

## The Complications of Columbus and Indigenous Identity at BYU

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The Indigenous peoples of the Americas have held their own sets of values and beliefs since time immemorial. Indigenous peoples have rejected the Doctrine of Discovery because it suggests that the United States government is entitled to Indigenous land. I believe that BYU and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints need to recognize that colonial constructs such as the Doctrine of Discovery and the belief that Columbus was sent by God hurt Indigenous people, including students and their communities.

The Doctrine of Discovery stems from the response and action of Pope Alexander VI who issued the papal bull *Inter caetera* in 1493 to justify European rights to conquer and colonize “discovered” lands. Many Europeans like Pope Alexander VI (and Columbus) did not acknowledge the civilizations nor the humanity of Indigenous peoples. The United States continued the Doctrine of Discovery to perpetuate conquest of Indigenous homelands, including what would become the state of Utah, through ideas of Manifest Destiny.

Some Christian denominations and Americans have started to reject the Doctrine of Discovery. Indigenous peoples have called on the current pope to repudiate the doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, in my own church there has been little movement to correct these wrongs. *The Daily Universe* publication of “Education Week: Why Christopher Columbus Matters,” and BYU’s invitation to Clark B. Hinckley to

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1. United Church of Christ, “Doctrine of Discovery: The Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” accessed Feb. 9, 2020, [https://www.ucc.org/justice\\_racism\\_doctrine-of-discovery](https://www.ucc.org/justice_racism_doctrine-of-discovery); and Gale Courey Toensing, “Indigenous Delegates Ask Pope to Repudiate Doctrine of Discovery,” *Indian Country Today*, Dec. 21, 2009, updated July 26, 2018, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/indigenous-delegates-ask-pope-to-repudiate-doctrine-of-discovery/>.

present his book—without an Indigenous perspective or rebuttal—reaffirms that the Doctrine of Discovery is still in strong effect.

Columbus was a carrier of extreme violence. We should not celebrate him. Rather, we should honor the survivors and the perseverance and contributions of Indigenous people, and BYU needs to move toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Consider the statue of Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoag, by sculptor Cyrus Dallin on the BYU campus in Provo, Utah. The *Daily Universe* has published several articles about this statue. For instance, Adrienne Andros's article "Indian Statue a Welcoming Symbol" quotes a BYU tour guide who said that "Massasoit was an Indian who greeted the Pilgrims coming to America in the 1600s."<sup>2</sup> However, the statue distorts memories and histories of colonialism that involved wars, violence, destruction, genocide, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples such as the Wampanoag. Massasoit's own son, known as King Philip or Metacom, sought to repel the European colonists and defend his homelands—he and his people, including allies of Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck, and Narragansetts, were brutally suppressed by the New England colonizing forces. King Philip was beheaded, his body mutilated and displayed, and his wife and child were enslaved and sent to Bermuda.<sup>3</sup> These histories are not included on the plaque of Massasoit's statue at BYU. The Latter-day Saint university was established on Indigenous lands—Ute homelands—but there is no monument to them. Rather, many Utes to this day have tense feelings toward "Mormons" or those who affiliate

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2. Adrienne Andros, "Indian Statue a Welcoming Symbol," *Daily Universe*, Feb. 4, 2002, <https://universe.byu.edu/2002/02/04/indian-statue-a-welcoming-symbol/>.

3. See, for example, Eric B. Schultz and Michael J. Tougias, *King Philip's War: The History and Legacy of America's Forgotten Conflict* (New York: Countryman Press, 1999), 290. See also Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018); and Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 2009).

with Brigham Young and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Scholars Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien's recent book, *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit*, notes that "Indigenous people insist on a reckoning with the past and the present that refuses narratives of frozen Indians in a place sanitized of the violence of settler colonialism."<sup>4</sup> I agree.

While I attended BYU, between 2004 and 2008, I never thought much about how I was occupying and navigating a space with layered histories of Indigenous meaning and significance. I knew nothing about what the lands, mountains, and waters mean to Ute people, and what it has meant to their ancestors since time immemorial. I felt that Indigenous presence was almost invisible, and I had to almost cry out in my classes, dorms, and other campus places to find those who understand what it means to be Native American, or Indigenous.

BYU once boasted the largest Native American student body in the United States during the 1970s. The Church, under the leadership of Spencer W. Kimball, especially between 1960 and 1985, concentrated on American Indian education through programs such as the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP), Indian Seminary, and BYU Indian Education. These programs pipelined American Indian youth to BYU for their post-secondary education, which catered curriculum, activities, and groups to their needs. However, BYU has since lost much of its support for and even recognition of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. After interviewing about one hundred Latter-day Saint Native Americans for the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies between 2007 and 2008, I can confirm with testimonies of BYU Native American students that it is isolating, difficult, and even hostile in certain circumstances to attend BYU as someone who identifies as Native American.

I propose an effort to embrace the mantle of education and truth-telling by reinvigorating Native American studies at BYU. Native

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4. Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien, *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 118.

American faculty, students, and studies need greater support at BYU and beyond, especially by considering Native American and Indigenous studies courses as general requirements and enabling these classes to reach and engage with more students and people, Native and non-Native. BYU and other scholarly institutions should also prioritize hiring Native American faculty and staff with direct ties to Native American communities. From my experience, I have observed that BYU has not prioritized hiring Indigenous people and that, in recent years, they have not dispensed the necessary resources to recruit and support Native American students and faculty, who are grossly underrepresented at this institution. In 2021, the newly formed BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging shared a report that acknowledges the need to better support Black, Indigenous, and people of color on campus, and I hope to see the university follow their recommendations with immediate attention.<sup>5</sup> By hiring Native American faculty and requiring Native American and Indigenous studies as general requirements, for example, it sends a message to Native American students and communities that their histories and perspectives matter.

Perhaps with such changes we might begin to heal through heeding and cease the problematic and hurtful teachings that drive a wedge between us. The Columbus myth continues to repulse diverse Native American and Indigenous peoples and those who understand their perspectives. These interpretations are taught as truths, but they have blinded and misled many Latter-day Saints of all backgrounds from comprehending the complexities and realities of the past and their constant relevance to our present and future.



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5. Shane Reese, Moises Aguirre, Ryan Gabriel, Lita Little Giddins, Vern Heperi, Carl Hernandez III, Jon McBride, Stephani Perkins, and Michalyn Steele, "Report and Recommendations of the BYU Committee on Race, Equity, and Belonging," Feb. 2021, <https://brightspotcdn.byu.edu/12/58/d61b3164487da5946d13471e7567/byu-race-equity-belonging-report-feb21.pdf>.