

RACIAL CATEGORIES: INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AND MORMONISM, 1850s TO PRESENT

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In February 2008, then prime minister of Australia Kevin Rudd stood before the nation and apologised to Indigenous Australians, people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, for the so-called “Stolen Generations.”¹ These infamous eugenicist policies of forced removal and institutionalisation, in existence from the early to late twentieth century, aimed to eradicate and later assimilate Australia’s native populations.² As a result of these programs, Indigenous families and communities were gravely fractured, and decades of intergenerational trauma has followed, compounded by subsequent government policies.³ Within this speech, Prime Minister Rudd retold the life story of Lorna “Nanna Nungala” Fejo, a Warumungu woman from the Northern

1. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997); Doris Kartinyeri, *Kick The Tin* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2000).

2. Peter Read, “Reflecting on the Stolen Generations,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 8, no. 13 (July/Aug. 2014): 3–6; Noah Riseman, “The Stolen Veteran: Institutionalisation, Military Service, and the Stolen Generations,” *Aboriginal History* 35 (2011): 57–77.

3. Katelyn Barney and Elizabeth MacKinlay, “‘Singing Trauma Trails’: Songs of the Stolen Generations in Indigenous Australia,” *Music and Politics* 4, no. 2 (2010): 1–25; Dylan Lino, “Monetary Compensation and the Stolen Generations: A Critique of the Federal Labor Government’s Position,” *Australian Indigenous Law Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 18–34; Ngitji Ngitji Mona Tur, *Cicada Dreaming* (Adelaide, South Australia: Hyde Park Press, 2010).

Territory.⁴ Lorna Fejo was torn from her family as a toddler, but later in life became an activist, health worker, and respected elder within her community.⁵ What was not acknowledged in the prime minister's address, however, was that Fejo was a long-committed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁶

Baptised in 1973, not long after a significant change in Church doctrine and policy, Fejo's story represents a new era of LDS engagement with Indigenous Australians in the second half of the twentieth century. In response to the National Apology, the Australian Mormon Newsroom published a story about Fejo and her tireless work in the realm of Indigenous activism and health, for which she has received numerous awards.⁷ This article described Fejo's emphasis on "keeping [families] together . . . and that love is passed down the generations," as well as her forgiveness of the Aboriginal stockman who participated in her forced removal when she was four years old.⁸ That Fejo, who instructed the prime minister on his National Apology, is also a Latter-day Saint is an example of the place Indigenous Australians have within both Oceanic and global Latter-day Saint history.

4. Darren Coyne, "Waiting for an Apology: Hundreds Will Put Pressure on Rudd to Keep Promise," *Koori Mail*, Jan. 16, 2008, 1, available at <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/koori-mail>.

5. Lorna Fejo, "The Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture Program," *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal* 18, no. 6 (November/December 1994): 16; Lorna Tennant, "Women and Land Rights: Kiuk and Wagaidj Women in the Darwin Area," in *We Are Bosses Ourselves: The Status and Role of Aboriginal Women Today*, edited by Fay Gale (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983), 84–86.

6. "Mormon Grandmother Helps Australian Prime Minister Say 'Sorry,'" *Mormon Newsroom*, Apr. 8, 2008, Canberra, Australia, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormon-grandmother-helps-australian-prime-minister-say--sorry->.

7. "Mormon Grandmother Helps Australian Prime Minister Say 'Sorry.'"

8. "Mormon Grandmother Helps Australian Prime Minister Say 'Sorry.'"

This article will examine the complicated status of Indigenous Australians within Mormonism, particularly in relation to the racialised doctrines of the Church, from the 1850s to the present. Throughout most of Mormonism's history, Indigenous Australians occupied an ambiguous place in Latter-day Saint theologies of race and lineage. This stands in stark contrast to other Indigenous groups throughout the world, particularly within the Pacific and the Americas, whose ethnic identity has been cosmologically deliberated since the nineteenth century.⁹ From here, this article will argue that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latter-day Saint missionaries largely avoided preaching to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and Church leaders prioritised the conversion of non-Indigenous Australians. Due to perceived physical similarities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those of African descent, Church leaders initially believed that Indigenous Australians were under a divine curse, seriously limiting missionary engagement with these populations.

In 1964, the First Presidency wrote to the Australasian mission president and deemed Indigenous Australians to be “not of the Negroid Race.”¹⁰ This theological ruling stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander converts were eligible for priesthood ordination. Following the First Presidency's 1964 letter, and the missionary efforts that prompted its ruling, the Australian Church has experienced growth

9. Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Bruce A. Chadwick and Thomas Garrow, “Native Americans,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992): 981–85; John-Charles Duffy, “The Use of ‘Lamanite’ in Official LDS Discourse,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 118–67.

10. Leonidas DeVon Mecham and Janet Frame Mecham, comps., *Book of Remembrance: Australia LDS Missions, 1840 to 1976*, 57–58. (A special thank you to Cecily Watson for supplying the photographs of this source from her mother Marjorie Newton's collection of sources.)

in the number of both Indigenous and Australian converts. There are two important stories about this outcome. First, the ambiguous racial lineages within Mormonism continue to be important for making sense of Indigenous identity within LDS cosmology. Second, for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Mormonism presents a way to address intergenerational trauma through its genealogical programs, particularly in relation to the twentieth-century eugenicist programs of the Australian government. As shall be explored, there is evidence of a synthesis between the doctrines, scriptures, and institutions of the Church and contemporary Indigenous issues. This is as the Church's vast genealogical resources have helped to reconnect families shattered through the oppressive imperialism of the Australian government. Many Indigenous Australians see Mormonism as uniquely equipped to help address the trauma caused by Australia's complicated history of racialised colonialism and violence.

The historical arc traced here shows how the incremental reception of peripheral ethnic minorities in the Church complicates historical narratives of racialised doctrines and institutions within Mormon history. As the Australian example shows, it was not just the civil rights movement in the United States or expanding missionary work in the African diaspora, especially Brazil, that prompted Church leaders to reimagine racial categories, including reassessing the scope of the priesthood ban, but also continued growth amongst Indigenous groups throughout Oceania, including Fiji and Australia.

Race in Latter-day Saint Teaching

In order to understand the place of Indigenous Australians within the Church, it is important to first briefly contextualise the complexity of race within Mormon doctrines and history. In regards to theology, this includes the historical belief that African peoples, due to their lineage, had inherited both the "curse of Cain" and the "curse of Ham," separate

but interrelated afflictions of supposed divine disfavour.¹¹ In Latter-day Saint cosmology, the former curse, named after the son of the biblical Adam, was apparently evidenced by dark complexion, whilst the latter was based upon the scriptural cursing of Ham, the son of Noah.¹² Latter-day Saint doctrinaires have referred to Genesis 9, in which Noah curses his grandson Canaan, the son of Ham, to be the “servant of servants.”¹³ Moreover, the LDS Book of Abraham narrates Ham’s marriage to the Canaanite woman Egyptus, for which his progeny was cursed with not being able to receive the priesthood.¹⁴ These particular scriptures, as well as others, have been used in Latter-day Saint theology as justification for the Church’s historical support of slavery and segregation, both within the United States and globally.¹⁵ Moreover, they have been used as the canonical basis for the Church’s barring of African peoples

11. For more detailed information regarding race, scripture, and blood in Mormon thought, see: Newell Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith, eds., *Black and Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Armand L. Mauss, “The Fading of Pharaoh’s Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban Against Blacks in the Mormon Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 10–45.

12. Fred C. Collier, comp. and ed., *The Teachings of President Brigham Young, Vol. 3, 1852–1854* (Salt Lake City: Collier’s Publishing Co., 1987), 49.

13. Genesis 9:20–27.

14. Letter from Joseph Smith, Jr. to Oliver Cowdrey, *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 290; Abraham 1.

15. Harris and Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks*, 27; Lester E. Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 14; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 107–08; G. D. Watt, comp., *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10 (London: Daniel H. Wells Publisher), 251.

from the priesthood and temple for much of the Church's existence.¹⁶ However, in June 1978, the First Presidency announced in general conference that all racial restrictions on the priesthood and temple had been removed.¹⁷ As a result, there was radical institutional change that allowed members of African descent to receive priesthood and temple ordinances, as well as opened up missions in geographic areas where the Church had not formally proselyted.

There has been burgeoning academic literature over the past few decades in relation to Mormonism's racialised theology and the effects it has had on the development of the worldwide Church. For example, Armand Mauss, in his 2003 book *All Abraham's Children*, explores the evolution of the Church's racialised doctrines, cosmology, and institutions over the last two centuries. Mauss succinctly contextualises the religious milieu of the Church within the broader cultural environment in which it formed and developed. Similarly, W. Paul Reeve's 2015 book *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* notes the consistent tensions between Mormon and broader American identity. For instance, due to the Church's history of mass emigration, polygamy, and its cosmological view of Native Americans, Reeve argues that Mormons were seen by broader American society as a "pariah race."¹⁸ He posits that as Mormonism grappled with this identity crisis, it began to expand and entrench the belief that Latter-day Saints were a theologically and racially "chosen people."¹⁹

16. D. Dmitri Hurlbut, "The LDS Church and the Problem of Race: Mormonism in Nigeria, 1946–1978," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 51, no. 1 (2018): 1–4; Mauss, "The Fading of Pharaoh's Curse," 11–15.

17. Official Declaration 2, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>.

18. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24–34.

19. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 40.

Likewise, Max Mueller's 2017 book *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* investigates the scriptural-based racial hierarchies that existed within Mormonism from its inception in 1830. As with Mauss and Reeve, Mueller argues that Latter-day Saint doctrines were not created within a vacuum but instead were the result of and reaction to an increasingly varied American, and worldwide, culture. However, along with these overarching histories of Mormonism, identity, and race, there is also a vast, nuanced literature that examines unique aspects of these complicated themes. For example, there is scholarship that discusses the adaptation of Mormon cosmology, rituals, and racial hierarchies within Oceania, Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Indian subcontinent.²⁰ Although local distinctions exist, there is general consensus amongst scholars that the Church has a multifaceted history with racial theology and identity throughout the world.

20. See, for example: Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land*; Hokulani K. Aikau, "Indigeneity in the Diaspora: The Case of Native Hawaiians at Iosepa, Utah," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (Sept. 2010): 477–500; Booker T. Alston, "The Cumorah Baseball Club: Mormon Missionaries and Baseball in South Africa," *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 3 (2014): 93–126; Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou, and the LDS Faith in Haiti," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (2004): 1–34; Chiung Hwang Chen, "In Taiwan But Not of Taiwan: Challenges of the LDS Church in the Wake of the Indigenous Movement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 3–31; Mark L. Grover, "The Mormon Priesthood Revelation and the São Paulo, Brazil Temple," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1990): 39–52; J. B. Haws, "The Freeze and the Thaw: The LDS Church and State of Ghana in the 1980s," in *The Worldwide Church: Mormonism as a Global Religion*, edited by Michael A. Goodman and Mauro Properzi (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2016), 21–41; Hurlbut, "Mormonism in Nigeria, 1946–1978"; Shinji Takagi, *The Trek East: Mormonism Meets Japan, 1901–1968* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2016); Taunalyn Rutherford, Joe Chelladurai, and Vinna Chintaram, "Race and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in India," *Mormon Studies Review* 7 (2020): 52–60.

Indigenous Australians in Early LDS Racial Thought

Of significance to the contextualisation of Indigenous Australians' ambiguous place in Mormonism was the conscientious pivot by mid-nineteenth-century missionaries to proselyte actively amongst various Indigenous groups in the Pacific. This began with the *Māohi* (Native Tahitians) in 1844 before spreading to the *Kanak Maoli* (Native Hawaiians) by 1851.²¹ As part of this emphasis, a cosmological connection was made between Oceanic peoples and Mormon theology, wherein they were believed to be related to the peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon descending from a character named Hagoth, who sailed away never to be heard from again.²² Hokulani Aikau and Ian Barber, amongst others, have noted that there is continual ambiguity as to whether Pacific Islanders are classified as Lamanites or Nephites, though in the popular imagination there remains a connection between Polynesian racial origin and Latter-day Saint scripture.²³ This has permeated into

21. R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 4, 96–97.

22. Alma 63:5–8; R. Lanier Britsch, “Maori Traditions and the Mormon Church,” *New Era*, June 1981, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1981/06/maori-traditions-and-the-mormon-church?lang=eng>.

23. For more detailed discussions about race, scripture, and Latter-day Saint theology within the Pacific, see: Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land*; Ian Barber, “Between Biculturalism and Assimilation: The Changing Place of Maori Culture in the Twentieth-Century New Zealand Mormon Church,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 9, no. 2 (1995): 142–69; Ian G. Barber, “Matakite, Mormon Conversions, and Māori-Israelite Identity Work in Colonial New Zealand,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 167–220; Selwyn Katene, ed., *Turning the Hearts of the Children: Early Māori Leaders in the Mormon Church* (Wellington, New Zealand: Steele Roberts Publishing, 2014); Marjorie Newton, *Tiki and Temple: The Mormon Mission in New Zealand, 1854–1958* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2012); Grant Underwood, “Mormonism, the Maori and Cultural Authenticity,” *Journal of Pacific History* 35, no. 2 (2000): 133–46; Grant Underwood, ed., *Pioneers in the Pacific: Memory, History and Cultural Identity among the Latter-day Saints* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005).

the modern day, as Hokulani Aikau makes clear in her book *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i*: “within the Church framework Polynesians are understood as being ‘cousins’ to Native Americans and thus descended from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel.”²⁴

However, Indigenous Australians have been excluded from this Book of Mormon racial genealogy, ostensibly due to perceived similarities to African peoples. By the early twentieth century, Church leaders posited that Indigenous Australians and African peoples were racially linked. However, this reflected the wider racialisation of Indigenous Australians in Western pseudoscience and religions, which equated appearance to assumed heritage, character, and abilities.²⁵ For example, throughout much of the twentieth century, British-Australian racial theorists generally suggested that Indigenous Australians were of African descent, and Aboriginal peoples were referred to as “Australnegers” in German anthropology.²⁶ This almost-universal conflation was the basis for the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the theological developments that cosmologically associated Pacific Islander ethnic identity with Latter-day Saint scriptures.

Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint missionaries were the first of their faith to describe Indigenous Australians and provided the early racial analysis in their religious idiom. Their impressions of Indigenous Australians tended to be racist, condescending, and dismissive. For example, in 1854, John Murdock, who was assigned to preach in

24. Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land*, 42

25. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 209–10.

26. It is important to note that there was a wide variety in nineteenth-century racial thought and pseudoscientific theories. For discussions on this, please see: Antje Kühnast, “Theorising Race and Evolution: German *Anthropologie*’s Utilisation of Australian Aboriginal Skeletal Remains During the Long Nineteenth Century” (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2017), 149–55; Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin, “How Race Became Everything: Australia and Polygenism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 5 (2008): 972–73.

Sydney, compared the native peoples of Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas in a report of his proselyting efforts:

New Zealand, 1600 miles from this [Sydney] with much population, of both Europeans, and Native, the latter industrious, and intelligent, the young can talk, read, and write the English; But the natives on this Isle are more indolent than the American Indians. On Vandeman's [Tasmania] there is none, for they have been all removed by the English.²⁷

However, there is little evidence that Murdock had any contact with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, as he was solely focused on the British-Australian colonies.²⁸ The other journals and autobiography of John Murdock contain no further references to Indigenous Australians, nor do the journals of William Hyde and John Warren Norton, both of whom served missions in various Australian cities during the nineteenth century.²⁹

Like these early missionaries, for the most part of the next century Latter-day Saints ignored Indigenous Australians. The available historical reports and records of the Australasian missions between 1895 and the 1950s do not indicate any references to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, bar two exceptions.³⁰ The first is a 1912 photograph in

27. John Murdock, Journal and autobiography, circa 1830–1867, Church History Library, MS 1194, p. 104, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record?id=e8018e8a-058f-4a05-844b-357b250c1d0d&view=browse>.

28. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 209.

29. Murdock, Journal and autobiography; John Warren Norton, Missionary journal, 1857–1858, Church History Library, MS 14686, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=886cd34a-fe2b-456e-81aa-276ff5c98ad1&crate=0&index=0>; William Hyde, William Hyde diary, 1852–1854, Church History Library, MS 9358, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=1f609865-6fe1-48c2-a862-59d3a82df19a&crate=0&index=0>.

30. Australia Sydney South Mission manuscript history and historical reports, 1895–1970; volume 1, Church History Library, LR 108712, p. 168, available at: <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=aa192eba-317a-4186-a89f-d7a12be39916&crate=0&index=0>.

the first volume of *Australasian Mission History* showing three missionaries with two Aboriginal men, one of them labelled the “king of their tribe,” all of whom are holding boomerangs.³¹ As this source contains no further information or reference, it is arguable, then, that Indigenous Australians, whilst known to missionaries and ecclesiastical leaders, were seen as “exotic” but not viewed as serious targets for proselytisation. It should be noted, however, that only the first volume of this record is open to research; there are three additional volumes, as well as numerous sources from various Australian missions, but these are restricted in the Church’s archives. Further examination of currently unavailable sources may reveal additional information.

In the second, Joseph B. Gunnell, who served in the Australian Mission from 1922–24, wrote a description of the “White Australia Policy,” which denied immigration to anyone not of Northern European descent from the early 1900s until the 1950s. He wrote, “No negroes, Japanese, Chinese, or Indians are allowed to live in Australia. It is called white Australia. Soon after Australia was discovered, the natives lived on reservations like our Indians do here.”³² This racially restrictive policy was first eased to attract Southern European workers in the post–World War II period, before allowing Pacific Islanders and Middle Easterners entrance into the country from the 1970s.³³ Gunnell’s

31. Australia Sydney South Mission, 168.

32. Joseph B. Gunnell, Missionary journal, Church History Library, MS 20462, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=247db0e7-f2dd-448d-a0b8-f6a6fa8f5eb8&crate=0&index=0>.

33. Margaret Allen, “Shadow Letters and the ‘Karnana’ Letter: Indians Negotiate the White Australia Policy, 1901–21,” *Life Writing* 8, no. 2 (2011): 190–91; Anne Barton, “Going White: Claiming a Racialised Identity through the White Australia Policy,” *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 7, no. 23 (2011): 17; Paul Hamer, “‘Unsophisticated and Unsuitable’: Australian Barriers to Pacific Islander Immigration from New Zealand,” *Political Science* 66, no. 2 (Dec. 2014): 100–04; Gabriella Haynes, “Colouring In: Defining White Australia’s Internal Frontiers,” *Agora* 49, no. 2 (June 2014): 5–7.

brief summary again stands as an extremely rare discussion of race in Australia in LDS sources.

This lack of discussion about Indigenous Australians may have a number of plausible explanations. These silences in the records may reveal the lack of contact that many early Latter-day Saint missionaries had with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as their priority to preach to ethnically British and European Australians. Historian Marjorie Newton posits that this was largely due to what is termed the “tyranny of distance”: during much of the Church’s existence in Australia, it was immensely difficult for missionaries to travel beyond major cities and towns.³⁴ This was compounded by the fact that the main urban centres of Australia are far removed from each other and it was difficult to maintain enough communication to establish branches of the Church.³⁵ John Murdock’s journals indicate the accuracy of Newton’s arguments, as he wrote of the disappointment that nineteenth-century missionaries experienced as they were not able to travel “without purse or scrip.”³⁶ The American custom of welcoming itinerant preachers into homes was not part of the Australian cultural milieu.

Besides distance, the small number of LDS missionaries in Australia also contributed to the lack of significant contacts. Clarence H. Tingey, who served in Australia as a young missionary in 1917 before becoming mission president, explained in a 1973 interview that the largest issue facing the growth of the Church in Australia was resistance from the government. Tingey reminisced that during his time as a younger missionary, the Australian government had ruled that no more than ten missionaries could enter the country at a time.³⁷ Although the

34. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 159.

35. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 178–85.

36. John Murdock, *Journal and autobiography*, 101.

37. Clarence H. Tingey interview, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1973, Church History Library, OH 133, p. 16, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record?id=6f4277ff-24de-4d67-9a01-5a5b6dalc078&view=browse>.

number was doubled under Tingey's time as mission president, this was still a small contingent of missionaries for such a vast continent. As a result, Australia has always had relatively low conversions. Whilst tens of thousands left Britain and Europe for Utah in the nineteenth century, fewer than a thousand left Australia during the same period.³⁸ Even after the end of the Latter-day Saint migrations, the Church in Australia remained small, particularly in contrast to the rest of the Pacific, which saw a boom of conversions in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.³⁹

The meagre efforts at proselytising in Australia encountered further limitations to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The perpetual marginalisation of Indigenous Australians was rooted in systemic measures, both geographically and ideologically.⁴⁰ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were predominantly situated either within the interior of the continent or on distant coastal islands, far removed from urban centres. Even the significant numbers of Indigenous Australians who lived in major cities and towns from the eighteenth century were closely monitored by various government

38. John Devitry-Smith, "The Wreck of the *Julia Ann*," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Apr. 1989): 6–7; Ann Lazarsfeld-Jensen, "The Lost Tribes of Mansfield: How An English Market Town Was Won by the Mormons in Mid-Victorian Times," *Culture and Religion* 17, no. 2 (2016): 148–61; Marjorie Newton, "The Gathering of the Australian Saints in the 1850s," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (Apr. 1987): 9.

39. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 174.

40. Harry Blagg, Neil Morgan, Chris Cunneen, and Anna Ferrante, *Systemic Racism as a Factor in the Over-Representation of Aboriginal People in the Victorian Criminal Justice System*, (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, September 2005); Beverley Raphael, Patricia Swan, and Nada Martinek, "Intergenerational Aspects of Trauma for Australian Aboriginal People," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, edited by Yael Danieli (Boston: Springer Publishers, 1998), 327–28.

agencies.⁴¹ There were legislative bans that barred many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from housing within urban centres, and restrictions on movement, marriage, and employment were enforced.⁴² As a result, many Indigenous Australians remained on the periphery of Australian society until the mid-twentieth century, as most lived on missions, reserves, and rural townships, and those who lived in urban centres were under government restraints.

But geography and access alone cannot fully explain the lack of contact. As noted above, LDS leaders also engaged in racialised thinking in regards to Indigenous Australians, and thus they were subject to the same exclusions from full participation as those of African descent. For example, in 1921, Hugh Cannon reported at the end of David O. McKay's apostolic world tour that "Church members in Australia are all white, practically no work being done among the Aborigines."⁴³ This open admittance is important, as it reveals that Church leaders were not oblivious to the fact that missionary work had not been done amongst Australia's First Peoples.

The lack of missionary work between 1850 and 1950 was not entirely passive but rather the result of LDS racial teachings at the time. In 1938, a missionary reported about an Aboriginal family in Bundaberg, Queensland:

Mrs. Grace and her family have asked for baptism but from orders we have received from the president of the mission they are not anxious to

41. Kay Anderson and Jane M. Jacobs, "From Urban Aborigines to Aboriginality and the City: One Path Through the History of Australian Cultural Geography," *Australian Geographical Studies* [now *Geographical Research*] 35, no. 1 (1997): 12–22.

42. Fay Gale and Alison Brookman, *Urban Aborigines*, Aborigines in Australian Society, vol. 8 (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Australian National University Press, 1972).

43. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 210.

have them come into the Church. Apostle Smith and Rufus K. Hardy [who were touring the mission at the time] also told us . . . they are of the Negro race.⁴⁴

It is apparent that this Aboriginal family was explicitly barred from baptism, despite the fact that it was not policy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to deny African people baptism or confirmation into the Church.⁴⁵ However, it appears there were informal prohibitions at work, even if they were not official Church policy. Nevertheless, this source does highlight the fact that the Church hierarchy perceived Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be cosmologically linked to African people.

Racial Recategorisation and New Missions

With these racial genealogies linking Indigenous Australians to Africa, the LDS map of available missionary work was constrained for the first century of LDS presence on the continent. In the second half of the twentieth century, these racial categorisations underwent significant changes. By the 1950s, non-LDS racial theorists had started to make distinctions between Australia's native ethnic groups and recategorise them. Anthropologists began to emphasise an interconnectedness between Torres Strait Islanders and other Pacific peoples.⁴⁶ This development was mirrored by ambiguous government classifications of

44. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 210.

45. Bruce R. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Publishing, 1954), 55–56; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 265.

46. Anderson and Perrin, "How Race Became Everything," 973; Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

Torres Strait Islanders as Polynesian and Pacific Islanders for a time.⁴⁷ These racial recategorisations were characteristic of the post-WWII era in LDS thought. Ian Barber points out that Native Fijians were considered “not of the Negroid races” and granted full Church privileges in 1958.⁴⁸ A new racial map was emerging in LDS thought that would transform how ecclesiastical leaders distinguished between various ethnicities, even if previously perceived as connected.

These new categorisations connected some Indigenous Australians to the Pacific rather than to Africa and may have influenced the Church to send a small group of missionaries to Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait, in 1961.⁴⁹ These efforts led to some success for the Church.⁵⁰ Fred E. Woods, in his article “Making Friends Down Under,” claims that although missionaries were at first treated with suspicion by Torres Strait Islander communities and at times were called “white witch doctors,” acceptance was quickly forthcoming.⁵¹ According to Woods, the first convert to the Church on Thursday Island was May Tatipata, who belonged to a Muslim family; she was baptised on May 5, 1961.⁵² Moreover, in 1962, the local newspaper *Torres News* reported

47. Anna Shnukal, “Torres Strait Islanders,” in *Multicultural Queensland 2001: 100 Years, 100 Communities, A Century of Contributions*, edited by Maximilian Brändle (Brisbane: Multicultural Affairs Queensland, Department of the Premier and the Cabinet, 2001), 4.

48. Ian Barber, “Faith Across Cultures: Research on Mormonism in Oceania,” *Mormon Studies Review* 6 (2019): 64.

49. Fred E. Woods, “Making Friends Down Under: The Beginnings of LDS Missionary Work on Thursday Island, Queensland, Australia, 1961,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 106–07, 123n61.

50. Shnukal, “Torres Strait Islanders,” 11.

51. Woods, “Making Friends Down Under,” 121n48.

52. Woods, “Making Friends Down Under,” 123n61.

that subsequent Mormon missionaries were received with traditional dances before they began to proselyte.⁵³

Previous scholarship on changes to LDS teachings on race have understandably focused on the civil rights politics in the United States.⁵⁴ Other studies have pointed to pressures on missionary work in Brazil and Africa as a context for changing LDS teachings on race and priesthood.⁵⁵ However, it is significant that in places like Australia, more incremental changes to LDS racial hierarchies and lineages were remaking LDS racial boundaries, setting in motion precedents to the revelation ending the connection between race and priesthood completely. These missionary efforts amongst the newly recategorised Torres Islanders may have prompted mission president Morgan Coombs to inquire to senior leaders about priesthood ordination, long unavailable for Indigenous Australians. Newton argues that by this time, there were also other Aboriginal individuals and families who had joined the Church, particularly those who had been adopted by European-Australian families during the tumultuous years of the Stolen Generations.⁵⁶

Coombs wrote to the First Presidency on November 28, 1963 seeking guidance on the question. In 1964, the First Presidency responded, setting new policy based on racial categories.⁵⁷ This letter reads in full:

Dear President Coombs, since receiving your letter of November 28, 1963, we have given some consideration to the question therein raised:

53. "Four Mormons Visit the Island," *Torres News*, Thursday Island, Queensland, May 1, 1962, 12, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/255802411>.

54. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 218–20.

55. Grover, "The Mormon Priesthood Revelation and the São Paulo, Brazil Temple," 39–53.

56. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 210.

57. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 94.

namely, the advisability of conferring the priesthood upon people in Australia of aboriginal blood who have joined the Church. We are pleased to give our consent to the conferring of the priesthood upon such of these brethren as may otherwise be worthy, in the event that there is no definite evidence that they have Negroid blood. Signed David O. McKay, Hugh B. Brown, and N. Eldon Tanner.⁵⁸

The letter signalled new approaches to Indigenous Australians and authorised full membership privileges to them. The key to this change was in separating them from “Negroid blood,” though the letter itself did not opine on the racial origins or genealogy of the First Peoples at all. No further context or explanation for the 1964 letter is mentioned in Coombs’s 1974 interview with Charles Ursenbach.⁵⁹

Few sources exist from this period, but one sheds some light on the practices of LDS missionaries in response to this letter. The childhood memoir of multi-award-winning Wiradjuri author Kerry Reed-Gilbert, *The Cherry Picker’s Daughter*, describes her Mormon baptism in 1966, in the central New South Wales township of Leeton, roughly six hundred kilometres (four hundred miles) inland from Sydney. She reminisces:

We’re going to Church again, but this time, it’s the Mormons. We go to them for about six months while we’re in Leeton, this time doing the oranges. . . . Mummy makes ‘em a cup of Milo every time they come and visit. They’re not allowed to drink tea or coffee so it’s Milo instead. We’ve all gotta have it when they’re here. . . .

We go to Church and put our money in the tin, but sometimes it’s hard to do that; we need the money, too. We do it, anyway. . . . The Mormons baptise us all and cousin Billy, too, in the Murrumbidgee River, which is just right for us ‘cause we’re river people.

The Christening takes place five days after my tenth birthday: 29th October 1966. We all gotta dress in white, then they take us out in the

58. Mecham and Mecham, *Book of Remembrance*, 57–58; Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 210.

59. Morgan S. Coombs interview, Mar. 30, 1974, Salt Lake City, Utah, Church History Library, OH 192, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=03533c5d-190e-4249-a46c-1d7454f61894&crate=0&index=0>.

water and dunk us under. I come up spluttering as they hold you down so the water goes up your nose. We have a big barbeque in the park when it's over.

Reed-Gilbert's baptism was in 1966, only two years after the approval for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to receive the priesthood. The reminiscence does not include any discussion of whether the men in the family were ordained to the priesthood, nor how long the family remained connected to the Church, but the precise dating of the memory makes it especially useful to shed light on fresh conversions of Indigenous Australians during this period in the immediate wake of the Church's new racial categories.

Unofficial LDS Racial Classification

The 1964 letter authorizing priesthood ordination for Indigenous Australians who were not of African descent did not explain where these peoples fit into LDS racial cosmology. The lack of affirmative classification in the 1964 First Presidency letter meant that other Latter-day Saints set their task to establishing racial genealogies. There are a number of sources that explore the cosmological place of Indigenous Australians within Mormonism. At least one famous Church writer, W. Cleon Skousen, touched on the subject in his 1973 book *Treasures from the Book of Mormon, Volume 3*. As this book was written after the 1964 letter to President Coombs but five years before the 1978 revelation on priesthood and race, it is an immensely useful source to contextualise the development of the place Indigenous Australians have within the racialised hierarchies of Mormonism. In this book, Skousen first chronicles the canonical migration of the Book of Mormon figure Hagoth and his followers into Polynesia. Following this exegesis, Skousen writes two pages regarding Indigenous Australians and Fijian peoples:

As the Polynesians drift west, they began to mix with other peoples coming east. Some of these were of much darker skin than the Polynesians and the question arose as to whether there would be any of

these who would come under the restrictions of Priesthood service because of their lineage. The President of the Church ruled that the dark-skinned aborigines of Australia and the Fiji Islanders were not under the restriction. At the time this ran contrary to the conclusions of anthropologists who considered both of these people to be of the Negroid extraction.⁶⁰

Skousen then quotes early-twentieth-century Anglo-Maori anthropologist, doctor, and museum director Sir Peter Buck/Te Rangi Hiroa, arguing that “Australian aborigines” are “Dravidian stock” and “not Negroids” but rather related to Mediterranean peoples. Skousen then offers his own commentary:

It should be noted that the Dravidians were the first settlers in India after the Great Flood, and were later driven south by the Aryan races who followed them. The dark brown Dravidians were looked down upon by the Aryans. They may have very well occupied a status in the early period similar to the role of the Lamanites in America after the division of Lehi’s descendants. Dravidians often have light brown hair in their youth and medium brown skin, but exposure to the elements often turns them as black as the Negroid peoples as they mature.

The Fiji islanders have some characteristics which anthropologists have identified with the oceanic Negroid migrations, but they, too, will turn out to be Dravidians or some similar racial origin mixed with the Polynesians. Meanwhile, they are not encumbered by Priesthood restrictions which, of course, indicates something about their descent.⁶¹

Despite his emphasis on racialised physical characteristics, Skousen’s teachings were not an aberration but reflected one effort at integrating Indigenous Australians into LDS racial categories. In this period, Indigenous Australians were assigned a feasible, unofficial place within Latter-day Saint cosmology that separated them from African people. The native inhabitants of Australia and Fiji were not considered

60. W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon, Volume 3: Alma 30 – 3 Nephi 7* (Utah: Verity Publishers, 1973), 149.

61. Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, 149.

by Skousen as part of the Book of Mormon's Hagoth mythology of the Pacific Islanders either. Instead, Skousen argued that they were the descendants of a people who may have "occupied a status . . . similar to the role of Lamanites" to the Aryan races in Europe, central Asia, and India, which for him thus explained their priesthood eligibility. In the 1980s, at least some other American Latter-day Saints believed that Indigenous Australians, as well as "South Sea Island natives," i.e., those from Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, were descended from Book of Mormon peoples.⁶² The options remained open in part because of a lack of any official explanation, and the intense interest in racial categorisation LDS members held in this era.

Contemporary LDS Racial Categorisation

Before 1978, the stakes of racial categorisation and an accurate racial cosmology were vital because of the restrictions placed on LDS members of African descent. Discerning the cosmological origins of various ethnicities was a key interpretive goal in the racial mapping of the Church in order to maintain racial hierarchies. After 1978, however, when Spencer W. Kimball announced a revelation ending priesthood restrictions based on race, the stakes were different. Establishing racial connections was no longer relevant to missionary work, baptisms, or priesthood ordination. However, the cultural need to explain where Indigenous Australians fit into the LDS sacred past, from the biblical myths and Book of Mormon accounts, fuelled further speculation even after 1978.

Some sources shed light on the popular imaginations about racial lineage, increasingly coming from Indigenous members of the Church themselves. At a weeklong gathering in 1994 in which Indigenous

62. Richard Broome and Corinne Manning, *A Man of All Tribes: The Life of Alick Jackomos* (Canberra, Australian Capital Territory: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006), 273.

Australians from across the continent attended daily temple sessions in Sydney (the only temple in Australia at the time), Indigenous members “completed ordinances for the whole of the Larrakee [Larrakia] Tribe in the Northern Territory.”⁶³ In addition to temple worship, these members participated in cultural events, held a testimony meeting, and joined one another in dance. During the activities, some members reflected on their racial identities and their connection to LDS teachings about racial origins. Wiradjuri woman Donna Ballangarry, who resided in Liverpool, Sydney, was quoted as saying:

The Aboriginal people have always been a deeply spiritual people . . . and the Church provides an opportunity for us to express that spirituality. Our dreamtime legend says that the Aboriginal people came to Australia from the waters the same way Lehi sailed to the promised land, and that’s one reason why we find it so easy to accept the Book of Mormon.⁶⁴

This reading into and assertion of Indigenous histories within the silences of Latter-day Saint cosmology is important to note, as is the synthesis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and Mormonism. It is evident from this quote that Ballangarry was able to utilise the scriptures and official theology of the Church in order to understand and contextualise her own Aboriginal heritage.

These kinds of speculations revealed a continued interest in the importance of racial genealogy to LDS thought, long after priesthood restrictions remained a relevant factor. At a special fireside held in the

63. Amanda Meyer, “Aborigines Gather for Temple Work, Meetings,” *Church News Archives*, Feb. 5, 1994, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/1994-02-05/aborigines-gather-for-temple-work-meetings-140721>; Amanda Meyer, “Aborigines Gather for Temple Work, Meetings,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 5, 1994, <https://www.deseret.com/1994/2/5/20766557/aborigines-gather-for-temple-work-meetings>.

64. Meyer, “Aborigines Gather for Temple Work.”

Parramatta meetinghouse this same week, Elder Lowell D. Wood of the Seventy and First Counsellor in the Pacific Area Presidency, “reassured . . . Aboriginal Latter-day Saints that they are from the house of Israel.”⁶⁵ Elder Wood’s assertion did not clarify whether it was in relation to a literal descendancy, as is claimed about Pacific Islanders and Native Americans, or if this is a reference to the doctrine of “adoption” into the house of Israel through Church ordinances.⁶⁶

The ambiguity of these claims and of Indigenous Australian lineage remains unresolved throughout LDS culture. Matthew Harris’s 2018 article “Mormons and Lineage: The Complicated History of Blacks and Patriarchal Blessings” examines the way that LDS patriarchs (local leaders charged with giving once-in-a-lifetime “blessings” for LDS members that are written down and kept with personal records) identify the sacred lineages of individuals. Such lineages are meant to describe which “tribe” of the house of Israel a member belongs to, with attendant duties and blessings, and this becomes an occasion for continued LDS racial theorizing in popular and official venues. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members are included in Harris’s list of ethnic minorities for whom local patriarchs throughout the Church have struggled to pronounce lineage, as well as “African Americans, Black Africans, Black Fijians . . . and Philippine Negritos.”⁶⁷ Such ambiguities preoccupy some Latter-day Saints because of the way that racial genealogies remain important in LDS thought, calling for a need to answer the question.

65. Meyer, “Aborigines Gather for Temple Work.”

66. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 34–35.

67. Matthew L. Harris, “Mormons and Lineage: The Complicated History of Blacks and Patriarchal Blessings, 1830–2018,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (2018): 100; D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2013), 16, 109–13.

Indigenous Representation in LDS Publications

Racial categories, however, are playing a smaller role in the representation of Indigenous Australians in LDS thought. Since the 1980s, there has been a growing number of articles published by official organs of the Church that contain important perspectives from Indigenous Australians.⁶⁸ As these are published by the Church, it is important to briefly highlight the limitations of these sources. Most evident is the way in which (presumably non-Indigenous) writers and editors obfuscate and diminish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, beliefs, and customs in their zeal to express the positive nature of the Church.⁶⁹ Similarly, as the purpose of these sources is to provide “faith-promoting” content, there is a tendency to sanitise contemporary Indigenous struggles within a homiletic framework. Moreover, a number of authors comment on the fact that those they write about are “full-blooded aborigines.”⁷⁰ This demarcation of Indigeneity has connotations within the context of forced removal and assimilation;

68. Tracy Matenga, “Torn Apart in This Life, United for Eternity in the Next,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/03/aus-eng-local-pages/local-news-003?lang=eng>.

69. See, for example: Grace Madsen Pratt, “People of the Dreamtime,” *Friend*, Sept. 1981, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/1981/08/people-of-the-dreamtime?lang=eng>; Robert G. Moodie, “Missionary Work in the Central Australian ‘Outback,’” *Ensign*, Feb. 1982, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1982/02/news-of-the-church/missionary-work-in-the-central-australian-outback?lang=eng>; Marianne Walters, “Aboriginal Ancestors Left Few Traces,” *Church News Archives*, Mar. 19, 1988, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/1988-03-19/aboriginal-ancestors-left-few-traces-153536>.

70. Colin Robert Nilsen, “To Do My Best,” *New Era*, Oct. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1994/10/to-do-my-best?lang=eng>; Moodie, “Missionary Work in the Central Australian ‘Outback.’”

for much of Australia's history, these definitions maintained various racialised hierarchies with accompanying political restrictions.⁷¹

Church publications tend to focus on human-interest stories or celebrations of the accomplishments of Indigenous members of the Church. The October 1994 edition of the *New Era* contains an interview with Colin Robert Nilsen, an Aboriginal man from Queensland who served his mission in the "immigrant areas" of Western Sydney in the early 1990s.⁷² Although he faced some racial abuse due to being Indigenous, Nilsen stated: "Every time I knocked on a door, people were a bit surprised because they thought Mormon missionaries were mostly white Americans and white Australians. They had never seen an Aboriginal LDS missionary before."⁷³ The story celebrated diversity and inclusion in LDS culture.

Other publications promoted the achievements of LDS members, emphasising their faithfulness in the Church as a part of their success. In 2000, Lorna Fejo, mentioned in the beginning of this article, received an award for her program "Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture." The *Australian Church News* (LDS) published a brief article about her accomplishments. The author lauded Fejo's work in helping domestic violence victims, lowering infant mortality rates, and improving general health amongst Indigenous communities. The story concludes with a quote from Fejo: "I have to carry the Book of Mormon in my handbag," she said. "I have to read it everyday."⁷⁴ Moreover, in 2001, Bangerang Latter-day Saint Eddie Kneebone, a renowned lecturer, writer, and activist, received the Catholic Pax Christi

71. David Hollinsworth, "Discourses on Aboriginality and the Politics of Identity in Urban Australia," *Oceania* 63, no. 2 (Dec. 1992): 137.

72. Nilsen, "To Do My Best."

73. Nilsen, "To Do My Best."

74. Sarah Jane Weaver, "Service to Aboriginal Women Lauded," *Church News Archives*, Mar. 30, 2000, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2000-04-01/service-to-aboriginal-women-lauded-119885>.

International Peace Prize.⁷⁵ In response, the Church published an account of his accomplishments:

Brother Kneebone has lectured about Aboriginal culture, history, and art to young Australians, seeking to promote social awareness and acceptance between people of different backgrounds. He also writes extensively on Aboriginal culture to assist in the education of public service workers and those involved in health care, police services, and the army.⁷⁶

Although brief, these sources explore the actions of Indigenous Australian Mormons, who have been recognised for their contributions to social work, health, academia, and cultural reconciliation.

Besides these narratives about accomplishment and personal interest, Indigenous Australian Latter-day Saints have also expressed the ways in which the eugenicist programs of the Australian government ruptured families of the Stolen Generations, and how the Church and its resources helped them amend these wrongs. The Church has published some of these stories, including one by Aboriginal woman Tracy Matenga in the March 2019 “Australia Local Pages” of the *Ensign*. This source explores Matenga’s own struggles with the Stolen Generations and how the Church has assisted her in dealing with Australia’s violent colonialism. Born to a “young Aboriginal girl who lived in the dormitory system” but adopted by a European-Australian Latter-day Saint family, Matenga describes a spiritual experience she had as an adult:

Without warning, a vision opened to me. I saw an Aboriginal woman standing in front of me. Three small children were clinging to her dress as they wept. The mother wept also as a man in a blue uniform came

75. “Eddie ‘Kookaburra’ Kneebone: An Educator Who Inspired through His Art,” *Aboriginal Victoria*, <https://www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/eddie-kookaburra-kneebone>.

76. “In the Spotlight: Australian Member Wins International Peace Prize,” *Ensign*, Mar. 2002, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2002/03/news-of-the-church/in-the-spotlight?lang=eng>.

into view and began pulling the children away from her. The mother and her children were screaming and crying, and then suddenly, they disappeared. I began to cry uncontrollably at the scene that I had just beheld. . . .

I researched my family history and found one of the children from the vision. She was now an elderly woman. I discovered that she had in fact been taken from her mother, along with her brother and sister, as a result of the assimilation policy. My heart ached for her as it did for all my people who were “lost” in the spirit world.

Doing this work was hard and at times it felt like no progress was being made. . . . [Eventually] a woman named Mrs. Howell, who had spent decades researching and recording Indigenous family history . . . told me that she had a gift for me, her original list of approximately 3,000 indigenous families, and their records. . . . She made me promise to do all I could to help my people with their genealogy. I spent the next 15 years actively keeping that promise and making use of that list and files that went with it. This miracle was one of countless miracles I encountered on my journey.

In 2016, after Mrs. Howell had passed away, I called her husband about the files as I was working with another Aboriginal family on their genealogy. I was shocked to discover that he had donated four trailer loads of the files to the local university, who had passed it on to the local library. I knew that neither organisation had any idea how sacred these files were and was terrified of what might become of them. . . . They were being kept in a dark basement in the library, as this was not a family history library and they didn’t have much use for the files.

My father . . . knew the landscape and the history of the area and warned me that flooding was imminent. The months that followed were filled with regular phone calls to the library, desperate warnings of flooding, and a plea to remove the files from the basement and into the care of the Church. Tropical Cyclone Debbie hit in March 2017. Parts of the town were submerged under 11.6 metres of murky floodwaters.

As the flood waters rose, I waited, helpless. I prayed desperately for Heavenly Father to protect the files. It took three weeks for me to get through to the library. I felt sick as I asked the librarian about the files. She reassured me that all the files had been pulled from the basement and thrown onto the second floor just moments before the flood waters

had entered the basement. When I heard those words the relief in my heart was immense. Perhaps the intensity of my relief was because it was not only my relief that I was feeling, but the relief of thousands of individuals desperate to be found.

The Indigenous family files have now been digitised and are currently in paper form and on memory sticks. Once tribal elders have cleared any privacy concerns and given permission, the public will have access.

Australia's Indigenous people on the other side wait with hope that hidden treasures of family history that were thought lost or forgotten will be found, preserved, protected, and shared with our people. . . . This is God's work; he wants us to succeed and he *will* help us if we do all we can. Awaken the heritage within you.⁷⁷

Such stories of LDS adoption of Indigenous children are not uncommon.⁷⁸ There are a number of themes and ideas that can be gleaned from this important source. Firstly, from the perspective of some Indigenous members, the Church's vast collection of family histories and genealogical technologies has been able to connect them to a past that has been shattered by violent colonialism. Additionally, it shows how the intergenerational traumas associated with Australia's violent colonialism are viewed by Indigenous Australian Mormons through the doctrines, rituals, and scriptures of the Church. The Church's emphasis on the family, forgiveness, and reconnection with ancestors are central.

Matenga's story illustrates a broad role that the Church may play in contemporary Indigenous interests. Various state governments throughout Australia have contracted the Church to digitise the official records of South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales.⁷⁹ However, this process has been scrutinised by a number of

77. Matenga, "Torn Apart in This Life."

78. Newton, *Southern Cross Saints*, 210.

79. "Why Does the Mormon Church Want State Records? And What Do They Do with Them?" *ABC Radio Adelaide*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-05/why-does-the-mormon-church-want-state-records/9943288>.

journalists who discovered that zealous members had performed temple ordinances by proxy for a number of famous Australians without the permission of their living descendants.⁸⁰ Included in this list were early-twentieth-century Tasmanian Aboriginal activist Truganini and Australia's first Indigenous federal parliamentarian, Neville Bonner, who was elected to represent Queensland in 1971.⁸¹ Such controversies have been compared to the activities of Church members who performed proxy ordinances for victims of the Holocaust, for which there has been considerable backlash.⁸² Thus, the baptism of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whilst perhaps part of the Church's efforts to grant salvation, has nonetheless been condemned. Nevertheless, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have utilised the Church and its genealogical resources is an important example of the synthesis of Mormonism and contemporary Indigenous issues.

Conclusion

Indigenous Australians have historically held an ambiguous and varied place in the history of Mormonism. This was due to a number

80. Liam Mannix, "Mormon Church Baptising Thousands of Dead Victorians—Atheist or Not," *The Age*, Melbourne, Victoria, Mar. 10, 2017, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/mormon-church-baptising-thousands-of-dead-victorians--atheist-or-not-20170307-gus640.html>; Ben Schneiders, "Menzies, Ned, and the Don: Mormons Baptise Prominent Australians After Death," *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sept. 23, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/menzies-ned-and-the-don-mormons-baptise-prominent-australians-after-death-20180922-p505ds.html>.

81. Sneider, "Menzies, Ned, and the Don." For a biography of Truganini, see Cassandra Pybus, *Truganini: Journey Through the Apocalypse* (Sydney, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2020).

82. Bernard I. Kouchel, comp., "The Issue of the Mormon Baptisms of Jewish Holocaust Victims and Other Jewish Dead," *JewishGen*, <https://www.jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/ldsagree.html>.

of factors, including Mormonism's scripturally based racial hierarchies, the limitations of early missions, and the marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within Australian society. Arguably, these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Mormon missionaries did not encounter Indigenous Australians, and thus did not report on their eligibility for proselytisation. These silences can be interpreted, moreover, as an emphasis on the Church's desire to preach amongst white Australians. As such, whilst the Church grew slowly within Australia for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was almost exclusively British and European colonists who were sought for conversion. Until the 1960s, Latter-day Saint theological developments and doctrines, as well as a racist cultural milieu within Australia, saw Indigenous Australians marginalised in the Church due to their perceived connection with African peoples. Though it is not necessarily the case that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were actively barred from the Church, these members were denied ordination to the priesthood based on race. Furthermore, there were no efforts to preach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait individuals and communities until the 1960s. By the mid-twentieth century, though, this became problematic, as there were Indigenous Australians who wanted to participate fully in the Church, including those adopted by Latter-day Saint families.

Moreover, as has been argued, developing anthropological ideas and changing government classifications, both within Australia and globally, may have complicated the Church's view of Indigenous Australians. As explored, missionary success in the Torres Strait Islands may have further led the First Presidency to articulate in 1964 the eligibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to receive the priesthood. Thus, it was not only the civil rights movement in the United States or the expansion of missionary work in the African diaspora that led to a reassessment of the scope of the priesthood ban, but also the growth of the Church amongst Indigenous groups in the Pacific, including Australia and Fiji.

In the decades that followed, Indigenous Australians have embraced Mormonism, despite a lack of official scriptural exegesis of their origins in LDS racial cosmology. However, individual members have read between the silences and asserted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories within sacred Church cosmologies. With this, there is evidence of a synthesis of contemporary Indigenous concerns with the doctrines and institutions of the Church by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Latter-day Saints. Most evidently, Indigenous Australian members have been able to utilise the Church's genealogical resources to create a connection with ancestors and heritage that has been ruptured by violent Australian colonialism. This brief history reveals dramatic and subtle reversals in LDS teachings and practice related to indigeneity and a complex and evolving interest in racial genealogies that continue to play multiple roles in LDS lives.

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