

Valerie Lambert, *Native Agency: Indians in the Bureau of Indian Affairs*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 376 pages. ISBN 978-1-5179-1453-0. \$27.00 USD paperback.

Native Agency opens with a road trip. When Dr. Valerie Lambert (Choctaw Nation) and her husband, Mike (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), begin to see signs for Washington D.C. along Route 95, Lambert suggests a visit to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) headquarters. When her husband asks why, Lambert responds: “Just to say hi... After all, it’s ours.” Lambert’s central question, though, is to what extent and in what sense (2)? Since the 1970s, the BIA has been predominantly staffed by Native peoples; by 2020, the agency’s staff was over 95% Native American and continues to be the largest employer of Native Peoples in the United States (4). *Native Agency* explores the transition of the BIA, a settler colonial institution originally tasked with the subjugation and extermination of Native Americans, to a settler colonial institution that is primarily staffed by Native American people themselves who seek to fight for Indigenous self-determination.

The BIA presents us with consistent contradictions. Kevin Gover, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs from 1997 to 2000, articulated this as ‘the paradox of working for an agency that has done harm to [our] people’ (107). Lambert sees this reflected in the space itself. She describes the steps of the South Interior Building (SIB) -- where the infamous 1972 take-over of BIA headquarters that culminated the Trail of Broken Treaties -- serve as both a “potent symbol of Native agency and Native discontent” (37), while simultaneously, the “past hangs over and pervades the BIA headquarters with a dark and somber heaviness that at times workers, including [Lambert], experienced as nauseating” (38). According to Lambert, the Main Interior Building’s (MIB) “monumental scale and colossal pillars convey timelessness, suggesting that the current regime is permanent and unshakeable” (108). Throughout the text, Lambert consistently peppers in narratives of real people that embody these tensions -- folks like Clydia Nahwooksy (Cherokee Nation) who ate pizza in the occupied commissioner’s office with some members of the Black Panthers during the infamous 1972 BIA takeover, only to accept a position as special assistant to the commissioner in 1976, just four years later (36).

Chapter 1 provides a detailed history of what is now known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Established in 1824 by John C. Calhoun, the Office of Indian Affairs was initially housed in the Department of War. The agency was then transferred to the Department of the Interior in 1849 and renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1947. Prior to the BIA’s transformation in the 1970s, the primary purpose of the agency was the subjugation and extermination of Native Peoples via myriad strategies including massacres, alcohol, threat, force, and deceit (39). Chapter 2 provides a detailed examination into how Indian employees of the BIA have reconfigured several key concepts central to the function and mission of the agency: federal trust responsibility, tribal sovereignty, and Indian land. Federal trust responsibility is not temporary, gratuitous, or federal control -- but requires active and ongoing services. Tribal sovereignty was reframed to be something honored, rather than denigrated by the BIA; specifically, Indian employees sought to help tribes fully express sovereign rights and actualize dormant rights. Lastly, within the context of Indian land, Indian employees “challenged prevailing federal and popular discourses that declared that the Indian land base was too large. At the BIA and in other arenas, they replaced these with a discourse that asserted that the Indian land base was too small” (93). While reading these two chapters, I immediately saw its immense value for general audiences and students; a clear, concise and engaging history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is sorely needed for the public and students of history, public policy, and

Native American Studies courses. I imagine many educators, myself included, will rely on Lambert's first two chapters in any courses pertaining to Native American history, federal Indian law, and Native American activism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapters 3-6 provide more detailed ethnographic snapshots of various positions held at the BIA. Starting at the top of the bureaucratic ladder, Chapter 3 examines BIA leadership, specifically the Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs (AS-IA). The AS-IA is responsible for maintaining existing federal programs and services for Indian tribes, identifying issues, making adjustments, and allocating and reallocating humans and other resources, and solving problems that require effective strategizing and vision. Chapter 4 moves down a rung on the bureaucratic ladder and examines "top-tier" officials, who are situated beneath the AS-IA, but above other employees at the BIA. This category includes both political appointees and Senior Executive Service (SES) employees. Top tier officials tackle the most pressing problems in Indian Country, including education, unemployment, and land fractionation. Here, Lambert blurs the boundary "us" and "them" (e.g., BIA & Indian tribes) through a discussion of what she refers to as "federal-tribal crossovers": when highly educated and talented Indian professionals vacillate between working for tribal governments and the federal government. This diffuses the argument that it is the BIA *versus* Indian tribes -- because oftentimes, each side is composed of the same folks.

Chapter 5 -- focused on "rank and file" employees, defined as "white-collar workers whose overlapping responsibilities are administering policy and determining the details of policy application (185), of which Lambert herself was -- opens, as many chapters in this text do, with a story. Lambert found herself at an "art" (quotations used in original text) exhibit for BIA employees that included "the most offensive, anti-Indian objects from the personal collections of BIA workers" (183). Lambert's contribution was a plastic liquor flask "adorned with a cartoon Indian holding an oversized drum" that her husband had purchased at a shop on his reservation. Lambert recalls the laughter of Native BIA employees filling the exhibit hall, to which Lambert found "strangely comforting. To me, it was not a bad way of coping with and fighting back against the many stomach-turning expressions of racism that American Indians experience on an almost daily basis" (184). Here, I'm reminded of Vine Deloria Jr's (Standing Rock Sioux) writing on Indian humor -- dating all the way back to the publication of *Custer Died for Your Sins* in 1969 (University of Oklahoma Press) in which Deloria Jr. links Indigenous Peoples' very survival to their ability to laugh: "Humor has come to occupy such a prominent place in national Indian affairs that any kind of movement is impossible without it... The more desperate the problem, the more humor is directed to describe it "(147). I recommend a revisit of the chapter -- as several assuming jokes about the Bureau of Indian Affairs are included (that I will not spoil here). Lastly, Chapter 6 examines Native employees who work in field operations. This includes twelve regional offices and eighty-three reservation-based agencies. Again, this chapter blurs the boundaries between tribal and federal and demonstrates the impact of chronic underfunding and understaffing the BIA.

This text is a much-needed history and analysis of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, particularly its transition from an agency tasked with the subjugation and elimination of Native American peoples to one primarily staffed by Native People with visions to empower Native American nations. While I appreciate Lambert's inclusion of settler colonialism as an analytical framework in the introduction and conclusion of the text, I would have loved to see how Lambert sees the reproduction of settler colonial ideologies through federal agencies -- whether in hindrance to Native employees at the BIA or, perhaps in some cases, reproduced themselves. I think this would help unpack important discussions around the complicated "love-hate relationship" with the BIA (27) expressed by a variety of folks in the text. Here, I'm thinking of Glen Coulthard's

(Yellowknives Dene) *Red Skin, White Masks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) “efforts over the last four decades to attain settler-state recognition of our rights to land and self-government have in fact encouraged the opposite -- the continued dispossession of our homelands and the ongoing usurpation of our self-determining authority (24). While understanding “that today’s Indian workers are not in fact stooges in an imagined neocolonial arrangement in which the past goals, policies, and actions of the BIA are being continued in the present” (196), in what ways does the staffing of the Bureau of Indian Affairs reproduce settler legitimacy? And additionally, how do the various challenges faced by BIA Indian agents, both underfunded and understaffed, speak to the United States’ larger project of settler colonialism?

Other contributions of the text include engagement with bureaucracy studies and the insertion of Native American/Indigenous Studies into that discourse. I would have liked to see how Lambert sees the intersections between settler colonial studies and bureaucracy studies, and what’s to be gleaned there. Lastly, Lambert is an excellent storyteller. Lambert reconstructs what are, to many of us, nameless and faceless bureaucrats into people with complex lives, stories, and motivations. Lambert should be lauded for transforming boring bureaucratic days-in and days-out into a gripping tale of settler state infiltration.

Kaitlin Reed
Native American Studies
Cal Poly Humboldt