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Original caption: "The 600 American Indian students at BYU—the largest Indian enrollment at any university in the United States—are held in special regard on campus. Each autumn the Indian students, under sponsorship of The Tribe of Many Feathers, elect Miss Indian BYU, who presides over annual Indian Week and who occupies a place of honor at all Indian student activities on campus during the year. Elected Miss Indian BYU for 1970–71 was Nora Begay, a Navajo. Her attendants were Betty Henderson, left, also Navajo, and Beverly Ketcher, Cherokee. The following summer Miss Begay was elected Miss Indian America at the nationwide All-American Indian Days at Sheridan, Wyoming."
"Many Hearts Yet Beat With the Hurt of a Wounded Past"

Miss Indian BYU, Lamanite Identities, and the Subversive Potential of Pageants

Jennifer Duqué

The theme of Brigham Young University’s 1972 Indian Week, an annual event set apart for Native guest speakers, Lamanite Generation performances, and the Miss Indian BYU pageant, was “New Indian—New Commitments.”¹ This might have well been the theme of Mormonism’s oft-ambivalent relationship with Native Americans. The “new Indian” that the Mormon leadership celebrated was “modernized,” “civilized,” and, of course, Mormonized. The Miss Indian BYU pageant provides a compelling site in which to investigate the tension between new and old, the contemporary and the traditional. Although Miss Indian BYU existed within an oppressive neocolonial framework, it is reductive to see the women involved as merely passively inscribed upon by these power structures. Rather, Miss Indian BYU functioned as an ambivalent cultural script that allowed participants to exist safely within a dominant cultural framework (i.e. Mormonism), while at the same time celebrating their specific cultural heritages and processing their history of colonization. Through their self-presentation, the talents they performed, and the ways in which the winners represented both their religion and their indigenous communities, Miss Indian BYU contestants reworked the concept of “Lamanite

¹ “Navajo Tribe Chairman to Visit During BYU Indian Week Activities, Feb. 13–19,” The Herald (Provo, UT), February 11, 1972, 4.
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identity" to negotiate the wider cultural issue of what it meant to be an indigenous American in the twentieth century.

First, an introduction to neocolonialism, one of the primary theoretical frameworks upon which this essay relies. While colonialism employs genocide, relocation, and sexual violence to subjugate indigenous people, neocolonialism relies on cultural assimilation and other mechanisms of ideological control in order to oppress Native identity. This includes attempts to acculturate Native people to the dominant Anglo culture through boarding schools and missions, as well as efforts to project Euro-American stereotypes onto indigenous identity. Hence, all-too-familiar tropes such as the noble savage, the drunk Indian, the alluring Indian princess, and the promiscuous squaw are not only demeaning, but also essentializing: according to white supremacist ideology, these stereotypes are completely accurate. As anthropologist Elizabeth Bird observes, “Whichever narrative is in the ascendency, Indians themselves have little voice in the story. Their role is to be the object of the white gaze and the focus of white myth.” Mythologization thus functions to devalue the subjectivities of indigenous individuals, which allows dominant narratives to interpellate all indigenous people as dehumanized caricatures.

Due to this mentality, Native people become living relics (or “Living Legends,” for that matter). American studies scholar Rachel Buff provides a vivid, if brief, anecdote illustrating this concept. She once observed tourists interacting with two young women who held Comanche royalty titles, one of whom was the reigning Miss Comanche at the time. In the course of this encounter, the tourists asked to take photos standing with the Comanche “princesses” as though they were Disneyland attractions. Struck by the strange dynamics of the encounter, Buff wrote:


3. The philosophical term “interpellate,” as introduced by Louis Althusser, refers to the process through which subjects are defined by (and are taught to self-identify with) ideological structures, mediated through social and political institutions such as religion, education, politics, the army, etc.

4. Formerly known as the “Lamanite Generation,” Living Legends is a BYU-based performance group comprising of students of Native American, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic descent. The Lamanite Generation was created in 1971, by a white male BYU student. Armand Mauss, All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003), 92.

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Rayna Green argues that “in order for anyone to play Indian successfully, real Indians have to be dead.” Certainly the way the photosnapping couple treated the Comanche tribal princess was closer to the playful way one might treat a cigar-store Indian or a cardboard cutout of Ronald Reagan than a typical interaction with a stranger. A 500-year history of displacement, administration, migration, and appropriation prepared all of us for that photo opportunity. The optics of colonialism here operate as a mirror in which living young women look like dead artifacts. 

This is a valuable reflection for several reasons. First, it explicitly draws parallels between the genocidal project of colonialism and the neocolonial ideology underlying this interaction. After all, to reiterate Rayne Green’s incisive comment, “in order for anyone to play Indian successfully, the real Indians have to be dead,” which makes the projection of Pocahontas onto living Native women seem much more sinister than it might initially. In addition, it invokes Miss Comanche, a powwow princess, winner of a tribal pageant, as a site whereon these historical scars are inscribed. After I discuss the ways in which the Mormon tradition has interpreted Native American identity, I plan to revisit this idea and contribute to it further.

Within the Mormon worldview, indigenous Americans are reconfigured as doubly mythic figures. Appended to the Euro-American concept of the Native American as noble savage (or just plain “savage”) grew the Mormon concept of indigenous Americans as proto-Mormons, as once-believers of the Mormon faith before their religious and cultural traditions were corrupted by wickedness. According to the Book of Mormon, modern-day indigenous Americans are the descendants of a “lost tribe” of ancient Israelites that immigrated to the “New World” around 600 BC. The descendants of these ancient Israelites quickly separated into two opposing nations: the righteous Nephites, described as white and “delightsome,” and the wicked Lamanites, described as dark and “loathsome.” The darkness of the Lamanites’ skin was supposed to be God’s punishment for their ancestors’ wickedness, and Lamanites that converted to the true church were sometimes rewarded with lighter skin. Of course, the Latter-day Saints were meant to identify with the religious beliefs of the righteous white Nephites,
while indigenous Americans represented a group of people, like the ancient Lamanites, to either fight or convert.

Mormonism's unique brand of the "white man's burden" took on deeply religious import as church leaders' revelations urged members to bring the "Lamanites" back to the fold—not merely for the sake of humanitarianism or Christianizing, but for the sake of preparing for the Second Coming of Christ and fulfilling scriptural prophecy. As Armand Mauss points out, the Mormons saw "Lamanites" as being at "the forefront of the eschatological drama then unfolding in preparation for the millennium," and that the Saints were to "play a supporting role in this drama by bringing to the Lamanites and all other remnants of Israel the lost knowledge of the true Messiah and his gospel." Joseph Smith wrote many times of the centrality of Native Americans to the purpose of Mormonism, recording in 1828 a revelation stating,

And for this very purpose are these plates preserved, which contain these records—that the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to his people; and that the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved. Amen.8

Here, Smith locates Native Americans at the center of the Book of Mormon's preservation throughout the centuries, which gives them considerable import in the restoration of the religion itself. Although seemingly benign, this too functioned to reduce Native Americans to mere puppets in an Anglo-authored narrative of Manifest Destiny and western supremacy.

The Latter-day Saints' belief that they could speak authoritatively on Native American ancestry resulted in a sense of paternalistic ownership over them. Although the racism many church leaders and members exuded was benevolent, it still operated under the "optics of colonialism." Spencer W. Kimball, the president of the LDS church from 1973 to 1985, often embodied this propensity for benevolent racism. In a speech given in the 1977 Regional Representative Seminar, Kimball remarked, "Certainly the day of the Lamanite has arrived. And now is our time to deliver the Lamanites from their bondage. No longer can we be satisfied to see them labor and struggle in their poverty and in their

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bondage. They must be educated, trained and brought out of obscurity into the light.” Mormons believed they had a special obligation to deliver the Lamanites from the bondage of their traditions, which involved both conversion and education. The Indian Placement Program, (a foster care program designed to let Native American children live with white Mormon families), the Lamanite Seminary for Native American high school students, the BYU Lamanite Education Program, and BYU itself—which more than six hundred Native American students attended in the ’70s—were all designed to acculturate Native Americans out of the “obscurity” of their immediate traditions and into the “light” of their purported Lamanite ancestors.

Regarding the effectiveness of the Indian Placement Program, Spencer W. Kimball remarked, The question is asked me nearly every day when the Indian program is mentioned: Will they stay with the church? Will they retain their faith? Or will they go back “to the blanket?” And I want to tell you that few will return to the blanket when they have had their opportunities in education and the gospel.

Going “back to the blanket” is presented as wholly negative; the goal was to exchange indigenous heritage for a Lamanite birthright. Through the erasure of their tribal identity and the rhetoric connecting them to prehistoric beings, Native American Mormons were urged to claim their status as living relics. In his talk “Of Royal Blood,” Spencer W. Kimball tells the audience, “My brothers and sisters, you belong to a great race,” and lists biblical patriarchs Joseph, Jacob, and Abraham before he goes on to say, “Be proud of [Abraham] and know that you are of royal blood; with your royal blood you can achieve, rising to the top.”

Here, Kimball’s remarks stand in drastic contrast with his remarks on their tribal heritages, which he characterizes repeatedly as primitive, impoverished, and riddled with superstition. As he informs Native Americans in his talk “To You . . . Our Kinsmen,” “your immediate ancestors lost their written language, their high culture, and worst of all their knowledge of God and his
work.”14 which in effect tells them that without Mormonism they would be condemned to live in “low culture.” This substantiates anthropologist Elizabeth Bird’s argument that, “However they are pictured, Indians are the quintessential Other, whose role is to be the object of the White, colonialist gaze . . . and when Indians refuse to be quaint, White culture’s imagery condemns them.”15 Hence, Mormon church leaders were quick to extol Native Americans for their “royal blood,” but much less enthusiastic about the customs and traditions they inherited from their grandparents on the reservation.

This paper focuses primarily on the 1970s and 1980s, a time frame in which the Mormon Church’s emphasis and hold on Native Americans began to subside. For instance, in 1971 there were an estimated 7,000 Native Americans involved with the Indian Placement Program, but the program saw a 60% reduction in the late 1980s.16 In 1978, there were approximately 500 Native American students enrolled at BYU, but enrollment declined to less than half that by 1986.17 In 1982, the Indian Education Department at BYU was integrated into the more general Multicultural Education Program, reflecting the declining number of Native American students and the Church’s growing emphasis on proselytizing to other minority groups.18 Overall, these developments indicated the Church leaders’ perceived failure to bring the “Lamanites” back into the fold in adequate numbers.19

At the same time, a dialogue between radical Native American advocacy groups and the Mormon Church began to evolve, as both non-Mormon and Mormon Native Americans voiced their anger at the pressure to assimilate into white Anglo culture. Victor Selam, a former BYU student of Warm Springs-Yakima-Nez Perce descent, recounted in 1971 the following conversation he had with a BYU official, before he was dismissed from the school for refusing to cut his hair in compliance with its dress and grooming standards:

I reminded the “Man” that in Mormon prophecy the Indian people would “rise up and blossom as a rose in the latter days.” I said that I fully agreed with the prophecy and that it also exists among the Indian people, only in

17. Mauss, All Abraham’s Children, 100.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 95–98.
Selam was far from alone in his belief that Mormonism had a negative (and negating) effect on indigenous American identity. Critics of the Indian Placement Program, for instance, saw it as a tool of assimilation in the tradition of government boarding schools. The American Indian Movement emerged as one of the more vocal, incisive critics of the Church's assimilationist ideology, and frequently picketed Temple Square during General Conference.

How did the Miss Indian BYU pageant, which might seem banal at best and further evidence of neocolonialism at worst, feature within this historical backdrop of cultural assimilation and politically radical backlash? It is important, if perhaps surprising, to note that Miss Indian pageants have a long history of being sites of cultural conservation and celebration. American studies scholar Wendy Kozol writes, “Since the early days of colonization, Indians have adopted, and adapted, pageants, parades, and other Euro-American cultural practices, often as a means of subversively keeping traditions alive.” Perhaps counterintuitively, then, Miss Indian pageants fly in the face of neocolonialism’s mythologizing project—precisely because of the banality of pageants. Kozol goes on to observe, “The context of the beauty contest itself refuses such a timeless construction of the ‘living relic.’ Beauty pageants emerge within twentieth-century cultures, thus unsettling any easy assumptions about the timelessness of these subjects.”

In the case of Miss Indian BYU, the pageant structure itself calls for both cultural memory and an appreciation of one’s own contemporary historical context.
moment. In one newspaper article, we are told that “selection of the Miss Indian BYU is based on both modern and traditional talent presentations. These include individual interviews to test knowledge of Indian culture, current Indian affairs, and world affairs; traditional dress, talent, and ability to represent the Indian students.”25 Watching Native American women performing contemporary femininity within the pageant’s highly twentieth-century directives, but then trading their semiformal gown for traditionally Navajo, or Mohawk, or Mik’maq attire, is to watch the contestants establishing continuity between the modern and the traditional, thus crossing (and implicitly questioning) these boundaries. This threatens to contradict the image of the frozen-in-time Indian maiden, but also calls into question the idea that contemporary Native Americans are necessarily, and totally, assimilated into Euro-American culture.

As alluded to previously, the Miss Indian BYU pageant was contemporary to the American Indian Movement (AIM). AIM was, of course, a much more overt method of resistance. Concerned with sovereignty, treaty rights, poverty, and cultural renewal, many members of AIM believed that Mormons wanted to whitewash Native Americans, and that “Lamanite” identity further colonized Native Americans, thus reducing them to mythologized caricatures. While Mormon leaders devalued their “Lamanite” students’ indigenous heritage and cultural background, a controversy in AIM was whether self-presentation in full regalia—which some members frequently did during protests—perpetuated the stereotype that “real” Indians only wear headdresses and buckskin, that “real” Indians are only “authentic” if they can be confused with relics from the past. Miss Indian BYU laureates frequently found themselves at the crossroads of celebrating and preserving their cultural background, while at the same time wrestling with essentializing notions of “real Indianness” that they did not feel accurately reflected who they were.

AIM came into direct contact—and conflict—with Miss Indian BYU through Nora Begay, who was Miss Indian BYU 1971–1972. After being crowned Miss Indian BYU, she went on to win the Miss Indian America pageant. Nora used her platform as Miss Indian BYU to “warn [her fellow BYU students] against [Red Power] militancy,”26 and used her platform as Miss Indian America to promote the Mormon faith. This was when she caught AIM’s attention. As The Eagle’s Eye, an official publication of BYU’s Indian Program, reported,

25. “Miss Indian BYU Title Competition Underway,” The Herald (Provo, UT), March 14, 1977, 2.

Due to her position in relation to the Red Power and Indian Militant movement, Nora has recently been the target of criticism by these groups. The Indian activists claim that the LDS Placement Program is giving Indians nothing, but is taking their heritage, customs, culture, and identity from them. Therefore, they say, since Nora is a product of this program, she does not represent the true Indian of today.  

Other Miss Indian BYU laureates responded to AIM as well. As Victoria Bird Sanders, Miss Indian BYU 1972–1973, said,

[The American Indian Movement] would refer to us as “Apple Indians,” red on the outside but white on the inside and you’re not really an Indian . . . So many of them [would ask], “why don’t you wear something that identifies you as native? Why don’t you wear a feather in your hair?” That to me is not what needs to set me apart from who I am. I don’t need to grow my hair long or wear it in braids or wear a feather or wear my Indian dress to show people I’m proud of who I am.

Again, Miss Indian BYU contestants were able to challenge the mythologizing project they faced both from AIM and from Mormon tradition, and were able to negotiate their own understanding of “Indianness.”

Another recurring theme in the interviews and oral histories of Miss Indian BYU contestants is an acute awareness of negative, totalizing stereotypes aimed at indigenous Americans. One of the duties of Miss Indian BYU was to teach the public about Native American culture, and this duty sometimes took on religious significance. In an article published in The Eagle’s Eye, Victoria “described the Miss Indian BYU title as a calling, ‘much like one you’d get in your ward or branch . . .’” She goes on to say,

When I was Miss Indian BYU . . . I made up my mind never to turn down an offer to represent the Indian people, and I spoke to Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, the mentally retarded, women’s clubs, the PTA, high school, junior high, and elementary students . . . I was surprised to find how little they knew and realized even more my responsibility to teach them what I knew about my people.

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27. Ibid.
She counseled other Miss BYU contestants to “help erase the stereotype of the American Indian.” Echoing Vicki’s directive, Sandy Nahno-Kerchee, Miss Indian BYU 1973–1974, said, “The Indians have a lot to offer; they are unique, they are a part of America. But, America knows nothing of them . . . All they know is that they exist; the only feedback they get is through TV . . . We have our culture, our way of life; it is different from the non-Indians, that is one of our greatest advantages.”30 And as Miss Indian BYU contestant Gracie Welch remarked, “I talk of people who have never met a modern Indian in person. They ask crazy questions. Things like, ‘What do “ugh” and “how” mean,’ and ‘Did I need permission to leave the reservation?’” She too observes wryly, “All they have ever seen is what is on television.”31

Elaine Cole, a Mohawk and Miss Indian BYU 1984–1985, told the following story, which highlights the intricacies of colonized heritage and identity. Her grandmother had offered to do the intricate beading on her outfit for the Miss Indian BYU pageant, provided that it be on cloth, as her fingers had become too arthritic to bead on the tough, but more “traditional,” buckskin. Elaine recounted her grandma telling her, “I know it’s not a real buckskin and I know some people will say, ‘that’s kind of Hollywood and tacky.’”32 Her grandma explained, however, that there was another reason to use cloth. Cloth was brought to the Mohawk people in the 1700s, when “We were moved to the reservation. We couldn’t hunt. They took our rights away, and then they gave us calico or broad cloth instead of buckskin to use. We had to make it. [We] beaded it up beautiful, and that’s what [we] wear now.” The traditional and the nontraditional, then, are interwoven to the point of inseparability. It was a difficult decision for Elaine to use her grandma’s cloth beading rather than to simply make her own, more acceptable buckskin outfit. She concluded, however, that looking like the “right” kind of indigenous American to appease others was an affront to her grandmother’s love and hard work.

All this being said, it bears asking: could it be problematic to vindicate Miss Indian BYU as a means of subversion, despite its neocolonial roots? Feminist theorist Audre Lorde argues that the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house, and though “they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game . . . they

31. Ibid.
will never enable us to bring about genuine change." Similarly, Gloria Bird, a poet of the Spokane tribe, maintains that to employ the master’s tools is to reveal one’s internalized colonization. She writes, “We are all the products of colonization... Promoting the ideas of native people as Other, perpetuated as we parrot Othering language when we speak of ourselves, are instances of the internalization of oppression—it is, in fact, to speak the language of the oppressed.” Miss Indian BYU is a prime example of working within the system, a concept that many agitators for change understandably find inadequate. This is not to suggest that Miss Indian BYU was an inherently subversive sanctuary in which agitators promoted change and directly called the status quo into question. However, to dismiss the voices that surface from this tradition as illegitimate or inauthentic risks privileging the Indian-as-relic image over complex, contemporary identities, and underestimates the ways in which indigenous American women have interacted with the tropes and images they have been forced to interact with.

The notion of ambivalent mimicry and its connection to both resistance and identity within colonization is useful at this point. In Kozol’s discussion about Miss Indian America, she looks to Homi Bhabha’s argument that “for the colonized, mimicry creates gaps or slippages that reassert other subjectivities and histories and hence secure spaces of resistance.” Through mimicry, the colonized can inhabit safely assimilated spaces—like pageants. Through the ambivalent projects of both otherization and assimilation that the pageant contains, the inhabitants of these spaces often come across or create places of “slippage.” Slippage in this context might look like establishing one’s contemporaneousness despite the dead Indian trope, one’s specific tribal identity in the midst of a homogenizing “Lamanite” narrative, or a celebration of traditions widely condemned as “low culture.”

Judith Butler’s theory of repetition—or iteration—with difference adds additional ideas valuable to this conversation. Focusing her discussion on how to be an agential being despite the power structures that enforce gender roles, she suggests, “power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed,” and advocates for “subversive and parodic redeployment of power

35. Kozol, “Miss Indian America,” 69.
rather than . . . the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence.”

Thus, Butler suggests that the master’s tools can, if not completely dismantle the master’s house, at least self-reflexively probe its parameters. While full-scale transcendence of the master’s domain would be simply unfeasible, Butler still sees potential for resistance and agency. “The task is not whether to repeat,” she writes, “but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very . . . norms that enable the repetition itself.”

To use the master’s tools, which built the house, is to deconstruct the master’s site of authority and acknowledge both the constraints society imposes on the self and the self’s agency within the structure. As such, it is a realistic and useful method of resistance.

The discrepancy between Miss Indian pageants and other beauty pageants is striking: Miss Navajo contestants, for example, must know about Navajo history, speak Navajo competently, and demonstrate their proficiency at butchering sheep. The Miss Indian BYU pageant, although it existed in a highly Mormon setting, kept similar distance from the pageant status quo in dominant Euro-American culture. “It is not a beauty contest, but one which tests the girls’ knowledge and skills in Indian culture,” as one Daily Herald article reminded its readers. Contestants showed off their skills beading, cooking fry bread, dancing hoop dances, singing tribal songs, and speaking their indigenous languages. In a home video of the Miss Indian BYU Pageant 1985–86, we see a contestant demonstrating how to ground maize, giving the native names for the tools she uses. Another contestant demonstrates the carding and spinning techniques that she learned from her grandmother. In the process, she recounts the legend of “spider woman” her grandmother also taught her, and finishes by tearfully showing the audience the rug her grandmother made and gave to her for her seventeenth birthday. Several contestants perform narratives in Navajo, and one recites a prayer first in Mik’maq, then in English. It seems less of a pageant, and more of a community talent show.

37. Ibid., 202–203.
38. One only has to watch the documentary Miss Navajo to confirm this.
40. “Indian Week Audio Recordings and Other Material,” L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
The Miss BYU Pageant’s communal aspect was not accidental; rather, it was central to the tradition of Miss Indian pageants. As Buff writes, “powwow royalty function as goodwill ambassadors between their Indian culture and a sometimes rapaciously curious white public.” Miss Indian BYU would represent not only her own accomplishments per se, but the caliber of the entire Indian student body. Additionally, she functioned as an ambassador of sorts to non-Indians. Theda McCabe, committee chairman of Miss Indian BYU, told a Daily Herald reporter that the purpose of the pageant is “to select an outstanding Indian girl on campus as representative of the character and quality of the Lamanite (Indian) students at BYU,” and that “as Miss Indian BYU, she will represent Indian students on campus in the activities which call for such a representative and meet officials and recognize Indian leaders who may visit BYU.”

Glena Jenks, the 1972-1972 Miss Indian BYU, told a reporter, “This title is one of great honor and dignity. It gives an Indian woman an opportunity to be a symbol of hope, beauty, and determination.” She stressed in the same article that, “Miss Indian BYU is not a superficial beauty contest winner but an office for the Indian students and an ambassador for BYU.”

In her English recitation of a prayer she originally spoke in Mik'maq, a Miss Indian BYU contestant expressed to the addressed “Great One” that “Many hearts yet beat with the hurt of a wounded past.” Throughout the prayer, her voice was often tremulous with emotion. Likewise, the 1985 pageant’s talent portion indicates that the contestants were acutely aware of the pain of colonialism. It is notable that the contestants never evoked the Lamanite heritage that their Mormon context projected onto them, and that the stories they told are not from ancient Judeo-Christian texts; rather, their stories came from their immediate traditions. Speaking of the significance of stories, Native American literature scholar Janice Gould (Maidu/Konkow) writes, “The legacy of colonization of indigenous people seeks to replace or change the people's stories, to excise the heart's knowledge, rendering it deaf and dumb... Stories, then, and

42. “Reigning Miss Indian America to Crown ‘Y’ Contest Winner in Provo Friday Night,” The Herald (Provo, UT), November 9, 1971, 3.

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prayers and songs are basic to an understanding of sovereignty, to the indigenous imagination that is rooted in place.”

The dramatic narratives that two girls performed in the 1985 pageant are powerful instances of this storytelling.

In the first dramatization, through portraying a young girl experiencing the historical event directly, a contestant recounts the Cherokee relocation to “a place called Oklahoma.” She talks about the soldiers’ violence as they take her family members to stockades (“soldiers must be mean, because they didn’t sit down to share the family’s meal”), and laments over their lost homes. She describes hiding from the soldiers in a cave, and her gnawing worry that her family and friends have all been taken to the stockades and forced to walk the Trail of Tears. The young girl and her family have escaped relocation, but their home will never be the same again. On the one hand, this narrative repeats the dead Indian trope. The contestant is performing relic-ness, but with a difference: she performs not as a domesticated living legend, but as a living, breathing human being who has been detrimentally affected by white supremacy. Her performance as a historical figure has contemporary import, not as a two-dimensional tourist attraction, but as a challenge to white complacency with the legacy of neocolonialism (it would, after all, be downright perverted to snap a photo with a cardboard cutout of a Trail of Tears victim). It is a daring narrative to push in the context of Mormonism’s assimilatory efforts and “royal blood” rhetoric, but at the same time there is safety in baring these scars within the benign framework of a pageant.

The second dramatic narrative is also explicitly historical, this time about “my favorite hero of them all—my great-grandfather.” The contestant tells a story about her great-grandfather, Jesús, who was kidnapped by Apaches from his Navajo home, and who, through a series of relocations and encounters with soldiers, became an interpreter for the captain of the troop. Since he could speak both Spanish and Navajo, he acted as a liaison between the soldiers and the Navajo. While in this position, the soldiers decided that Navajo “should be sent to a place where they would be watched day and night,” and through his


45. “Indian Week Audio Recordings and Other Material,” L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.
liminal status, Jesús was able to protect his family from them. We are told that due to his dual identity as an interpreter and a Navajo, he “found times to be very, very hard,” but “as time went on, the government and other people came to realize that this wasn’t the way the Navajo should live.”49 The army employs him, as an interpreter, to speak with Andrew Jackson, and “this resulted in a treaty that said the Navajo could go to back their homeland.”50 This narrative recounts a happy ending, but one that still treats colonialism, and the borderland identity it forms for indigenous Americans, with gravity. Like the first narrative, it focuses not on a Judeo-Christian heritage, but an Indian heritage; however, it does so without repeating mythologizing narratives that minimize Native subjectivity. Through the pageant, then, Miss Indian BYU contestants were unafraid to evoke their colonized history, and equally unafraid to speak out against colonialism’s offenses.

The Miss Indian BYU contestants existed within multiple frameworks that insisted upon their subservience: the colonial project saw them as animalistic and infantile; the Mormon project attempted benevolently to build them up, though this often resulted in putting down their cultural heritage; they were constructed as either traitors to their race or backward squaws, and rarely were their voices taken seriously. On that note, it would be a shame not to take the Miss Indian BYU contestants’ voices seriously. Within the same faith tradition in which Spencer W. Kimball cautioned against “going back to the blanket,” Miss Indian BYU provided a space for young Native American women to talk lovingly about the beaded outfit their grandmother made for them, pray publicly in Mik'maq, and speak out against the enduring legacy of colonialism. In doing so, they were able to rework, and not simply reiterate, the dominant cultural script.

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49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.