this time. The details I'm hoping to find might only be accessible through a combination of historical imagination, ethnographic reconstruction, and family folklore.

As I have come to identify as Aymara, I also recognize and celebrate that this makes me part of something even bigger. In the US this entity is sometimes called "Native America," comprising the hundreds of tribes and nations from south to north. We never formed a solid political unit, but as more evidence comes to light, we have a clearer idea of the hemispherical scale of commerce, science, and cosmology that we shared. I feel love for my siblings in this extended family and a desire to hear them and learn what I can from them.

And yet . . . do the hard-earned fragments of history we've found make up for all that is lost? I know that some bits of Aymara language and tradition seeped deep enough into my family culture to avoid being wiped away by centuries of colonial rule, but how much do those subtle impressions leave me sharing with Indigenous Americans a continent away? Even with all my study and work, I still feel blindsided when I fill out a census or similar document and have to classify myself as "American Indian" or "Some Other Race," knowing that the America they have

in mind is not the America I know, but also feeling that checking or not checking either box somehow furthers the erasure of our lineage.

Sharing Time—teaching ethnic studies from the perspective of a POC

After fifteen years of teaching Spanish—and helping to build up a social justice and community engagement–oriented program, which makes me beam with pride—my principal approached me with an offer: would I be willing to teach our school's inaugural year of ethnic studies in 2019–2020? The proposal tantalized me. At the beginning of my career, my hope was to extend my undergraduate work in anthropology by teaching social studies. Although social studies was my main endorsement, Spanish was always in higher demand. What is more, I learned through years of circulating through professional conferences that being a male POC Spanish teacher was a bit unusual. I had grown used to the idiosyncratic space that my workplace had asked me to occupy and was hesitant to try something new. But, in addition to my experience and having never abandoned my orientation to the social sciences, I saw that I was the only candidate who brought a marginalized ethnicity to the position. I learned that this would be critical to the success of the class.

My experience with teaching ethnic studies opened a field of possibilities, many of which included blessed chances to continue my personal work. In the first week of class, we welcomed a Puyallup tribal historian who helped us establish a practice of land acknowledgement. As she educated us about her people and traditions, we learned about Leschi, a Nisqually leader for whom a local tribal school is named. With the little time we had left in the period, our guest gave us some background on the conflicts and wars that led to his execution, but my students wanted to know more. Not a single one of them could recall learning about him in their other classes, and I, having grown up out of the state, had only a faint idea of local history. The following day in

class we brainstormed some follow-up inquiries and ended up pursuing the rumor that there was a monument to Leschi somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Steilacoom, where he was hung. With a bit of sleuthing we found the strip mall where there rested a granite boulder engraved with an explanation that the gallows where US soldiers killed him was constructed about two hundred yards away, in an aging neighborhood. My students and I were stunned. Just days ago, this piece of local history was unknown to us, and we felt cheated and hurt that this atrocity would be kept from us. One perceptive class member asked us to imagine what it must feel like to the Indigenous people in our community who have known this story all their lives and know that most of the rest of us were kept ignorant of it. This formative experience in our class set most of us up for a semester of study guided in part by a recognition of the loss of our ancestral ways and a commitment to understand how and why this happens, as well as what we can do to revive them.

One year is hardly enough to make me an expert teacher in this discipline, but I have learned a handful of principles that enrich both my professional work and the pursuit of my Indigenous identity:

> Holism: the teacher must bring their whole, authentic self to the classroom. I am not teaching a prescribed curriculum to the class so much as modeling how the themes and practices of our discipline demand that we look critically at all aspects of our lives and communities and then take action to dismantle oppression and achieve equity. This means that at times I discuss the facets of my own identity and the ways in which oppression has been a part of my personal and family histories.
> Solidarity: we seek to create not only empathy toward the oppressed but also unity with them by taking actions to support their cause. We consider how people from across the globe joined to denounce the Dakota Access Pipeline. We join forces with local organizations to support immigrants who have just been released from the detention center in our community and to communicate with those who are still detained. We take turns each week acknowledging the lands on which we live and the people who have cared for them since time immemorial. When possible, we invite them and other marginalized people to our

> learning space to share with us their knowledge and help us refocus our attention.
>
> Regeneration and revitalization: we look for and celebrate ways in which Indigenous people and people of color around the Americas are revitalizing their life-sustaining traditions, whether it be the tongue of the Puyallup people being taught at the local tribal schools, the wisdom and presence of elders on Hawaii being turned to for guidance during the Mauna Kea protests, or the gastronomical feats of a Navajo/Diné chef who combines traditional ingredients with modern cooking techniques.

Throughout the semester, parents, educators, and community members regularly joined us, sometimes as invited guests, sometimes hoping that they could be a part of the discussion, and once in a while just lingering outside our circle of seats, finding something in our class that healed a wound opened in some other part of the school. My own misgivings about the fragmented state of my own indigeneity quickly dissipated as I saw the thirst that people of all ages showed for this type of curriculum. I learned that having the completely intact identity I longed for was not requisite to do this kind of work effectively. The scars and the desolate places help me relate better to people who have had similar experiences, binding me to them.

"I am large, I contain multitudes"

Dear Reader, if these recollections and reflections leave you believing that I am just a confused adult, grasping for something missing from my past, then you are beginning to understand my predicament. The puzzle that best describes what this feels like is the Rubik's Cube: I know what the end product is supposed to look like, but just as I begin to see a pattern and a logic to my twisting of the pieces, the world twists me by rearranging the stickers, revealing a different pattern below the surface that suddenly feels like the right solution, or even superimposing a new motif on top of what I thought were the originals. An outsider to my

lived experience might interpret being Lamanite or Aymara or a person of color as confusion, like trying to finish three different puzzles, only one of which can be fully solved, and only to the exclusion of the others. Why not just choose one?

I would cease to be me if I did this. Discarding any of these indigeneities to focus exclusively on one is not the path I choose. Like Walt Whitman, I can lean into being a walking contradiction, happy with the multitudes of generations, lives, and longings that I carry in me, even if they don't coexist in perfect harmony. My roots are in my mother's tearful Lamanite testimony, my cousin's colorful Aymara shirt, my students' hunger for a justice in which our modern society faces wrongs by which the past forged our present. To some, it may seem strange that an ethnic studies teacher counts himself as a Lamanite, to others that a Chileno Aymara finds shared cause with the Lakota and Diné. I understand if others don't see the same Rubik's palimpsest I do, if they struggle to make sense of what I find meaningful. To me, even those differences suggest that we are linked. What family is there that doesn't fight or hurt itself, even while acknowledging that something holds them together?

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