



Reframing the Frontier: Religion, Race, and Colonial Violence in *American Primeval* (2025)

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Abstract

The American frontier has long been celebrated as a narrative of progress and divine destiny, yet this myth conceals the colonial violence and religious extremism that shaped U.S. expansion. This study investigates how the Netflix miniseries *American Primeval* (2025) deconstructs that mythology by exposing the intersections of religion, race, and power within nineteenth-century Mormon expansion. Drawing on Mohrman's (2022) analysis of how religious ideologies intensify settler colonial violence, this research examines how *American Primeval* portrays faith not as salvation but as an instrument of domination. Using qualitative content analysis and guided by settler colonial theory, the study analyzes selected episodes (2–5) focusing on dialogues, character arcs, and visual framing that reveal how spiritual conviction was weaponized to justify land seizure, racial hierarchy, and intra-settler violence. The findings show that the series reframes Mormonism as both a faith of refuge and a mechanism of control—demonstrating how the pursuit of Zion transformed into the reproduction of colonial systems. By foregrounding Indigenous resistance and exposing the moral contradictions of frontier religiosity, *American Primeval* challenges the enduring myth of American exceptionalism. Addressing the research gap in the representation of Mormon expansion within contemporary visual media, this study contributes to scholarship on settler colonialism by illustrating how screen narratives can revise historical memory and critique the theological foundations of conquest. Ultimately, the series serves as a cinematic act of historical revision that reclaims the frontier as a site of trauma, resistance, and moral reckoning.

Keywords: American frontier; *American Primeval*; Indigenous peoples; Mormon expansion; Settler colonialism

Introduction

The American frontier has traditionally been portrayed as a land of opportunity, heroism, and national destiny. Popular media often celebrates the

frontier myth as a narrative of civilizational progress, where rugged pioneers tamed a wild and empty land. This narrative helped shape the American national identity by glorifying westward expansion and justifying settler dominance over the so-called "wilderness." These ideas continue to influence how American history is remembered and reproduced in mainstream cultural discourse (Slotkin, 1992).

Scholarly discussions have long examined how the frontier myth functions within American culture. Rollins and O'Connor (2005) argue that traditional Western films often reinforce racial stereotypes and obscure the violence that accompanied U.S. territorial expansion. Paul (2022) highlights how religious and pseudo-scientific ideologies justified the forced removal and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples, while Mohrman (2022) explores how Mormon settlers drew upon doctrines of divine destiny and racial hierarchy to legitimize their expansion.

In contrast, Oberg and Olsen-Harbich (2022) emphasize the political adaptability and resilience of Indigenous nations, challenging the narrative of their disappearance. Collectively, these studies illuminate how religion, race, and power intersected in shaping colonial ideology, yet most remain confined to historical or textual analysis without addressing how these ideas are represented and critiqued in modern visual media. Beneath the romanticized image of the American frontier lies a history of conquest, dispossession, and systemic racial domination.

The ideology of Manifest Destiny transformed territorial expansion into a sacred national duty, disguising colonial aggression as divine purpose. Under this belief, the seizure of Indigenous lands and the suppression of Native sovereignty were reframed as acts of progress and civilization. Early Mormon settlers often portrayed as victims of religious persecution embodied this contradiction by reproducing the same structures of violence they once fled. Their pursuit of religious sanctuary evolved into an assertion of territorial power, illustrating how faith and empire became intertwined in the project of settler colonialism.

This entanglement exposes how moral conviction was weaponized to justify the erasure of other communities (Dodge, 2022). The Netflix miniseries *American Primeval* reinterprets these histories through a distinctly critical cinematic lens. Set amid the volatile conditions of the 19th-century frontier, the series examines how religion, racial ideology, and colonial desire worked collectively to sustain white supremacy and institutionalize violence (Davis-Delano et al., 2021). It confronts the viewer with unsettling depictions of Mormon militias, racialized persecution, and Indigenous resistance, dismantling the long-standing myth of the frontier as a space of moral triumph.

Through visceral imagery and layered characterization, the series exposes how the rhetoric of divine purpose masked systematic exploitation and genocide. In doing so, *American Primeval* disrupts the traditional Western narrative and reclaims the frontier as a contested site of memory and moral reckoning (Oberg & Olsen-Harbich, 2022). Through its cinematic storytelling, *American Primeval* also delves deeply into the moral contradictions embedded within settler colonial

ideology.

It presents Mormons not merely as one-dimensional agents of faith but as multifaceted figures both victims of exclusion and perpetrators of oppression whose spiritual convictions are continuously tested by the violence they enact. The series explores how their sense of divine mission becomes corrupted by ambition, fear, and the desire for control, illustrating how faith can evolve into a justification for cruelty. These characters operate within a system that equates religious purity with racial superiority, thereby transforming spiritual devotion into a mechanism of domination.

The narrative underscores how belief and brutality coexist, often blurring the boundary between salvation and subjugation. By exposing the internal conflicts that drive these individuals, *American Primeval* humanizes them without absolving their actions, making their faith-driven violence both comprehensible and condemnable. In doing so, the series invites a broader reflection on complicity, trauma, and the moral blindness that enables oppression to persist under the guise of righteousness.

The work of scholars such as Wald (2025) further enriches this depiction by analyzing how *American Primeval* uses characters like Sara and Isaac to explore the fraught intersection of faith, power, and guilt within the settler psyche. Their personal journeys embody the internal conflicts that define life on the frontier where devotion to God coexists uneasily with acts of violence and domination. Sara's endurance and Isaac's torment illustrate how belief systems, once rooted in hope and salvation, become distorted by the harsh realities of conquest and survival.

Through their struggles, the series reveals the psychological residue of settler colonialism, the weight of moral dissonance carried by those who both suffer and inflict suffering. By intertwining intimate human stories with broader historical forces, *American Primeval* transforms the mythic frontier from a symbol of heroism into a complex psychological landscape shaped by fear, memory, and remorse (Thackeray & Behm, 2025). This layered portrayal not only humanizes its characters but also underscores the enduring trauma embedded in America's colonial foundations.

Although the frontier myth has been thoroughly examined in American cultural and historical studies, limited scholarship has explored how contemporary visual media deconstructs its ideological foundations. Much of the existing literature remains focused on classical Westerns that reinforce heroic settler narratives, leaving a gap in understanding how modern works reinterpret this mythology through postcolonial and critical race frameworks. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how *American Primeval* rearticulates familiar tropes of conquest and redemption into a critique of settler colonial logic.

By employing moral ambiguity, symbolic imagery, and Indigenous-centered storytelling, the series challenges the foundational myths of American

exceptionalism and reimagines the frontier as a space of trauma, survival, and resistance. Ultimately, *American Primeval* functions as a cinematic act of historical revision, exposing the enduring structures of racial domination that underpin the American past.

Method

The data for this study consist of textual and visual elements from the Netflix miniseries *American Primeval* (2025). A qualitative content analysis method was employed, involving four stages: data reduction, data display, theoretical application, and interpretation. The researcher carefully selected specific scenes, dialogues, and imagery that represent themes of settler colonialism, Indigenous erasure, and racialized violence. The analysis centers on Episode 2, Episode 3, Episode 4, and Episode 5, chosen because they feature the most significant portrayals of colonial violence and Indigenous resistance.

Thematic coding was carried out manually, guided by key concepts from settler colonial theory and historical analysis, to identify recurring patterns of domination, religious justification, and survival. Although the coding was conducted by a single researcher, consistency was ensured through repeated validation against scholarly references. All materials analyzed were publicly accessible, maintaining ethical standards. This approach provides a clear understanding of how *American Primeval* (2025) portrays the historical entanglement of violence, belief, and racial hierarchy within settler colonial structures.

The selected data were then organized and analyzed through each theoretical lens. Interpretations were drawn to highlight the broader social and ethical implications of colonial violence, cultural displacement, and systemic oppression as portrayed in the movie. Following the interpretivist paradigm as outlined by (Dodge, 2022), secondary data includes scholarly works on settler colonialism, media representation, Indigenous histories, and race relations to provide historical and theoretical context.

Themes were inductively derived from repeated viewings, focusing on depictions of racialized violence, land conquest, and cultural resilience. This study also employs a historical approach to contextualize scenes of settler violence, land dispossession, and religious legitimation depicted in *American Primeval* (2025). Building on Indigenous-centered historiography (e.g., Blackhawk, 2023), the analysis reads Episodes 2–5 against contemporaneous discourses and policies that structured U.S. expansion, foregrounding how frontier myths obscure sustained colonial domination.

The historical lens is combined with a settler-colonial framework to trace continuities between past practices and enduring structures. This framework challenges conventional historical narratives by foregrounding Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems, tracing the enduring structures of colonial

domination. By amplifying marginalized voices and interrogating their representation, the discussion reveals how the series dismantles mythologized visions of progress and moral superiority.

Through this critical lens, *American Primeval* (2025) reframes the frontier as a site of systemic violence, resistance, and survival rather than a symbol of national destiny. The study uses settler colonialism theory to analyze how *American Primeval* represents the processes of land seizure, racial hierarchy, and settler power. According to theorists like Wolfe (1999) and Allard-Tremblay and Coburn (2023), settler colonialism is not a one-time event but a continuing system designed to remove Indigenous peoples and secure permanent settler control.

In the series, this system is clearly shown through repeated scenes of violence, land taking, and the use of religion to justify domination. These moments reveal that colonial power works not only through physical violence but also through ideas by shaping beliefs about race, faith, and civilization to defend white superiority. Veracini and Slyomovics (2022) expand on this by explaining how settler colonialism connects with race, religion, and control over nature, while also emphasizing the ongoing strength of Indigenous resistance.

American Primeval brings these ideas to life by showing both the cruelty of colonization and the resilience of Indigenous communities especially the Shoshone, whose traditions of sharing, care, and spiritual ties to the land express survival and defiance. The series ultimately criticizes how whiteness, Christianity, and sameness were made the standards of civilization, turning difference into a threat and justifying conquest through the language of Manifest Destiny and divine will (Mohrman, 2022).

Result

Based on the analysis, four primary patterns of behavior and ideological dynamics were identified in *American Primeval*, highlighting the series' depiction of Mormon settler violence, intra-settler aggression, Indigenous resistance, and the interplay of religion, race, and power on the 19th-century frontier:

1. Mormonism as Both Refuge and Agent of Domination

American Primeval portrays Mormonism as a community seeking safety while simultaneously acting as an instrument of colonial control. Although Mormons fled persecution, the series shows that they participated in the oppression of Indigenous peoples to secure land and authority. Williams (2024) notes that communities claiming victimhood can inadvertently reproduce systems of exclusion they once experienced. The series demonstrates how the Mormons justified territorial expansion through religious belief, framing violent acts as divinely sanctioned missions. Their conviction of being God's chosen people created a moral hierarchy that masked domination as righteousness. This depiction highlights how religious faith was used to uphold settler permanence and

enforce conformity, aligning with Wolfe's (1999) argument that settler colonialism is an enduring structure aimed at eradicating Indigenous societies.

2. Prejudice and Control in Relations with Indigenous Communities

The series emphasizes the Mormons' deep prejudice toward Indigenous peoples, viewing them as spiritually inferior and outside God's chosen plan. Johnson (2023) argues that any alliances formed with Indigenous groups were strategic rather than genuine, designed to maintain Mormon control and moral authority. This reflects Veracini and Slyomovics' (2022) observation that settler colonialism combines religion, race, and territorial domination, while Indigenous resistance persists despite oppression. The Mormons' attempts to convert and govern Indigenous communities disregarded their sovereignty, creating a fragile and coercive coexistence. Williams (2024) further explains that this moral pretense obscured the reality of control and exclusion, replacing authentic intercultural engagement with fear and manipulation.

3. Violence Within Settler Communities

American Primeval goes beyond depicting settler-Indigenous conflict by showing Mormons also committing violence against other white settlers. This intra-settler aggression demonstrates how religious exceptionalism the belief in being divinely chosen justified control, exclusion, and even murder. Williams (2021) emphasizes that a sense of sacred superiority allows persecution to transform into power. Scenes in the series show dissenters punished or exiled, illustrating how religious authority enforced conformity and suppressed differences. Mohrman (2022) points out that combining religious destiny with racial ideology created a rigid social order, while Johnson (2023) highlights that such violence ensured the community's dominance both internally and externally. These portrayals show that moral authority and faith could be weaponized to maintain social control.

4. Critiquing Faith, Violence, and Historical Memory

Ultimately, *American Primeval* challenges the myth of the frontier as morally heroic, revealing how religion and ideology justified violence and land dispossession. The series presents Mormonism not merely as a persecuted faith but as an active participant in settler colonial structures. Wolfe (1999) explains that settler colonialism is a persistent system designed to eliminate Indigenous societies, a framework visible throughout the series. Veracini and Slyomovics (2022) further illustrate how race, sovereignty, and environmental domination are intertwined in these colonial systems. Williams (2021) underscores how narratives of divine election were historically used to legitimize both inter-settler and Indigenous violence. Through physical and ideological depictions of aggression, the show exposes the moral contradictions of frontier expansion and the human cost of religiously justified conquest.

Discussion

One reason *American Primeval* resonates is how it foregrounds the clash between differing visions for America's future. Indigenous and marginalized communities are shown valuing collective responsibility, ecological balance, and cultural continuity, contrasting sharply with the settler ethos of individual ambition, property accumulation, and power. The Mormon settlers embody an extreme form of this ethos, guided by divine destiny that justified violent conquest. Their aggression extended beyond Indigenous peoples to include white, non-Mormon settlers who opposed their vision (Chakraverty, 2022).

The series highlights how religion, political authority, and settler colonial ideology combined to create domination, moral rationalization, and fear, revealing the broader social and ethical consequences of such beliefs. *American Primeval* exposes the violence hidden beneath the myth of American progress, revealing how U.S. expansion not only displaced Indigenous peoples but also fueled conflicts among settlers, particularly through the violent actions of Mormon factions. By illustrating these dynamics, the series complicates the traditional colonizer colonized binary, showing that power struggles also emerged within settler groups themselves.

The findings indicate that the narrative does not portray Indigenous peoples as a monolithic entity; rather, it underscores the diversity of their cultures and highlights that not all societies practiced the same traditions or responded to colonial encroachment in identical ways. Importantly, the series emphasizes that Indigenous attitudes and strategies evolved over time, reflecting resilience, adaptability, and the preservation of cultural practices and ethical frameworks despite ongoing systemic oppression (Starkey, 2023).

Mormon Settlers and the Violent Making of America

Firstly, in *American Primeval*, the Mormon settlers are depicted as ruthless and uncompromising, driven by a belief that their religion gave them the right to dominate the land and decide who deserved to live on it. They viewed Indigenous peoples not as people but as barriers to their vision, treating them with relentless hostility and using violence to remove them. Their ambition was not limited to Indigenous peoples; they also turned against other white settlers who did not share their faith, showing no tolerance for difference.

In contrast, the series presents Indigenous peoples as a peaceful and honorable community, deeply connected to the land and living with respect for its history and balance. They are shown as victims of unprovoked aggression, striving to protect their homes and families without engaging in needless cruelty. This sharp opposition between the settlers' greed and the Indigenous peoples' integrity highlights the injustice of the frontier, making it clear that the violence and

suffering were the result of settler ambition rather than any fault of the Indigenous communities. One example on Episode 2 (approx.00:13:20–00.14.41) is when a Mormon character Brigham Young says to his group:



Figure 1. *Brigham Young declares the vision of Zion to his followers.*

Dialogue:

Brigham Young: "We must use the spirit of Zion to drive out those devils. Because not today, my brothers, not tomorrow, but one day in the future, our land across the entire American continent will become Zion."

His followers: "Amen"

In this dialogue, when Brigham Young says, "We must use the spirit of Zion to drive out those devils, the term "devils" clearly refers to Indigenous peoples, who are seen by him and his followers as obstacles to the creation of their religious utopia by calling them "devils," he dehumanizes Indigenous people and frames their removal as a holy mission, not just a political or territorial act. His vision of turning the entire American continent into "Zion" reflects a settler-colonial mindset, where the land must be "cleansed" of those who do not fit into the religious and racial ideals of the Mormon community.

This dialogue highlights how religion was used to justify violence and expansion, especially against Indigenous populations. Before directing aggression toward individuals outside their community even those who were also white Mormon settlers demonstrated how religious ideology was appropriated to legitimize violence, including acts of murder. They believe they are chosen and that anyone outside their group is a threat so they are willing to kill to protect their way of life.

The finding shows that Mormon settlers used religious rhetoric to justify the displacement and killing of Indigenous peoples, framing it as divine duty. It also reveals that Indigenous cultures were diverse and adaptable, contradicting settler stereotypes. The land was imagined as untouched, waiting to be claimed and "civilized". This way of thinking allowed settlers to justify taking land that was already full of life, history, and meaning. For Brigham Young and his followers, the American continent was more than a place to live, it was the Promised Land, a

divine inheritance. And in their eyes, claiming it no matter the cost was part of fulfilling God's will (Simon, 2022).

Colonial Power and Territorial Domination

Moreover, American Primeval Episode 3 (approx.00.26.12-00.28.00), one of the most spiritually and politically charged moments takes place during a conversation between Captain Edmund Dellinger and a Shoshone elder. This interaction reflects the core conflict of the settler colonial project: the imposition of state authority over Indigenous land, people, and belief systems. While the American government views land as something to be governed, distributed, and reassigned for political convenience, Indigenous communities like the Shoshone see land as sacred connected to ancestry, identity, and divine will. The conversation does more than represent a policy dispute; it captures the fundamental disconnect between two worldviews. Through this dialogue, the series emphasizes how Indigenous sovereignty is deeply rooted in spiritual responsibility, not just political claims, and how that sovereignty is constantly threatened by colonial expansion.



Figure 2. Captain Dellinger urges removal, but Winter Bird stands firm.

Dialogue:

Captain Edmund Dellinger: "I'll say it like this, you must move far to the east, to the land U.S government has given you."

Winter Bird (Shoshone): "The Shoshone will remain on the land given by Nasuwegai'nde. The attacker does not care even if it comes from God."

This exchange reveals the deep resistance to colonial domination and the spiritual dimensions of Indigenous struggle. Captain Dellinger's statement reflects a bureaucratic and authoritarian logic, assuming the U.S. government has both the right and the power to relocate Indigenous peoples at will. His perspective reduces land to a mere possession to be claimed and controlled, disregarding the cultural heritage and sacred connections it holds for Indigenous communities. In sharp contrast, the Shoshone elder invokes Nasuwegai'nde, a sacred being in Shoshone belief, to assert that the land was not America's to give it had already been entrusted to them by a higher spiritual authority.

His words challenge the very foundation of colonial entitlement, reminding both the captain and the audience that Indigenous claims are rooted in spiritual law as well as historical presence. The line, “The attacker does not care even if it comes from God,” is a powerful indictment of settler colonialism’s moral bankruptcy, revealing how greed and power override any sense of justice or reverence.

This moment underscores that forced removal was more than a political displacement, it was a spiritual violation aimed at severing the bond between a people and their sacred land. In doing so, it stripped away not only territory but also identity, memory, and the foundations of cultural survival, exposing the profound human cost of America’s westward expansion (Carrillo, 2024).

Challenging the Myth of the “Savage”

Importantly, in American Primeval Episode 4 (approx. 00.16.00-00.17.28), a quietly powerful scene emerges when Sara Willson recounts her personal experience with Indigenous peoples. This moment operates as a living counter-document to the prevailing “merciless Indian savages” framing, a phrase whose every word historically served to cement white perceptions of Indigenous peoples as inherently violent and uncivilized. Sara’s testimony reveals that such prejudice is not the product of lived reality but of misinformation, rumor, and fear repeatedly circulated within settler society. Her words dismantle, piece by piece, the linguistic architecture of this stereotype, replacing it with an account that portrays Indigenous people as compassionate, generous, and profoundly human. In doing so, the scene exposes how the repetition of dehumanizing language over generations worked to erase truth, while her reflection opens space for empathy and the rehumanization of those long cast as “savages” (Stanković, 2021).



Figure 3. Sara Willson feels safe with the Indians despite prior prejudice.

Dialogue:

Sara Willson: “They were so kind, I didn’t expect that at all. I had always been told

the Indians were savages. But I've never felt so safe."

Sara's words directly confront the colonial myths she was raised to believe. Her surprise "I didn't expect that at all" underscores how settler society conditioned individuals to fear and distrust Indigenous peoples, even without personal experience. By stating that she "never felt so safe," Sara overturns the stereotype of the Indigenous "savage" and instead presents them as protectors and caretakers.

This shift in perspective is not just personal; it serves a larger purpose in the narrative by inviting viewers to question their own assumptions and the sources of those beliefs. The line is subtle but powerful, emphasizing how colonial ideology depends on fear-based propaganda to justify violence, land theft, and displacement. By humanizing the very people she was taught to fear, Sara's statement contributes to the show's broader effort to reframe American frontier history from an Indigenous centered point of view.

This emphasizes that Sara's statement is not only about her personal realization but also illustrates how settler culture functioned, it instilled fear and false ideas about Indigenous peoples to make settler violence and land theft appear reasonable or even necessary. By framing her words within this larger colonial mindset, the analysis shows how propaganda and ideology shaped both individual experiences and collective justifications for expansion. Indigenous peoples were often called savages, but this label ignored the truth that violence was frequently started by settlers, like the Mormons, who attacked them first. Blaming Indigenous peoples justified their removal while hiding the real aggressors (Rushforth, 2024).

Shoshone Voices on Pain and Resistance

And in American Primeval Episode 4 (approx.00.04.20-00.06.48), a powerful conversation unfolds between Winter Bird, Abish Pratt, and Red Feathers that explores the emotional and philosophical consequences of colonization. This scene goes beyond physical survival, diving into questions of cultural identity, inherited violence, and the psychological toll of living under constant threat. Through their dialogue, the Shoshone characters voice both their confusion and pain in trying to understand white aggression, while also wrestling with their own responses to it. The exchange captures the intersection of fear, anger, and the struggle to maintain humanity in a world that continuously seeks to erase Indigenous existence. It is one of the most emotionally reflective scenes in the series, offering a space where Indigenous characters are not only reacting to violence but deeply analyzing its roots and consequences.



Figure 4. Winter Bird questions the future, and Red Feathers vows to fight.

Dialogue:

Winter Bird (Shoshone): "I have a question, why do you think your people have such so much hunger to kill?"

Abish Pratt: "Fear."

Winter Bird (Shoshone): "I wonder... If so much has changed, can we still survive?"

Red Feathers (Shoshone): "We bleed for all Shoshone. When the white settlers kill one of us, I will kill ten of them. White men know no peace."

This scene reveals how settler colonial violence is sustained by a psychology of fear, the erasure of Indigenous humanity, and the resulting cycles of resistance it provokes. Abish's terse answer, fear, distills the deep-rooted anxieties of settler society fear of losing control, fear of the "other" that justify preemptive brutality, land theft, and systemic oppression. Winter Bird's question about survival captures both the physical threat of annihilation and the existential danger of cultural extinction. Red Feathers' vow to retaliate reflects generational trauma and the shift from peaceful resistance to militant defense when coexistence proves impossible. His assertion that "white men know no peace" indicts the settler worldview that equates dominance with security, showing how colonialism not only devastates Indigenous lives but also forces moral compromises, leaving communities to wonder whether they can endure without losing their humanity (Calcoen, 2025).

Exposing the Suppressed Histories of Frontier Violence

Nevertheless, in *American Primeval*, the series not only critiques settler colonialism through scenes of physical violence, but also through conversations that uncover deeper truths about land, justice, and responsibility. In Episode 4 (approx.00:31:35–00:38:00), Abish Pratt bravely testifies to a U.S. soldier about the true perpetrators of a brutal attack, exposing not only the injustice endured by her people but also the political hypocrisy of the era, where Indigenous peoples were displaced under the guise of peace while their real attackers remained unpunished. Her defiance challenges Mormonism's dominant paradigm, which perpetuated

racial and colonial violence through the theft of land, suppression of cultural practices, and even punishment of Indigenous people for attending native ceremonies. This moment positions Abish as a voice of truth and resistance, reclaiming Indigenous and marginalized narratives in American history. This series also underscores that not all Indigenous societies engaged in the same cultural practices and that their attitudes evolved over time, reflecting their resilience and adaptability in the face of systemic oppression (Hernandez, 2021).



Figure 5. Abish Pratt and the Demand for Proof Against Mormons.

Dialogues:

Abish Pratt: "They keep relocating to avoid conflict even though that might be right, the nation has decided this land isn't theirs.. They deserve a good life."

Captain Edmund Dellinger: "Yes, that's true, this country decided these lands don't belong to them."

Captain Edmund Dellinger: "I need proof that the Mormon tribe was involved in that attack, they must be brought to justice."

Abish Pratt: "I am the proof."

Captain Edmund Dellinger: "Yes, those damned Mormons."

Abish Pratt: "It was the Mormon who attacked my people. I saw them."

Abish Pratt speaks with a U.S. soldier about the recent attack and makes a powerful statement about the treatment of Indigenous peoples. When she says, "They keep relocating to avoid conflict even though that might be right, the nation has decided this land isn't theirs. They deserve a good life," the word "they" refers to Indigenous peoples, who are constantly being forced to move from their ancestral lands in an attempt to avoid war and preserve peace. Despite their efforts to coexist, the government and settlers continue to treat them as outsiders, denying them the right to their own land and way of life. Abish's testimony not only defends the innocence of her people but also highlights the hypocrisy of a system that

punishes Indigenous communities while ignoring the real perpetrators. Her decision to speak out becomes a powerful act of resistance that aligns with the show's larger goal of restoring Indigenous voices to the American historical narrative. While Indigenous peoples kept moving in search of safety, trying to avoid conflict, the Mormons continued to push them out of their own land through force and violence. This quiet act of survival, relocating repeatedly shows how ordinary Indigenous peoples used everyday forms of resistance to endure and adapt within an unjust system built against them (Garret, 2021).

Moral Fractures on the Frontier

In *American Primeval* Episode 5 (approx.00.20.20-00.21.31), a particularly thoughtful and emotional monologue is delivered by a kind-hearted white settler as he speaks to a violent Mormon character. This moment is important because it shows that not all white settlers supported the brutality carried out in the name of religion, expansion, or control. The speaker attempts to explain the violence he has witnessed not to excuse it, but to contextualize it. He reflects on how both Indigenous peoples and other working-class settlers have been pushed to create their own moral codes in response to trauma and systemic betrayal. The tone is both empathetic and morally critical, especially as it contrasts with the blind cruelty of the Mormon extremists. It's a rare moment where a white character actively challenges colonial violence and acknowledges the long-term consequences of oppression (Witkowski, 2024).



Figure 6. Jim Bridger shows empathy for Indigenous peoples but keeps his distance.

Dialogue:

Jim Bridger: "They saw their people wiped from the face of the Earth by white men. So, they have their own laws. The mountain people they saw others come and take the work they spent years building. So, they made their own laws too. And me? I just stay away from trouble and don't bother anyone."

This reflection reveals the deep fractures in the American frontier both moral and societal. By stating, *"They saw their people wiped from the face of the Earth by white men,"* the speaker directly acknowledges the genocide of Indigenous peoples, a truth many settlers ignored or denied. His observation that these groups *"have their own laws"* suggests that systems of justice naturally emerge when official institutions fail or turn hostile. He includes the *"mountain people"* to emphasize that even poor white settlers were not immune to marginalization and displacement, and that they too created their own survival ethics (Dunbar, 2021).

However, this section introduces class dynamics somewhat late; addressing these tensions earlier or weaving them more systematically into the analysis would better highlight how colonial violence intersected with economic inequality from the outset. This tension is highlighted through a thoughtful and emotional monologue by a compassionate white settler addressing a violent Mormon character. The scene shows that not all settlers condoned brutality justified by religion, expansion, or control.

The settler contextualizes the violence he has witnessed, reflecting on how both Indigenous communities and marginalized settlers created their own moral frameworks in response to trauma and systemic betrayal. The tone contrasts sharply with the cruelty of extremist Mormon settlers, making it a rare instance of a white character confronting colonial violence. The finding of the scene demonstrates that resistance can include moral reflection and condemnation, highlights how oppression shaped ethical systems of survival among marginalized groups, and shows that acknowledgment of injustice by members of the dominant group can challenge normalized violence and foster accountability (Klein, 2023).

Shoshone Resolve Against Mormon Aggression

Moreover, American Primeval Episode 5 (approx.00:21:57-00:23:02), a critical and emotionally charged moment unfolds as the Shoshone tribe confronts the terrifying reality of an approaching Mormon assault. The tension is palpable as the characters grapple with the looming threat of mass violence, displacement, and potential extermination. This scene powerfully captures the emotional depth and moral strength of the Shoshone people, especially through the calm and steady leadership of Winter Bird.

Each line of dialogue reflects a different aspect of their emotional response fear, desperation, sorrow but also determination and unity. Winter Bird, in particular, emerges as a symbol of courage and wisdom, refusing to entertain the idea of surrender. By turning fear into resistance, he transforms a moment of potential defeat into one of strength and solidarity. Through scenes like this, the series challenges dominant historical narratives and restores power and voice to Indigenous perspectives that are often silenced in popular media.



Figure 7. Abish Pratt and the Shoshone face the threat of attack.

Dialogue:

Abish Pratt : "The Mormons will kill all of you and your son."

Red Feathers (Shoshone) : "They are coming to kill us."

Winter Bird (Shoshone) : "We are innocent."

Red Feathers (Shoshone) : "They will hunt us down.. Just to kill all of us."

Winter Bird (Shoshone) : "How many are coming?"

Abish Pratt : "Too many."

Winter Bird (Shoshone) : "We'll go to west, like Kinii Da-Dawon said."

Red Feathers (Shoshone) : "We can't keep running forever. The white men will always find us."

Abish : "I'll go to them and surrender."

Winter Bird (Shoshone) : "No. You're with us now. If they want war, we'll face it."

This powerful exchange captures the bravery of the Shoshone in the face of injustice and imminent violence. Despite being wrongly blamed for a massacre they did not commit, and knowing they are outnumbered by the approaching Mormon forces, the Shoshone do not respond with fear or surrender. Instead, they stand together with a deep sense of unity and purpose. Winter Bird, as their leader, refuses to let fear dictate their fate. Her calm yet firm decision to resist "If they want war, we'll give them one" represents not just personal courage, but collective strength rooted in cultural pride and survival.

The finding reveals that the Shoshone resisted colonial violence with unity and cultural pride, challenging stereotypes of Indigenous passivity. It also shows that Mormon extremism extended beyond targeting Indigenous peoples, threatening anyone who opposed their religious vision. Through this moment, American Primeval portrays Indigenous people not as passive victims, but as active agents of their own history. The dialogue reflects one of the show's central themes and reclaiming Indigenous voices and reshaping the narrative around frontier violence, revealing the strength, wisdom, and dignity with which Native communities fought to survive in the face of colonial aggression and systemic

erasure. Mormons did not only target Indigenous peoples they also killed other white settlers who opposed their beliefs or threatened their vision of Zion. Their actions show how religious extremism was used to justify violence against anyone seen as outsiders (Hassani, 2024).

Indigenous Leadership Against Colonial Lies

The series not only exposes the violence committed by white settler groups such as the Mormons but also gives space for Native American characters particularly the Shoshone to be portrayed with dignity, strength, and courage. Far from being silent victims, the Shoshone are shown as brave defenders of their people and land, standing firm in the face of false accusations and violent oppression. In Episode 5 (approx.00.25.20-00:27:15), Winter Bird, the wise and courageous leader of the Shoshone tribe, speaks out boldly against the wrongful blame placed on her people, highlighting their resilience and refusal to be silenced by colonial narratives. This moment reflects not only her bravery, but also the strength of Indigenous leadership in resisting injustice.



Figure 8. Winter Bird denies Shoshone involvement in the killings.

Dialogue :

Winter Bird (Shoshone): "The Shoshone did not kill those white settlers, we have done nothing wrong."

This powerful line challenges the long-standing narrative that Indigenous tribes were the main source of violence during westward expansion. By denying the accusation, Winter Bird defends her people from being used as scapegoats for a massacre committed by the Mormon militia. Her statement not only reflects the truth but also exposes the systemic racism and false assumptions that settlers often placed upon Indigenous communities. It shows how Indigenous peoples were frequently blamed for violence they did not commit a tactic used by settlers to justify revenge attacks, land theft, and further military action.

This dialogue invites the audience to see the Shoshone as victims of a larger political and religious scheme, rather than aggressors. The finding shows that the

Shoshone actively resisted being scapegoated, exposing how settlers weaponized false narratives to justify land theft and violence. It also reveals that Mormon expansion was underpinned by an acceptance of Indigenous cultural erasure as an inevitable cost of settlement. By including this moment, *American Primeval* encourages viewers to question historical biases and reconsider who the real perpetrators of frontier violence were.

The Mormon Church continued expanding into Indigenous lands despite ongoing conflict, with Brigham Young accepting that Indigenous people would lose their culture for the sake of settlement. The Mormons continued expanding into Indigenous lands despite ongoing conflict, with Brigham Young accepting that Indigenous people would lose their culture for the sake of settlement. The false narratives used to justify this expansion and deflects blame from the real aggressors (Embleton, 2019).

Lastly, in *American Primeval* the portrayal of the Mormon settlers dismantles the familiar image of a persecuted faith community merely seeking refuge, instead revealing a group consumed by fanaticism, manipulation, and an unrestrained thirst for power. Their violence is deliberate and ideological, not acts of survival but assertions of dominance justified through distorted religious conviction. The Mormon militia is shown to be ruthless and deceitful, willing to slaughter not only Indigenous people but also other white settlers who refuse to submit to their authority.

By weaponizing faith and twisting divine purpose into a justification for cruelty, they perpetuate prejudice and sustain a violent social order under the guise of holiness. This depiction exposes the hypocrisy of settler morality, revealing how religious nationalism on the frontier often masked deep ambitions for control and conquest. In sharp contrast, the Shoshone people embody bravery, kindness, and moral clarity amidst relentless aggression. Despite being targets of invasion, displacement, and betrayal, they remain dignified, wise, and united, defending their land not only through warfare but also through compassion and spiritual endurance.

Characters such as Winter Bird and Red Feathers reflect Indigenous strength and humanity, challenging colonial portrayals that reduce Indigenous peoples to silence or victimhood. Through this contrast between Mormon brutality and Shoshone courage, *American Primeval* redefines the moral and historical landscape of the American frontier, suggesting that the essence of civilization lies not in conquest or domination, but in empathy, resistance, and the unyielding pursuit of truth and justice.

Conclusion

The series boldly presents the Mormon militia as not merely complicit in frontier violence, but as central perpetrators of calculated brutality. They kill entire peoples both Indigenous and white out of a desire to dominate land and impose

religious rule. Their actions represent a disturbing intersection of settler colonialism and religious nationalism, where violence is cloaked in spiritual righteousness. This aligns with recent scholarship, including Wald's (2025) analysis of Mormon trauma and complicity, which reveals how marginalized religious groups can become agents of oppression when their survival strategies evolve into militant ideologies.

By centering Indigenous voices, particularly through characters like Winter Bird and Red Feathers, *American Primeval* reclaims historical space for Indigenous resistance and resilience. The show does not reduce Indigenous characters to passive victims; instead, it portrays them as thinkers, leaders, and warriors navigating a brutal world of invasion and betrayal. *American Primeval* depicts the Mormon community as violent, ruthless, and morally corrupt. It presents them engaging in brutal actions rather than as peaceful settlers, emphasizing the darker aspects of their history.

In doing so, the series not only deconstructs the foundational myths of American exceptionalism but also invites viewers to reconsider who has historically been allowed to speak and who has been silenced. *American Primeval* ultimately delivers a searing indictment of settler violence, religious complicity, and historical amnesia, offering a more inclusive and honest account of America's past one that remains deeply relevant to ongoing struggles for racial justice, land rights, and truth-telling today (Wald's (2025)).

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