hope as we enjoy the complicated story of Margarito Bautista, we will do more than read. I hope we consider the lessons of history by turning inward as individuals to address our own biases, while also reflecting on the ways US Mormonism has historically benefited from and perpetuated practices of racial oppression and erasure. I hope we will commit to listen to those who have been minoritized or marginalized within LDS spaces. I hope we will commit to act as agents for equitable inclusion and change. I hope we, too, will *evolve*.

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Heavy Lifting on Broken Ground

Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, eds. *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 443 pp. Paperback: $36.95. ISBN: 9780190221935.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon cannot quite be described as "groundbreaking." It covers ground, the editors acknowledge right up front, that has been broken many times before. In their introductory essay, Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman describe the "the clockwork reiteration, at least once a generation, of a specific

scholarly gesture that combines dutiful nomination of and practical inattention to *The Book of Mormon* as an object of Americanist literary study" (1). A footnote to this passage gives nine examples from prominent Americanists writing between 1945 and 2016—each lamenting that the Book of Mormon has never received the attention it deserves and, at least tacitly, inviting colleagues to take up the challenge. The problem lies not in breaking the ground but in figuring out what to do with the ground once it has been broken. *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon is a seed-planting book that, if properly cultivated, could lead to bumper crops in the various disciplines of American studies.

Before going further, we must articulate the actual void that the volume attempts to fill. Those of us who spend a lot of time in the corner of the academic world called "Mormon studies" will not likely perceive a shortage of books and articles about the Book of Mormon. What about Terryl Givens? What about Grant Hardy and Joseph Spencer? What about the Maxwell Institute and its whole journal dedicated to articles about the Book of Mormon? I can barely walk through my living room barefoot without stepping on a half a dozen books about the Book of Mormon, most of them based on reasonably good to excellent scholarship. Where, exactly, is the deficit that a book like this needs to address?

The answer, of course, is that there is a dearth of scholarship about the Book of Mormon everywhere *but* the Mormon studies community—including academic work on the history, literature, and culture of the United States. As the editors point out, and as generations of Americanists have confirmed, the Book of Mormon has been as consequential as any text of the nineteenth century: *Moby Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Democracy in America*, just to name a few. But one would not know this by looking at the major anthologies and journals devoted to nineteenth-century texts or by studying nineteenth-century American history or literature at most US universities. People in these fields may occasionally glance at the Mormon migration or read *Angels*

in America, but the actual text of the Book of Mormon remains a mystery to all but the most specialized, or the most Mormon, Americanist scholars.

Fenton and Hickman suggest a reason for this, which, I think, is correct: Americanists don't study and write about the Book of Mormon because its status as a sacred text for sixteen million people makes it dangerous to put under an academic microscope. Simply suggesting that the Book of Mormon should be studied as a nineteenth-century American text has the potential to offend millions of people. And calling Joseph Smith an "author" could set off a riot—albeit a very polite riot with homemade refreshments. Conversely, a scholar who treats the Book of Mormon as something other than a nineteenth-century production—as, say, a work of prophecy or even as a historical record from pre-Columbian America—risks being labeled a propagandist and excluded from the ranks of serious academics. Nobody wants these problems—better to write about Melville and take one's chances with the whaling industry.

A book like *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon can do a valuable service to anybody who wants to study the Book of Mormon as an academic text by creating connections with scholarly discourses that already exist. The volume's seventeen essays grouped into four sections come from both familiar figures in Mormon studies and well-known Americanist scholars. This diversity of perspective is one of the book's great strengths, as it both incorporates and transcends the body of Book of Mormon scholarship that comes from within—and is rarely ever read beyond—the cultural boundaries of Mormonism broadly defined.

The collection begins with a set of three essays in a short section titled "Plates and Print." Two of these essays situate the Book of Mormon within some aspect of nineteenth-century print or material culture. Jillian Sayre's "Books Buried in the Earth: *The Book of Mormon*, Revelation, and the Humic Foundations of the Nation" explores how

the Book of Mormon's origin narrative worked in concert with other "buried history" narratives to tie the new American nation to a mythic and magnificent past. Paul Gutjahr, who explored the material history of the Book of Mormon in his 2012 *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*, continues with an interesting coda to his earlier work that documents the influence of Orson Pratt on three early editions, including the Deseret Alphabet edition of 1869. Pratt, he explains, did more than any other person to shape the way that the Book of Mormon looks in print by dividing it into the chapters and verses still in use today.

Though it fits uncomfortably into the section's theme of material culture, R. John Williams's "The Ghost and the Machine: Plates and Paratext in *The Book of Mormon*" may well turn out to be the most important essay in the volume. Williams explicitly challenges the critical maneuver known as "bracketing," or holding questions about the origins and truth claims of the text in abeyance while discussing less controversial (or, at least, less offensive) things. Bracketing has allowed a generation of practicing Latter-day Saints to talk about the Book of Mormon in scholarly venues without having to take positions that would alienate either their fellow scholars or their fellow saints. This move has made a number of intellectually stimulating readings of the Book of Mormon possible by removing obstacles to critical inquiry that some Mormon scholars find insuperable. But, Williams argues, it is ultimately impossible to bracket these kinds of questions in any text. And it is critically irresponsible to study the Book of Mormon this way because the bracketed items are precisely the questions that make it worth studying in the first place.

The essays in the second section of *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon, "Scripture and Secularity," all try to answer the question, "What other things familiar to nineteenth-century Americans does the Book of Mormon resemble?" Answering this question is crucial because it provides ways to connect scholarship on the Book of Mormon to other areas of research. And the answers themselves are

fascinating. Grant Hardy, for example, gives an overview of the different ways that the Book of Mormon connects itself to the King James Bible. Eran Shalev explores other works of pseudo-biblical writings popular in both England and America at the time. And Samuel Brown argues that the Book of Mormon breaks down distinctions between written and oral texts and stands with one foot in the oral narrative tradition. This section also includes Laura Thiemann Scales's essay "'The Writing of the Fruit of Thy Loins': Reading, Writing, and Prophecy in *The Book of Mormon*," which extends the above connections in an important direction by comparing Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to the work of other early Americans who identified themselves, or were identified by others, as prophets—including Ann Lee, William Miller, Robert Matthews, and Nat Turner.

All of these essays show us that the Book of Mormon came out of a culture obsessed with prophets, saturated in the language of the Bible, and determined to connect their young nation to the sacred history they inherited from their Old World ancestors. The Book of Mormon resonated with this culture because it gave theological significance to the New World. It situated America within the world defined by the Christian Bible—which began with the creation of the world, ended with a prophecy of its destruction, and had therefore to include everything that happened in between. The section concludes by pivoting from the fiery theology of nineteenth-century America to its no less flammable politics with Grant Shreve's "Nephite Secularization; or, Picking and Choosing in *The Book of Mormon*," an admirable close reading of passages from the Book of Mormon that reflect early American debates about the separation of church and state.

The third section of the volume, "Indigeneity and Imperialism," is by far its most coherent and connected set of essays. These selections address the fraught topics of race, gender, and colonialism in the Book of Mormon. Given the stated goals of *Americanist Approaches to* The Book of Mormon, these are vital issues to explore because they

connect to the interests of a large number of contemporary Americanist scholars. Fortunately, the Book of Mormon gives us a lot to work with. For one thing, as Elizabeth Fenton explains in "Nephites and Israelites: *The Book of Mormon* and the Hebraic Indian Theory," it is the most notable example we have of the nineteenth-century belief that American Indians descended from the lost ten tribes of Israel. Fenton surveys other examples of this theory—such as James Adair's *The History of the American Indians* (1775) and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* (1825)—and situates them in a larger discussion about whether or not Native Americans should be included in the human genealogy outlined in the Bible. "*The Book of Mormon*," she explains, "explicitly takes sides in a debate that extended from the colonial era into the nineteenth century, asserting without qualification that Amerindians are the descendants of Adam, one branch of a family tree extending from a single root" (278).

The essays in this section steer away from making Mormons the straightforward bad guys of the colonial narrative. In "How the Mormons Became White: Polygamy, Indigeneity, Sovereignty," Peter Coviello acknowledges the problematic nature of the Lamanite story while pushing back against "the reading of *The Book of Mormon* as plainly and conventionally racist" (259). The actual text is more nuanced than that, he insists, as was the behavior of Mormon settlers toward the Native Americans they encountered in the Great Basin, which sometimes, but by no means always, acknowledged their kinship with "*The Book of Mormon*'s surviving remnant" (260). Nancy Bentley takes the idea of kinship even further in her essay, which sees kinship as a major theme of the text and argues that "*The Book of Mormon* joined ongoing conversations among Smith's contemporaries about the deep history of human kinship in general and of Americans' ancestors in particular" (234). Kimberly M. Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer use the narrative of Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 13–16) to reject the argument that the Book of Mormon can be dismissed "as straightforwardly

racist or misogynistic on the grounds that it presents misogynistic and racist persons and peoples in the story it tells" (314). And the section ends with anthropologist Stanley J. Thayne's description of his interviews with a Catawba woman—and a deeply believing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—who reflects on the strong sense of her own Lamanite identity that she derives from the Book of Mormon.

The final section of the book—titled "Genre and Generation" to continue the theme of alliterative appellations—is really a collection of essays that don't quite fit anywhere else. I don't say this to complain. Most final sections are collections of things that don't fit anywhere else, and this section contains some of the strongest essays in the book. This is especially true of Terryl Givens's opening contribution, which asserts that the Book of Mormon resonated deeply with its original audience by redefining the biblical covenant between humanity and deity. Earlier covenant theology, Givens argues, privileged the New Testament at the expense of the Old. Protestants spoke of a "new covenant" that replaced the law of Moses with the grace of Jesus and relegated the rituals of the Jews to types and shadows that foretold the coming of Christ. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, "fully encompasses and unifies the diverse strands of history, scripture, and gospel dispensations into one" (348).

The fourth section continues with an essay by Amy Easton-Flake discussing the ideals of masculinity in the Book of Mormon in reference to the larger nineteenth-century Protestant conversation about ideal manhood. Next is Zachary McLeod Hutchins's essay zeroing in on the Book of Mormon's description of Christopher Columbus (1 Nephi 13:10–12) and making it the basis of an important discussion of genocide and the necessary ambiguity of "revealed truth." Both the section and the volume conclude with Edward Whitley's whirlwind survey of almost two hundred years of American poetry inspired by the Book of Mormon.

Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon leaves some important things unsaid, says some things that don't really need saying, and it doesn't always come together into a focused and coherent whole. But every edited collection ever published has these same issues, so they are neither interesting nor particularly important to talk about. This is an impressive collection of essays from a diverse group of scholars that does a lot of heavy lifting that has never been done before. Every selection in the volume opens or creates a set of potential connections between the Book of Mormon and the vast scholarly enterprise called "American studies"—and it delivers these connections to the rest of us in the Mormon studies community with the not-insignificant imprimatur of the Oxford University Press. Whether or not the conversation continues—and whether or not this excellent volume of essays helps to create a space within American studies for serious examinations of the Book of Mormon—largely depends on what the rest of us do with the gift.

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