Brooke Larson, *The Lettered Indian: Race, Nation, and Indigenous Education in Twentieth-Century Bolivia*

Duke University Press, 2024, pp. xiv + 480

Bret Gustafson

Washington University in St. Louis

(Received 22 April 2024; accepted 23 April 2024)

The Lettered Indian is a beautifully crafted saga tracing Aymara struggles for access to literacy, schools, land and rights in the altiplano of Bolivia. Some of this story has been told in broad strokes, much of it accessible only in Bolivia. However, Brooke Larson has delved further into the archives to reconstruct in vivid detail the herculean efforts of Aymara leaders, scribes and activists, as well as their Bolivian allies, to secure the right to letters, despite the violent opposition of the oligarchic class and state. Cinematic in its scope and with a gripping pace, the book brings remarkable characters back to life and follows their journeys across social and natural landscapes that shift with the pendulum of Bolivian politics. The book is built from painstakingly compiled archives ranging from newspapers, memoirs, oral histories and pedagogical tracts to US embassy missives, a monumental task that makes the work the definitive text on the history of Indigenous education in Andean Bolivia.

This is basically a story of a 'decolonizing political counterculture' (p. 7) that rose to challenge the hacienda system and the racist and assimilationist proposals that characterised Bolivia's education strategies for most of the twentieth century. Aymara communities managed to build, at one point, a vast network of locally controlled one-room schools, much of it linked to the historic school of Warisata. Defying the landlords, who opposed the idea of literate peons, as well as the alternating neglect and hostility of the state itself, Aymara caciques and *amautas* (elder councillors) exercised a form of self-determination that preceded the building out of state schools themselves. Recovering this history with more nuance and detail than extant nationalist (and Aymara-centric) historiographies is the most significant contribution of the book.

Chapter 1 traces the emergence of ideas about Indigenous education in the early twentieth century. Eternally revolving around a mode of 'tutelary race thinking' (p. 8) and the fear-laden colonial trope of the 'Indian problem' (p. 21), ideas emanating from the oligarchic state ranged from overt rejection of schooling for Indians, to romantic ideas of preservation, to European and US-inspired models of the 'farm school' (p. 57) through which the Aymara would have a limited education aimed at keeping them working in the fields.

Chapter 2 turns to the Aymara, who pursued their own 'vernacular literacy practices' (p. 83) as part of a struggle to defend the land. Caciques *apoderados*, literate leaders who used land titles and legal manoeuvres, made long judicial pilgrimages, slept in safe houses to avoid the army and landlords, spread knowledge about land titles, and set up small schools to teach basic literacy. Figures like Eduardo Nina

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X24000348 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Quispe and Santos Markos T'ula often paid with prison time, whippings and persecution, but managed to build a 'subaltern archive' (p. 85), all in the context of anti-Aymara rural terror and repression.

Chapter 3 turns to the allies – the Spanish-speaking progressive Bolivians who threw their support behind Aymara education, most significantly in the building of the Warisata school. The friendship between the Aymara cacique Avelino Siñani and the school teacher Elizardo Pérez has long been held up in Bolivia as the first example of intercultural schooling success. Yet Larson tells a much richer story, drawing on Pérez's memoir and interviews with descendants of both men (and Pérez's widow), as well as fellow travellers like Carlos Salazar, bringing them all to life with vivid detail, as they struggled to create what would become a decolonising anchor in the heart of the altiplano. Warisata expanded its influence so much so that it would eventually be targeted for dismantling, even though its curricular praxis was far from radical. Its very existence as a successful and autonomous Aymara-controlled network of schools with a significant amount of sympathy among Bolivia's post-Chaco War progressive thinkers, was a threat to the oligarchic ontological and political order.

So, the regime strikes back. Chapter 4 traces the revenge of the oligarchy, as the post-Chaco War governments, no longer led by socialist populists, used all manner of subterfuge to dismantle Warisata and the network of rural schools. With the 1940s came the return of the racist assimilationists and the arrival of US reformers. Thus an early decolonial effort gave way to the reassertion of '*mestizaje*' and 'peasantry' as the future of the Aymara.

Even so, the Aymara persisted. Chapter 5 follows leaders like the remarkable veteran of the Chaco War, Antonio Alvarez Mamani, who make journeys across the altiplano to organise local assemblies, share knowledge through 'radical print networks' (p. 210), and lead petitions for the right to control their own schools. Here begins the United States' first imperial foray into viewing the Aymara as a threat and deploying their own counterinsurgency strategies against these efforts. But the period from 1946 to 1952, known as the revolutionary *sexenio*, was charged by this effervescence of rural and urban radicalism coming together.

Nonetheless, US reformers were hard at work themselves, studying the Aymara 'problem' and designing school plans that hoped to turn the Aymara into happy homemakers and 'skilled, disciplined, and hygienic peasants', the topic of Chapter 6. With pictures of white 1940s-era US housewives, these textbooks imagined the Aymara as something akin to small-town Americans. Reformers like Ernest Maes, a veteran of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, had no interest in Warisata or Indigenous rights, suggesting that the time for equal citizenship had not arrived for the Aymara.

Chapter 7 examines the 1952 revolution, during which Aymara caciques once again took the forefront to demand the expansion of schooling. Aymara communities inundated the revolutionary government with petitions for land and schooling. While the new government promised radical change, it also reproduced older ideas. The Indians would remain as peasants, rural schools would be different from urban ones, and neither equality, much less decolonisation, would be entertained. Even so, on the foundation of 50 years of struggle, the rural school was now 'irreversible' (p. 314).

Larson ends this epic account by describing the fascinating story of how Alvarez Mamani, now a venerable elder, snuck into the 1954 Indigenista Congress and posed a plan for a hemispheric American Indian Union. Yet the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, MNR) government, now turning back to Washington DC for aid and advice, was too committed to acculturation to give such radical ideas attention. It would take another few decades of struggle and a generation of youth who were educated in the wake of 1952 to create the Indigenous resurgence that would radically transform the country in the 1990s and early 2000s. The book ends recounting the rise of Aymara president Morales, whose government passed a new education reform law named after Siñani and Pérez, the founders of the Warisata school.

The Lettered Indian is a monumental work that should become a key reference point for twentieth-century Latin American history, even beyond the theme of Indigenous education in Bolivia. It is also a model for writing, as it richly paints urban and rural landscapes and colourful figures of all stripes and personalities, and does so paying close attention to the ebbs and flows of political and economic dynamics. And, against the histories of violence and racism out of which it came, it is also, as Larson suggests, a story that is 'unexpectedly hopeful and inspiring' (p. 337).

doi:10.1017/S0022216X24000348