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Who Am I? A Reflection of the In-between

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Abstract: Adopted before her memory, the personal experiences of the author serve to interrogate the mass exportation and importation of Maya babies. In recounting her search for meaning and reconciliation, she presents to Maya and Non-Maya valuable insights into an expanded meaning for “Maya America”.

“Conocer la propia historia es enriquecer nuestra identidad del presente, y conocer lo complejo de nuestro pasado es también aceptarnos como parte de trayectorias más amplias. Eso implica reconocer también, en el caso de los mayas, que ha existido interacción y «mestizaje» con grupos no-mayas, pero que ello ha sido apropiado y resignificado desde la propia cultura, y no como imposición o, peor aún, «ladinización».” – Diego Vásquez Monterroso

A Note: The history of Guatemala, and Mayas in particular, is one of eradicating the people of indigeneity. From colonization to the Civil War to the creation of the caste system, indigeneity has been broken down generation to generation in order to allow white culture and people to thrive. The removal of babies from the Maya and poor populations is an act of genocide. The transracial shift from one culture to another, from indigenous to white, is a positive outcome for those who are in power in Guatemala. It means these powers no longer have to worry about these babies adding numbers to their opposition. Babies were at one point, one of Guatemala’s most significant exports, in one of the most corrupt adoption systems in the world. This is the reality the living exports of Guatemala have to contend with.

When I go to sleep at night, I am often thinking about the big questions: Where do I come from? Who are my people? Will I ever see the land I come from? Would my people accept me? Of course, the answers to these questions are big and powerful. And these kinds of questions have been swirling around in my head for my entire life.

When I was a child, my adopted mother told me at one point that my heritage was Maya. But what does that mean to a small brown child who was raised by European whiteness, who was told I was white? How could my adoptive parent say these two

different things? I was told, “Latin Americans are descendants of Spain.” Oh. My child’s mind wondered, “Then why do I look different, feel different... what about the Maya?” But in American books, the Maya were far away and long ago. I remember telling a white girl who was in class with me, “I’m Mayan!” Her reply was, “All your people are dead, you do know that, right?” And she walked away with her nose in the air. I remember feeling lost, alone, confused. I didn’t tell anyone else, “I’m Mayan” for another ten years.

I’m not sure at what age I started to learn about the modern history of Latin America. I was in my early 20’s, and I didn’t have many friends to hang out with. This meant spending a lot of time alone, learning about whatever came to mind to learn about. I thought a lot about my people, and I learned a lot about Latin America, but I was learning in English. I hated the Spanish language when I was growing up, as I had had some bad experiences with Latinos when I was a child, and I developed a strong lack of caring about it. Even a block against it, I might say. While spending all this time alone, I learned the meaning of mestizo. At this point, I thought for a long time that maybe I was mestizo. My adopted mother had, after all, told me that I was white, but with a different complexion. I didn’t really understand this, or anything about the caste system in Latin America as a child, just that I wasn’t white, and I wasn’t Black. Since I do not belong to a Mayan community, I must not be indigenous. I still resented mestizo culture, however. It never felt right. I never felt good about it, and I felt the same way about mestizo culture as I felt about the Spanish language. A block against it. Which was probably amplified by the way many Mexican Latinos interact with those from Central America. I also still had a feeling of immense pain whenever my thoughts strayed to Guatemalan and Mayan history, a sort of ache that never went away. A pain that starts in the guts and radiates up to the heart and throat.

It was at this point, faced with a lack of knowledge about my heritage that I turned towards Black and brown writers, activists, bloggers, and online platforms. I was out of touch with the will to understand myself, but I was pulled by a powerful force to care about others. I always had this urge to care for others and to care about the collective. And now, I was beginning to find a way to curate my knowledge. I decided to follow the gospel of brown and Black authors who made it possible for the younger generations to love themselves in a way that I had never been taught. White feminism was not all that important to me, but I remember listening to Kwame Ture speaking, and the machine in my head started turning on, and the mechanisms began to click. I started learning about revolutionary movements in-depth, about communism, about the American violence imposed on minorities worldwide that is hidden away in the American school system. I re-educated myself. Without knowing about the tradition of my people, I found my way

to believing in movements like *Ejército Guerrillero de Los Pobres* (The Guerilla Army of the Poor), and *Comité de Desarrollo* (CODECA), without yet knowing they had existed or do exist.

I can't tell you much about my birth family, as my mother was impoverished and illiterate, and my adoption papers give a very minimal amount of information. A common thread among adoptees, and a symptom of systematic oppression. It was over a year ago now that I was reunited with some of my family. It turns out my adoption papers didn't mention a very monumental piece of information: I had seven other siblings in the United States who had also been adopted. I knew of one, but it wasn't until I had taken a DNA test and matched with my other siblings that I found this out. We have since started to build our family relationship and began a search for family in Guatemala. As far as the results of the DNA test, I'm about 74% indigenous. Now, a DNA test doesn't hold the knowledge of who I am, nor does it give me permission to claim a reality where I don't exist. It merely allowed me to believe what I already felt in my mind and heart. Someone told me once that to claim to be Maya, I had to suffer Maya sufferings. I don't believe pain is a prerequisite to indigeneity, but if we are counting experiences, the adoption experience is a very Maya one.

I spent many years trying to keep separate all the parts of my identity: Maya, Guatemalan, American, Queer, Womxn, etc. The way American identity politics evolved in the last two decades also had a hand in this, which is a topic unto itself. And it is still a question that I contend with: Who am I? But my identity doesn't fit in a box the way American culture and the English language thinks it should. To the best of my knowledge, considering the way I feel, the way I think, and the way I interact with the world, I am Maya American. Which, actually, is a title I gave myself before I found this journal of the same name. When I opened up the first issue of *Maya America*, I felt a floodgate open, as if someone had finally come for me, and held out a hand to invite me in.

I did not think about this growing up, but I do now: Although I did not grow up around my people, I feel that the imprint of the Mayan spirit has made me who I am. The drive to care for the earth and its creatures, to decolonize the mind and spirit, to keep communal traditions and feelings alive, and the belief in community and the rights of people; these feelings resonate with me even though when I was younger I did not have words to express these ideas. I found a way to verbalize these ideas by myself, and through the Black, brown, and indigenous wisdom that I sought. I believe that the spirit of my people brought me to this point in time. I was not raised to be religious or spiritual, but I now believe that there is a genetic history and a cosmic history that a body can remember, if only one is open to it.