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# Review of Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program, 1947–2000, by Matthew Garrett

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*Reviewed by Sujei Vega*

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MATTHEW GARRETT BEGINS HIS HISTORY of the Mormon Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) with a narrative about his own family's participation and what it meant for him to find an old picture of a young Native American student among his family photos. Thus, Garrett starts his history through this personal connection. Like many historical monographs, however, it moves toward a more seemingly objective stance that provides information without much reflection. While there is peppered subtle critique of the LDS Church's representation of Native Americans in its doctrine, the ISPP is rescued from much reproach. The book does provide a much-needed account of the recruitment/missioning efforts of Mormons in Indian country in the name of education and upward mobility; however, it requires familiarity with LDS Church history, leadership structure, and terminology. A reader unversed in the church's organizational structure or leadership history might find some difficulty in the concluding chapters.

Garrett's focus, as stated in the introduction, is to provide a space for those who participated in the program to speak and relate their "agency" and "choice" to enroll in this effort. Of course, the realities of that "choice" are certainly debatable. That is, given the grossly underserved nature of education programs on the reservation, one has to question the validity of using the word *choice* to describe the circumstances that Native parents found themselves in when faced with

providing their children an education or not. Garrett does account for the lack of opportunity on the reservations in later chapters, but he still does so through the aim of justifying the ISPP and its benevolence.

Throughout the book there is much tension with this approach toward agency and critique. This is where historical objectivity clashes with critical race theory (CRT). CRT work favors open conversations surrounding injustice over a false reliance on scholarly objectivity. Operating from the given that no scholar can ever be objective, CRT prioritizes a need to address an inequity over assuming a balanced debate on clearly unsettling topics influenced by race. Readers navigate the church's doctrinal approach toward Native Americans laden in white supremacy. Garrett writes, in raw honesty, about the church's early stance that Native Americans are "wicked and loathsome" and White Mormons are "white and delightsome," but he does so in such matter-of-fact tone that it leaves the readers, not the author, with the responsibility of critiquing these deeply problematic representations. Though many members of the LDS Church are aware of this appalling racial binary within church history, there remains a distant disregard to the severity of those statements by a membership who would rather move past, as opposed to confronting, its racism. I would have appreciated a more direct critical engagement with the benevolent racism embedded in this historical moment. The past is not just some valueless topic to be reported on; history scholars need to account for the atrocities of the past more directly and guide their readership toward a more open critique of these moments. Leaving some of these painfully dismissive quotations floating in the narrative without critique can read as objectivity or apathy on the part of the author. The reader is left to wonder if the author chose to sprinkle them in for color or entertainment. To include these quotations without a willingness to dissect them only objectifies this community further, for it relegates the Native community to a group worthy of dismissal both then and even now.

Garrett attempts to subtly address the issues, but once more he presents bigoted notions of Native inferiority through a tone of historical objectivity that I found disturbing. For instance, noting the church's

stance that Native Americans “might be redeemed from barbarism” accurately portrays the approach members had to this community. Still, one cannot simply drop these positions in without unpacking how deeply repulsive they are or how they could account for present-day judgements on communities of color. The audience is assumed to be already tuned in to the problems of Mormon evolutionary representations of race. Otherwise, why would they pick up a book on the history of the ISPP? Still, the book might also be used in the classroom and read by students who may not immediately present a critical eye toward this past. In that regard, *Making Lamanites* becomes a difficult read, for it wavers between appropriate critical examination of benevolent racism embedded in the ISPP and salvaging the altruism of the program and its creators.

There are moments where Garrett’s key observations relate the difficulties of writing on such a divisive topic. Chapter 2, “Reimagining Israel,” explores the history of a “Lamanite” imaginary in the LDS Church and how Native Americans went from partners in salvation to wards of altruistic members with the moral authority to look after their native brethren. The shift toward salvation through assimilation was influenced by famed Carlisle Boarding School founder Richard H. Pratt’s dictate to “kill the Indian, and save the man.” The ISPP effectively modeled this approach, albeit with a blunter blade. This violence, however, is downplayed in the book’s narrative. Seen as an alternative to the violence enacted in the boarding schools, the ISPP fostered a kinder, gentler program of annihilation. For Garrett, moving the Indian toward Mormonism and Western individualism or bootstrap mentality was written almost as a necessary emancipatory act. Indeed, Garrett’s perhaps unintended reading of assimilation as an inevitable project can be gleaned in the way that the Red Power movement is discussed. The critique by Red Power activists to this assimilation project is depicted as disconnected from the needs of the community. In this setup, assimilation, or the annihilation of a Native way of life, is treated as a non-problematic happenstance of natural progress.

Garrett describes in great detail the role that Spencer W. Kimball played in advocating for the ISPP and the role of the church to “help”

nurture the Indian into Western ideals of “civilized” man. Here Kimball was caught between a US government/Bureau of Indian Affairs program that neglected education on the reservations and church leaders who were far from enthusiastic about continuing this effort. Chapter 7 sets up the role of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and other Red Power advocates of the 1960s and ’70s who questioned the role of ISPP as “assimilationist propaganda.” Here we see the divisions and inner conflicts of authenticity between Red Power advocates and ISPP graduates who fiercely defended the role of ISPP in their educational training. This “individualized uplift” message controlled by the LDS Church sowed divisive politics between Indian communities. For instance, Garret quotes some ISPP recipients who vocalized being better off, or more “civilized,” than other Indians in the evolutionary trek toward intellectual and spiritual salvation. Once Garrett establishes intra-Indian tensions between Red Power advocates and ISPP graduates, chapter 8 provides an in-depth exploration of church authorities and their position on “ethnic programs” that served both Native American and other “Lamanite” communities worldwide. Here we see how the church systematically shut down special ethnic programs and standardized instruction worldwide to sidestep the very peculiarities that ethnic Mormons were creating. Rather than confront the claims of Red Power activists who critiqued Mormon Indian cultural representations, the church would simply wash its hands of difference and attempt to generalize membership into one single identity.

Though the book moves carefully between salvific recollections of the ISPP and critique of the benevolent racism that undergirds it, the conclusion still promotes a slightly celebratory tone that once more presents the benefits of the program. One of the book’s stronger points is the detail by which it explores the rise, growth, and decline of the ISPP. Scholars of LDS Church history will enjoy the book’s look at this moment in time. Students, however, will be left without certainty of how to read the ISPP’s role in history. That is, the book adequately presents the deeply complex issues of both benefits and critique of the program. Still, I felt that contemporary students of history and religious

studies need to explore this topic with more direct evaluation of racism and white supremacy than is presently included in an otherwise tacit critique blended with benevolent admiration. In addition, though it was not his focus, I found Garrett lacked a basic knowledge about the “Lamanite” communities beyond the United States and the activities of the church in the making of these other Lamanites. His claims that nonwhite members from Central and South America were nonexistent dismisses entirely the importance of the Third Convention in Mexico in 1936 and how these Mexican “Lamanite” Saints broke away from the LDS Church because they felt otherwise marginalized and stunted. The fact that “Lamanite” Saints in Mexico were fighting with the church for their own autonomy a few decades before the ISPP program is, I feel, instrumental to understanding the “making of Lamanites” across time and space.

**Sujej Vega** is an assistant professor of women and gender studies and affiliate faculty in the School of Transborder Studies and Religious Studies at Arizona State University. Her research explores the everyday lived experiences of Latinos in the US. Her book *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest* (NYU Press, 2015) places in dialogue ethno-religious practices, comadrazgo (female social networks), ethnic solidarity, and community organizations that helped Mexicans assert a right to belong. Her current project historically locates Latino LDS members. She is interested in gendered social networks and the next generations of Latinos raised in the LDS Church.