

On Truth-Telling and Positionalities

P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink, eds. *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019. 440 pp. Hardcover: \$45.00. ISBN: 9781607816904.

Reviewed by Roni Jo Draper

I struggle with beginnings. I always just want to get to it. However, allow me to take a bit of time to introduce myself before I tell the story of my experience with the collection *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*. I approached the book as an Indigenous, Latter-day Saint woman, steeped in both my Yurok culture and my Mormon faith—one by birth and one by conversion. I come by my indigeneity via the land at the meeting of the Klamath and Trinity Rivers at the Old Village, Weitchpec, in what it now Northern California.

I also approached the review of this book as a non-historian. Perhaps that accounts for my apprehension, why I procrastinated, why I fretted, why I doubted my own abilities. Meanwhile, I am an educated woman—educated in the Western sense of education, not quite fully colonized—and not at all disinterested in colonization, race, culture, ceremony, and the histories of peoples and pasts that have shaped me and my futures. Thus, I took my responsibility to read the words of the authors with care—for me, for the authors, for my grandchildren, and for you, the reader. I knew that the authors would be sharing stories of peoples and places and events that I hold precious, and I worried that the authors of the essays would distort Indigenous knowledge and intentions in order to preserve the names and reputations of Church leaders. I also understood that the authors might seek to shame the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a sort of recompense for the early and ongoing settler colonialism its leaders and members have

brought, and continue to bring, against the Indigenous peoples of North America. Brenden W. Rensink, in the concluding chapter, explains that the aspiration of the book is to question “settler colonialism, Mormon tradition and doctrine, ethnic and racial issues, and Native histories broadly” (248). Indeed, what I encountered upon opening the book’s pages was unashamed and unapologetic truth-telling.

I will confess that sometimes I plodded through the pages more slowly than I do for my other daily professional reading. I imagine that some of that lies in the fact that the ideas and events and places and people described in the various essays represented new ideas for me. And new ideas take time to consider. Other times, my reading took time simply because of the sheer complexity of the stories being told. For example, Max Perry Mueller shares a story of the encounters between the Timpanogos Ute leader Wakara and the LDS prophet Brigham Young—two formidable men. Their story, like other stories throughout the book, is complicated by how it has already been told, how the already-told story has a presumed hero and a presumed villain, and how the new story doesn’t flip the hero/villain binary so much as it complicates it. And so it is throughout the book: the authors offer their essays not in an attempt to set any stories straight but to offer more to the stories, and usually that means the missing Native voices. Returning to the case of Wakara, more could be added to the story because more records became publicly available via new technologies. Thus, new literacies continue to make possible new stories. I read slowly, took long breaks, sat with stories, returned to new-old stories, and concluded my reading gratified.

The book opens with a proper introduction followed by a selection of poems and a couple of personal narratives by Indigenous LDS people. These pieces grounded me, they set me at ease, and they felt familiar, like listening to my aunties or uncles, or sitting in testimony meeting. I knew I could read them and let the words move through me without judgment, without evaluation, without analysis, and I appreciated the

peace and calm that settled in my body as I prepared to read the essays that followed. The poems and the personal narratives let me know that I could breathe easy here. I read the poem “Evensong” twice the first time, and then twice again every time I returned to it, to notice both the Native and LDS imagery it brought to my mind and how beautifully it did so. I kept forgetting that I had a job to do as a reader and eventual writer of this review, and I grinned in my heart for Tacey Atsitty for that song. And so it was for the remainder of the book.

The editors presented the essays in two parts. The first part they titled, “Native Experiences with the Early LDS Church, Interpretation of Mormon Scripture, and Literary Representations” and the second part they titled, “Native Mormon Experiences in the Twentieth Century.” Often edited books suffer from the unevenness of the storytelling and the feeling that some chapters shine while others offer little of value. However, the strength of this collection is the subjectivities that multiple voices offer to the discussion of histories of Native Americans and Mormons. Moreover, as Elise Boxer points out in the first chapter, “The use of diverse Indigenous histories and perspectives must be included to diversify current Mormon-Indian historiography” (5). And indeed, the various authors deliver on that, presenting histories of Mohawk, Iroquois, Seneca, Ute, Sioux, Haudenosaunee, Navajo, Catawba, and other Indigenous peoples as well as including perspectives from Native individuals from Pawnee, Cherokee, Oglala Lakota, Cheyenne, and other North American Indigenous nations. (Although I will note that the farthest west any author got was Nevada, with a discussion of the Paiute author Sarah Winnemucca.) I appreciated the multiple voices, especially as I moved from Thomas W. Murphy’s telling of the story of the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake to Lori Elaine Taylor’s story of Handsome Lake in the very next chapter. I appreciated the multiple voices again as I moved from Megan Stanton’s account of the LDS Indian Student Placement Program in chapter 10 to R. Warren Metcalf’s account of the same program in chapter 11.

Moreover, instead of being confused by contradictions presented by adjacent authors, I felt comforted by them. Growing up Indigenous, I knew better than to seek one, objective truth; rather, I grew up surrounded by an expectation of subjectivity. I knew well that if my father told me one thing and my gram told me another thing that seemed to contradict my father, the challenge was on me to figure out how they were both right, and not to discount either. I appreciate that the authors of this book placed the same trust in me. I came away from my reading of these essays with a sense of what I already knew—namely, that many LDS leaders of the far and near past view the Lamanites described in the Book of Mormon as a fallen people of Israel in need of rescue and redemption. Thus, the project of missionary work and programs among the Native Americans, as Jay H. Buckley, Kathryn Cochran, Taylor Brooks, and Kristen Hollist explain, is to “gather this scattered branch of Israel to the truth” (190). Ultimately, my reading confirmed that LDS pursuits, including the westward migration of the Saints, were part of the greater American project of settler colonization that included the erasure, assimilation, and annihilation of Indigenous peoples and cultures in the interest of occupying lands and controlling resources. And still, many accounts were shared throughout the book of Native individuals finding peace, sanctity, and veracity offered in the teachings and doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

My reading of the essays, however, was not without frustration. I found myself often wondering about the positionality of each author—their relationship to the land, to Mormonism, to indigeneity. This is not to say that one positionality offers more validity than another. On the contrary, I found myself equally convinced by the description of positionality offered by Michael P. Taylor, a non-Indigenous person, as I was by the positionality of Farina Noelani King, a Diné Bikéyah woman. What I appreciated is that both of these authors let me know. They simply revealed to me their relationship to the land, a fundamental

practice of Indigenous peoples and, thus, I believe, ought to be a practice of those who endeavor to write about Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and futures. Here, I will beg the pardon of historians reading this who may be thinking, “Well, that is not how our discipline works.” I would respectfully remind those readers that Indigenous peoples have been around longer than the discipline of history itself, so it may be time to adopt this practice prior to storytelling. I also find reassurance from P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink when they explain that non-Indigenous peoples can begin to decolonize spaces by asking themselves questions including, “Who is telling the story and the history?” (xvii). I agree completely. It is time for historians and other scholars to make their positionality more transparent to their readers.

Finally, I end my experience with this collection of essays with my own imagining for future collections of essays. I look forward to more stories told of Indigenous LDS peoples, cultures, and histories. I look forward to those histories centering the lives of women, non-binary people, Two Spirits, children, and people of every circumstance. I look forward to those histories engaging our imaginations around various critical theories that allow us to examine race, queerness, feminisms, (dis)abilities, spiritualities, and any of the other ways that humans might move through the world. I look forward to those histories including more voices and testimonies. And I look forward to those histories including how we can come closer to God, our Creator, by engaging in the knowledges and practices that Indigenous peoples have to offer the world.

RONI JO DRAPER {roni_jo_draper@byu.edu} is a professor of teacher education at Brigham Young University, where she teaches courses in multicultural education, women’s studies, and research methodologies. Her scholarship focuses on preparing teachers to create inclusive classrooms that center the lives and futures of children. She also serves as a community activist and is currently the board president of the ACLU of Utah.

