"Awaiting Translation": Timothy Liu, Identity Politics, and the Question of Religious Authenticity

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> Every inheritance is an accident. This is what religious, sexual, and ethnic identity is designed to make one forget. For a feeling of contingency, it substitutes a feeling of necessity. But it is not necessary to be necessary, if one is ready for work.
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> —Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity"[1]

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In a 1991 *New York Times Book Review* article, African-American literary theorist and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., used the bizarre case of *The Education of Little Tree* to reexamine the issues of "identity" and "authenticity" in literary studies.[2] *Little Tree*, a popular best-seller of the 1970s, which purported to be a Native American autobiography, turned out to have been written by a Klansman and former speech writer for George Wallace. Prior to the exposure of its author's identity, the award-winning book had been praised by reviewers and critics for its authentically Native voice, its simple approach to living, and had enjoyed years as a mainstay of Indian reservation tourist shops. The episode, according to Gates, reveals the degree to which "[o]ur literary judgments . . . remain

1. Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity," *The New Republic*, 28 Nov. 1994, 28.

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," in *Inventing America: Readings in Identity and Culture*, eds. Gabriella Ibieta and Miles Orvell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 439-49.

hostage to the ideology of authenticity" (440). Regardless of the fact that "authentic racial and ethnic differences have always been difficult to define," and in spite of the fact that literary critics for twenty years have heralded the "death of the author"—the code name for the belief that meaning in a text relies more on the reader than on the elusive details of an author's biography—most literary audiences are heavily invested in a politics (and poetics) of authorial identity.

Gates's conclusion, that, "like it or not, all writers are 'cultural impersonators'" (446), seems strange coming from a man whose professional career has been devoted to the self-consciously political task of expanding the American literary canon to include African-American writers and critics *as such*. His willingness, however, to acknowledge that "authenticity" is something that can be faked should be instructive to other groups—including Mormons—that seek to create identity-centered literary criticisms. Moreover, if ethnic authenticity inevitably involves "impersonat[ion]," then religious orthodoxy and apostasy, in all their various manifestations, certainly involve such performance. In other words, to borrow a phrase from anthropologist James Clifford, "the predicament of culture" is that culture—and cultural identity—are "conjectural, not essential."[3] Identity is, in both of these views, a fiction: politically and personally useful, perhaps, but fictional nonetheless.

As several critics of Mormon literature have recently noted, the contention over "Mormon" literature is analogous to similar discussions in other subcultures and communities. Identifying uniquely "Mormon" aspects of literature, in this view, is roughly the equivalent of reading for what Gates calls the "black signifying difference" in African-American literature,[4] or of reading Herman Melville or Walt Whitman, as several critics have done recently, as writing from some form of "gay" identity.[5] The more common analogy, of course, is drawn between "Mormon" writers and authors associated with other religious traditions: Singer, Roth, Bellow, or Ozick from Jewish communities, or O'Connor, O'Hara, Percy, or McCarthy from Catholic traditions. Thinking of Mormon identity as similar to ethno-racial, sexual, or (non-Mormon) religious categorizations has advantages and disadvantages. African-American critics, for example, like many Mormon critics, have sought to delineate tropes and fig-

3. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 11.

4. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5. See, for example, James Creech, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's* Pierre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

ures central to "their" literary traditions, an endeavor similar to Mormon critic Eugene England's in his classic essay "The Dawning of a Brighter Day." Like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who, in his literary criticism, draws on African and African-American vernacular and mythologies to find metaphors by which he can help others better understand black fiction, England argues that "Mormon" literature will contain elements derived from Mormon experience and history, including

> a certain epic consciousness, and mythic identification with ancient peoples and processes: the theme of exile and return, of the fruitful journey into the wilderness; the pilgrim traveling the dark and misty way to the tree of salvation; the lonely quest for selfhood that leads to conversion and then to the paradox of community; the desert as a crucible to make saints, not gold; the sacramental life that persists in spiritual experience and guileless charity despite physical and cultural deprivation; the fortunate fall from innocence and comfort into a lone and dreary world where opposition and tragic struggle can produce virtue and salvation.[6]

Perhaps England's catalog of tropes hoped for is what Western historian Patricia Limerick sees (in England's edited anthology of contemporary Mormon stories[7]) as "a clear cultural identity" that "thrives in a way identifiable to any reader."[8] As I discuss below, however, that "clear cultural identity" is not as plain to many critics within Mormon communities as it is to those without.

If similarities can be drawn between "Mormon" and other ex-centric writing, though, obvious differences are apparent as well. An important distinction between ethno-racial and religious identity, for example, is that the former is frequently determined by forces outside the individual, forces that categorize people based on skin color or sex or other physical characteristics. Even the comparison to non-Mormon "religious" writing is limited: the traditions to which Mormon writing is most often compared, for one thing, have hundreds if not thousands of years worth of cultural pluralism which are taken for granted by modern critics. Also, authenticity does not seem to be as serious a topic of conversation in traditions that are too large for rigid boundary maintenance by central

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6. Eugene England, "Dawning of a Brighter Day: 150 Years of Mormon Literature," rpt. in *Wasatch Review International* 1 (1992): 1.

7. Eugene England, ed., *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

8. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Peace Initiative: Using the Mormons to Rethink Culture and Ethnicity in American History," *Journal of Mormon History* 21 (Fall 1995): 23-24.

authority.[9] For this reason, while I think the comparisons to (non-white) ethnic or (non-Mormon) religious literatures may be helpful for understanding "Mormon" writing, Mormon identity may be more helpfully compared to sexual orientation—gayness in particular—which does not in itself prevent the individual from "passing" as a member of the dominant culture and which, as a category of identity, is also a product of the nineteenth century and still very much under construction.[10] Indeed, the questions surrounding "gay" or "lesbian" literature are remarkably similar to those regarding Mormon writing. Listen to Bonnie Zimmerman, an early lesbian critic who, in "determining whether or not [a lesbian] perspective is possible," asks the question: "When is a text a 'lesbian text' or its writer a 'lesbian writer'?" Answering the question in part, she continues:

> The [lesbian] critic must first define the term "lesbian" and then determine its applicability to both writer and text, sorting out the relation of literature to life. Her definition of lesbianism will influence the texts she defines as lesbian and . . . it is likely that many will disagree with various identifications of lesbian texts. . . . The critic will need to consider whether a lesbian text is one written by a lesbian (and if so, how do we determine who is a lesbian?), one written about lesbians (which might be by a heterosexual woman or a man), or one that expresses a lesbian "vision" (which has yet to be satisfactorily outlined).[11]

The dilemmas Zimmerman points to have been shared by those seeking to define a "Mormon" criticism. In fact, the above paragraph makes perfect sense when the word "Mormon" is substituted for the word "lesbian." Her aversion to essentialism, especially, is instructive. What readers of "Mormon" literature could learn from critics like Zimmerman and Gates or from anthropologists like Clifford is that group identity is *never* essential; rather, there are as many "Mormon" identities as there are

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9. Indeed, "identity," for one critic of American Jewish literature, cannot be dealt with at anything but an individual level. "Bearing witness," which Victoria Aarons sees as the central narrative device in "Jewish" storytelling, "becomes [in American Jewish texts] as much an attempt at forming individual identity as perpetuating and refashioning the identity of some sort of communal heritage." Following Irving Howe, Aarons theorizes apostasy ("tradition as discontinuity") as central to much Jewish writing, a concession "Mormon" critics continue to quibble over. See Victoria Aarons, *A Measure of Memory: Storytelling and Identity in American Jewish Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 5.

10. On the history of "homosexual" identity, see David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

11. Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," In *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 120, 123-24.

people who want or need to claim them—as writers *or* readers. Beginning with the instability of group identity (even while acknowledging the very real needs for such classifications) keeps us from seeing identity as an easy formula for understanding any given author. Rather than allowing one pat label—"Mormon," "African American," "lesbian"—to pretend to unlock all the secrets of a text, we can use such categories (if we want or need to) as starting points, recognizing the primacy of individual experience over the group identity of the author.[12]

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> For in every wound there is a truth, a revelation
> like a ram caught in a thicket, each brush stroke
> on the canvas obedient to a law I cannot live.
> I woke up crying, *what shall I do with my life?*,
> fearing the paralysis of each hour until I heard
> your voice: *I need you the way I need music.*
> It was then I knew. Only love can make us visible.
> —Timothy Liu, "With Chaos in Each Kiss"[13]

Even if we find parallels to "Mormon studies" in gay or ethnic studies, we should take one further step and ask: Whence the impulse to limn literature along lines of ethnic, sexual, religious, or other group identity? Claiming an artist belongs to one's own community (or, of course, the opposite measure of refusing one admission into a group) is an act fraught with political significance, as is the claim that "our" writers deserve wider recognition. The question of canonicity, as John Guillory and other theorists and historians have demonstrated,[14] is fundamentally one of representation: in the revolution now revising our understanding of the literary canon, critics from various subcultures and communities have fought for equal representation, requiring us to rethink our standards of what constitutes "good" literature in terms of various historical contexts. Representation is also the concern that most fuels the young (Mormon) critic Michael Austin, who writes in an award-winning *Dialogue* article that

> Mormon students and Mormon professors should be able to use university time and resources to study, write, and teach about our own culture and our

12. On this point I have appreciated the responses to questions I asked on H-AMREL, an electronic discussion group for scholars of American religion, in the summer of 1996.

13. Timothy Liu, *Burnt Offerings* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1995), 30.

14. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Process of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Guillory's work, however, offers a rigorous critique of the idea that "representation" is the foundation of a canon expansion.

> religion. . . . Literary scholars and critics [he writes elsewhere] now rally around the cries of "tolerate difference" and "celebrate diversity," and we, as Mormons, have plenty of difference and diversity to offer.[15]

Claiming an already significant figure as one's own, Austin implies, can also boost one's (group) visibility and status within the larger culture. This has been a principal strategy of gay readers, to be certain.[16] For Mormons this might be the literary equivalent of reminding fellow sports fans that Steve Young is a Mormon and BYU graduate.

As important as Austin's project of representing Mormons in the American canon may be, the more charged contest, in my view—and the more pertinent to a number of writers who self-identify institutionally as "Mormon"—takes place *within* Mormon communities when critics and (so-called) authorities police the boundaries of appropriate "Mormon" expression. Recent casualties of such police brutality include Brian Evenson and Gail Houston, both forced out of BYU's English department: one for inadvertently representing the church and BYU in ways Mormon leaders found unacceptable (the content of his fiction was not authentically Mormon, in other words) and the other for reading *non*-Mormon literature in *un*-Mormon ways (the contention being, at least in part, that her description of Victorian sexuality as a social construct was not in harmony with the hierarchy's recent "Proclamation on the Family," which asserts that gender is essential).[17] Such examples demonstrate that the question of identity politics is as vital within Mormon contexts as it is without.

The struggle to define appropriate means of "Mormon" expression is debated in more innocuous academic conflicts as well. In a recently published and much-cited debate—within certain circles, at least—Richard Cracroft and Bruce Jorgensen, both past presidents of the Association for Mormon Letters and both professors of English at BYU, set forth different ideas about what "Mormon" literature and criticism should be and do. Cracroft, representing a self-proclaimed "faithful" side of the debate, defends an unapologetically *essential* Mormon literature and criticism, grounded in "[faithful] Mormon metaphors" by authors and critics "who

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15. Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995): 134, 133.

16. For this reason I noted, earlier, the recent arguments about Melville's "gay" identity. While critics for decades have acknowledged Whitman's homosexuality, to make a similar argument for (the heterosexually married) Melville is a controversial and strategic maneuver in contemporary American culture wars.

17. For the details on these and other BYU academic freedom cases, see *Sunstone* magazine's news sections from July 1993 to the present, as well as Brian Kagel and Bryan Waterman, *The Lord's University: Freedom and Authority at Brigham Young University, 1985-1996* (forthcoming).

have been to the mountain" and who "cultivate the presence of the Holy Ghost."[18] In contrast, Jorgensen argues in favor of a "hospitable" reading that welcomes "strangers" into "our common room" with the invitation to "tell us your story so our hearing and telling can go on."[19] It is important to note the points of disjunction when comparing and contrasting the two: where Cracroft is primarily concerned with providing quality literature for a faithful audience, Jorgensen is interested in *teaching* that audience to be better readers of quality literature. Focusing on readers rather than writers, then, Jorgensen has sidestepped the messy question of group identity and its implied boundaries, even though he criticizes the notion of essentialism.

While I applaud several points in Jorgensen's address and find it to be a more satisfying and inclusive outline of "Mormon" criticism than Cracroft's, I am left to wonder whether Jorgensen—even with his good intentions—opens many more possibilities for a diversity of "Mormon" voices. Are his "others," his "strangers," Mormon? If so, how does he determine which Mormons are "stranger" than "others"? It seems Jorgensen relies, even while trying to avoid it, on the same notion of essence he finds problematic in Cracroft's criticism: Jorgensen's "our" and "we" seem to need no qualification. Each of these approaches, then, assumes the structure of an either/or binary categorization of opposites (what Mike Austin, riffing on Philip Roth, calls a "good-for-the-Mormons" and "not-good-for-the-Mormons" approach to literature[20])—Cracroft's in the split between "Mantic" and "Sophic," or between (essentially) Mormon and not-Mormon, and Jorgensen's in the implied opposition between (non-Mormon) stranger and (Mormon) familiar. Each critic positions himself in respect to an Other, another who is fundamentally different in some way.[21]

Into this context, which still has the negative potential of bogging down in a discussion of "Is so-and-so's writing *really* Mormon?" (the equivalent of asking the question: "Is Mariah Carey *really* black?"[22]), I

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18. Richard Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 57.

19. Bruce Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 50.

20. Austin, "Function," 131.

21. Of course, Jorgensen's use of the term "Other" has different connotations than mine. To him, the act of listening to the Other mirrors the central Christian image of Jesus' atonement. My assumption is that every author is always already Other and that Jorgensen's act of hospitable reading needs to be extended to the point that it renders the idea of "our" or "we" much more problematic. The more problematic those boundaries are, I think, the more inclusive they can be.

22. Michael Eric Dyson uses this facetious question in his own critique of African-American identity politics. See his *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 143.

wish to introduce Timothy Liu, a poet whose writing I much admire and who stands ready to follow May Swenson as a world-class poet to grow out of the Mormon tradition. Indeed, given the fact that the New York Public Library recently named Liu as one of "ten poets for the twenty-first century," his poems will likely serve larger academic communities as texts that embody the complications inherent in the very notion of "identity." My hope in examining Liu here, though, is that his poems—and the complexity of the categories of identity that surround (if not generate) them—will help us unravel some of the problematic aspects of trying to quantify the "Mormonness" of any given piece of literature.

Critics concerned with watching the borders of "Mormon" literary territory would be frustrated by Liu. Most definitely Richard Cracroft would dismiss him as not-Mormon: if anything would typify what Cracroft derides as "the faltering spiritual vision among younger Mormon poets" that "repress[es] and replac[es] soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism,"[23] it would be Liu's frequent gay subject matter, his exploration of corporeality in ways that many orthodox Mormons would find offensive. Jorgensen, on the other hand, in his quest to "undertake the task of love," would likely "listen to the voice of the Other, let the stranger say"; he would attempt to face Eudora Welty's challenge to imagine himself "inside the skin, body, heart, and mind of any other person" (49). In his hospitality, he would be "slow to shut out" or "to decide whether a literary visitor is 'Mormon' or not" (47), although hospitable listening and a slowness to judge are not the same as embracing one as one's own.

In contrast to these approaches, I would argue that the "Mormon" critic's initial task is not only to be slow to determine the visitor's "Mormonness," but also to refuse the notion of essence (rejecting the question "Is this work *really* Mormon?": a question literary or general authorities really cannot answer) and problematize the concept of "Mormon" identity from the outset. Here it is important to note a fundamental difference between the identity-specific criticism of people like Henry Louis Gates and the majority of the "Mormon" critics I have cited so far: while these critics—even Mike Austin, who, like Jorgensen, tries to shy away from essentialism—prophesy about their hopes for Mormon literature, including what tropes, figures, themes, and attitudes Mormon literature *should* take, someone like Gates only describes what already exists in his tradition. In other words, most "Mormon" critics have been prescriptive, whereas the best theories of ethnic or "minority" literature, it seems, grow descriptively out of a body of work already recognized as belong-

23. Richard Cracroft, Review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, *Brigham Young University Studies*, Spring 1990, 122.

ing to the tradition.[24] The initial critical questions, then, are not "Is this literature Mormon?" or "Is this author faithful?" but "*How* can this literature be read profitably as coming out of a Mormon tradition?" and "What does it have in common with other work that is recognized as 'Mormon' in some way?"

In dismissing essentialism we again find a parallel for "Mormon" criticism in gay studies: problematizing Mormon identity corresponds with the action taken by gay theorist Ed Cohen, who suggests that "the multiplicity of sexual practices that are engaged in by those who lay claim to the nominations 'gay' and 'lesbian' much less 'bisexual,' unquestioningly boggles the mind." Instead of perpetuating easy categories of "gay" and "straight," Cohen looks toward a "plurality of pleasurable, somatic, psychic, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual" locations from which a subject can speak.[25] David Van Leer, another gay theorist, agrees: "[M]onolithic concept[s] of identity den[y] the multiplicity of experience," he writes, "the ways in which people play many different roles."[26] The same suspicion of essentialism—and the accompanying respect for authorial individuality that these critics show—can operate when we discuss "Mormon" aspects of literature; the multiplicity of religious and irreligious practices engaged in, after all, by those who lay claim to the nominations "Mormon" and "post-Mormon," much less "Jack Mormon,"

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24. I don't have the space in this essay to examine other versions of "Mormon" criticism that I find as problematic as Cracroft's, but which might be summed up as "the thirteenth article of faith school." This approach, popular with the electronic discussion group sponsored by the Association for Mormon Letters and propounded most skillfully by Benson Parkinson, that group's moderator, would make Cracroft happy. Its problems, though, are the same as Cracroft's: if "we" base our literary tastes and canons on prescriptive categories such as "virtuous, lovely, or of good report," the question remains, "What authority polices these categories?" The assumptions I work from imply that loveliness, etc., are as difficult to pin down as the word "Mormon" is to define. Rather than giving us more precise terms to deal with, the language of the thirteenth article of faith only increases the muddiness of the "Mormon" critical pool.

I should also mention here that "Mormon" criticism's tendency toward prescription (or "pre-scription": judging literature before it's even written) has been paralleled in the *early stages* of many "minority" literatures and criticisms. As recently as 1993, for example, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong could write that "critics [of Asian-American literature] have not reached any agreement on how their subject matter is to be delimited. Prescriptive usages exist side by side with descriptive ones; some favor a narrow precision, others an expansive catholicity." Her book, significantly, works to displace prescriptive approaches. See Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7. Thanks to Jennifer Ho for bringing this book to my attention.

25. Ed Cohen, "Are We (Not) What We Are Becoming? 'Gay' 'Identity,' 'Gay Studies,' and the Disciplining of Knowledge," in Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 174.

26. David Van Leer, *The Queering of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

also boggles the mind.

Liu's poetry works to problematize easy categorizations, both religious and sexual. If "gayness" is to be thought of in terms of a spectrum, and also cannot be considered independent of other factors such as ethnicity, class, and religion, then perhaps we can best read Liu's poems as located on a Mormon spectrum or as existing in a space where the categories Asian American, Mormon, and gay all intersect—along with whatever other ex-centricities Liu may contribute. The recognition of such overlapping and contradictory categories of identity, intellectual historian David Hollinger suggests, will be the hallmark of what he calls "postethnic America," an America in which "affiliation on the basis of shared descent would be more voluntary than ascribed."[27] Hollinger's idea parallels what historians and sociologists of religion have recognized about contemporary Mormonism: that the near-ethnic flavor of nineteenth-century Mormonism is giving way to a constructed identity aligned closely with (voluntary) activity in the institutional church.[28] Moreover, Hollinger's recognition of overlapping and competing identity categories (he cites Alex Haley's African-Irish-American heritage) illustrates the same problematics that Liu embodies: whatever "Mormon" identity might mean for a particular author or text, that identity will coexist and possibly be in conflict or competition with any number of other identifications.[29] Adrienne Rich once described herself as seeing from "too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, antiracist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner." She is, she writes, "split at the root."[30] Most people could be described in similar ways.

Liu's poems begin from just such a problematized notion of identity, a strategy he uses to avoid being dismissed as Other, as object, by "Mormon" critics, however loving their intentions may be. For Liu, the overlapping identity categories are "em-bodied" in his very flesh. His fixation with the body—especially with his own sense of enfleshment—undermines binary categorization that would leave him marginal and illegitimate, without possibility of subjectivity in a Mormon (and, very often, in

27. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 19.

28. Jan Shipps, "Making Saints: In the Early Days and the Latter Days," and Armand Mauss, "Refuge and Retrenchment: The Mormon Quest for Identity," both in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

29. Patricia Limerick recounts a memorable anecdote to make this same point: She was quite surprised, several years ago, when a Mexican American student, a "great supporter of Chicano rights," proposed a term paper on Mormonism. His family was, she learned, fourth-generation Latter-day Saint. See Limerick, "Peace Initiative," 8.

30. Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," in *Creating America*, eds. Joyce Moser and Ann Watters (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 112-13.

a heterosexist American) context. The mere act of recognizing corporeality is charged with political potential. To a belief system that denies the legitimacy of gay identity, the enfleshed gay subject says, to misappropriate a phrase from Catharine MacKinnon, "Try arguing with an orgasm sometime." Somatic realities, the product of a lifetime of cultural inscriptions of the body, are perhaps the best defense against the threat of invisibility. Consider gay activism of the "We're here, we're queer, we're fabulous, get used to us" variety. Bodily subjectivity, in other words, resists institutional definition: the physical outweighs and replaces the metaphysical. In this view, the presence of the (speaking) gay subject emerging from the Mormon tradition threatens the security of a system that denies the reality and legitimacy of gayness, precisely because that presence signifies its own subjectivity.

Of course, the question remains whether a subversive subjectivity can be conceived of as a part of the tradition it consciously or unconsciously seeks to alter or even undermine. Here the question of readership is important. To most of Liu's audience, the "Mormon" content of his poetry is invisible; the poems work well without any understanding of Mormonism. Although Liu has published poems with overt Mormon references in *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and his 1988 chapbook *A Zipper of Haze* (published while he was a student at BYU), nowhere in his two collections of poetry[31] do we find mention of things overtly "Mormon." In fact, the only explicit references to Mormonism in Liu's books are found in Richard Howard's introduction to *Vox Angelica*, in which he describes Liu as "a young Asian of conflicted Christian (Mormon) faith" (x), and on the flyleaf of *Burnt Offerings*, which mentions Liu's Mormon mission to Hong Kong. Liu's own response to an interviewer who asked if he considers himself a "Mormon poet" reveals a little more about the connection between his Mormon background and his writing:

> It's always been joked that Mormon art is an oxymoron. Most of the vitality is at the fringes[.] . . . I think that many Mormons already believe that they're saved, taken care of spiritually. But for other artists, the art is all they have. A great poem or story saves them. I think if you don't live or die for art, you're not going to make it. When you have all you need spiritually at church, other things become unnecessary. Who cares about Van Gogh? He's not saved and he can't save you.[32]

Here Liu dances skillfully around the question, refusing to position him-

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31. Timothy Liu, *Vox Angelica* (Cambridge, MA: Alice James Books, 1992); Liu, *Burnt Offerings*.

32. Joanna Brooks, "*Vox Angelica*: Ex-BYU Student/Poet Tim Liu Returns to Provo," *Student Review*, 10 Mar. 1993, 12.

self firmly either with the "they" of "many Mormons" or the "they" of "other artists." While Liu's overtly "Mormon" poems have been unrelentingly critical of mindless religious orthodoxy (see "The Lord's Table," for example, in *A Zipper of Haze*, which I discuss below), many of his newer poems reveal—to someone trained to recognize "Mormon" influence—that much of Liu's sense of his somatic self is the result, in part, of Mormon enculturation. Because this content is evident to a "Mormon" reader, Liu's poems may usefully be discussed, I would argue, as "Mormon" poems. Both "Mormon" and larger American audiences would benefit from such an added angle of explication. Consider the short poem "The Tree that Knowledge Is" from *Vox Angelica*:

> I do not want to die. Not for love.
> Nor a vision of that tree I cannot
> recollect, shining in the darkness
> with cherubim and a flaming sword.
> All my life that still small voice
> of God coiled up inside my body.
> The lopped-off branch that guilt is
> is not death. Nor life. But the lust
> that flowers at the end of it.

A number of signifiers here resonate with a Mormon audience: God's "still small voice" (a favorite Primary phrase); the "vision of that tree" protected by "cherubim and a flaming sword," meaning the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The "lopped-off branch" brings to mind New Testament imagery, but also the allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon. If knowledge is the tree associated with the loss of innocence, we can attribute the poem's tension to its suspicious refusal of the other tree—the Tree of Life—with its association to God's voice; tension also derives from the poet's refusal of death or life as he settles instead for lust, flowering and bearing fruit. Even though it has been cut off and cast away, this branch is physically real, not vision—neither the mere semblance of an eternal tree nor the death that opens the poem like a disease. As in his response to the interviewer, Liu refuses here to place himself wholly in or out of any one category. But the added understanding gained by considering the poem's "Mormon" elements makes a seemingly parochial activity valuable. And at no point are we required to measure "Mormonness" against arbitrary and sometimes punitive standards.[33]

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33. I have benefitted here from the example of Susan Howe, whose essay "'I Do Remember How It Smelled Heavenly': Mormon Aspects of May Swenson's Poetry," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Fall 1996): 141-56, examines "Mormon" aspects without seeking to quantify or define Mormonness.

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> The lure of identity is the lure of wholeness. It proposes to bind up the parts and the pieces of a life and transform them into a unity, into a life that adds up. . . . But is there really nothing worse than a life that does not add up? Surely the life that adds up is the easeful one.
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> —Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity"[34]

To address Liu's texts as "Mormon," then, requires us to refuse the idea of Mormon essentialism; in doing so we recall his eligibility for "other" identity categories—an approach that could be taken with any literature we are tempted to discuss as "Mormon." In this final section of my essay I will outline more clearly two distinct approaches to reading such literature, again using Liu's poems as an example. While these approaches need to be more fully explored in order to demonstrate their applicability to other "Mormon" texts, the discussion here should be sufficient to point out the ways such approaches differ from and, hopefully, are more productive than previous attempts at "Mormon" criticism.

If we take Ed Cohen's suggestion, cited above, to use "gayness" as only a "point of departure" rather than as a totalizing identity, can we not also view Liu's subjective Mormonism as a point on a spectrum that also would include Cracroft in his attitude of judgment and Jorgensen in his invitation to his sitting room? Viewing Liu's poems and the corporeal sensibility they reveal as located in multiple traditions—including a problematic Mormon one—is, perhaps, the only practical way of approaching them. In "The Tree that Knowledge Is," discussed above, the voice is implicitly "gay," but that word does not—cannot—presume to answer all the poem's questions or explain all its meanings. The voice is also deeply religious, and, with the help of a little information about the author—the kind Gates reminds us that readers can't seem to do without, because books continue to be printed with authors' photos and biographical sketches—we realize that the religious language we're encountering likely has Mormon meanings. As I noted above, the tension between the two voices in the poem accounts for its vitality.

In the first version of "Mormon" criticism I am proposing, the idea of "tension" is central. As with the problematic category of "gayness," the "Mormonness" of the poems can be seen as located on similar spectra or in various tensions—tensions I see in much literature we might identify as "Mormon." One such tension is between author and author-ity, seen in the problem Liu as a sexually active gay male would find in the institutional Mormon church; or in the experience of Brian Evenson; or in the fact that the *Ensign* would refuse to publish a poem by Gene England for

34. Wieseltier, "Against Identity," 30.

doctrinal reasons. But the tension would also be present when self-styled literary author-ities like Cracroft deny Liu's Mormonness as they locate themselves in a position of faith, claiming spiritual and literary objectivity—and superiority—through the medium of the Holy Ghost and dismissing opponents as "earth-bound humanists."[35]

A second tension surfacing in Liu's poems is that between the Mormon tradition and an American society that, historically, opposed Mormons and placed them on its margins. This tension finds a counterpart in versions of "ethnic" criticism that rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "double voice." In African-American literature, for example, Gates sees "texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black." These texts have "a two-toned heritage: [they] speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent."[36] Much "Mormon" writing—especially that intended for a larger American audience—contains similar evidence of a double voice.

Consider Liu's poem "Awaiting Translation," originally printed in *The New Republic* and collected in *Vox Angelica*:

> My habit is reading only beginnings
> of books in a stranger's tongue, or else
> waiting for a new translation, the meaning
> of lines still imprisoned on the shelf.
> To set myself free! So often I have missed
> the chance to dive into an ocean
> of imposed words (not that I'd resist
> the drowning), yet I've felt the motion
> of wind-tossed water slowly taking me
> farther and farther out in its tides . . .
> If only I could balance that cardboard sea
> on the crown of my head, I would try
> dousing it with fire, that hard-cover cross
> (no heavier than a human heart).
> The ink and paper would save me, not because
> words can save any more than the Ark
> or the City of Enoch (all saved in the Bible)

---

35. Criticism and real life intersect here all too often: the authoritarianism that fuels Cracroft's readings spilled over, for example, into the 1993 firing of former BYU professor and feminist Cecilia Konchar Farr. Cracroft was head of Farr's college committee, which, although its decision was overturned by the college dean, provided most of the ammunition the administration needed to dismiss her. For details, see Kagel and Waterman, *The Lord's University* (forthcoming).

36. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxiii. See also pp. 110-13. For a use of Bakhtin's concept in Native American criticism, see Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

but because words must come to an end.
Did Columbus know there'd be an end to all
his travels—did he expect to find
a new world? Picture him washed up on a shelf
of sand, blazing forth again! I wish
I could be like him and somehow keep myself
alive, leave the last word unfinished.

The audiences of *The New Republic* or of *Vox Angelica* need no knowledge of Mormonism to appreciate Liu's poem. Its religious references—generic enough—can be read as simple metaphors for literary immortality or salvation through art (the City of Enoch, after all, is saved between the covers of a book). For a "Mormon" reader, or someone trained to read as one, the poem's words resonate on a different level. Even the title—"Awaiting Translation"—plays on double meanings: while the poem's speaker literally awaits translations of works in foreign languages, a "Mormon" reader realizes that "translation" means an instant, literal act of salvation: the City of Enoch, in Mormon terms, was "translated" from mortality into immortality. As in the interview cited and the poems discussed above, much of the energy in this poem resides in the tension between its multiple voices—and more specifically between literary and religious salvation. Reading, here, provides baptisms by water and fire; it promises, like religion, salvation through words, although "words," like everything else, "must come to an end." Even in the face of this realization, the poet hopes for immortality, for an unfinished word waiting for another reader—or a new translation—to prolong its life. The tension here, between the vocabulary of Mormon salvation and the promise of literary immortality, serves as a perfect example of the tensions between "Mormon" and "American" voices in texts such as Liu's.

A third tension, present more in Liu's earlier chapbook, but evident in traces throughout his work, is between Mormonism's utopian vision—its prophetic call to establish Zion, where all are alike unto God—and its inevitable failure to do so.[37] The general despair associated with religion in *Vox Angelica* and *Burnt Offerings* can be read as remnants of Liu's earlier, more concrete disaffection with Mormonism as a utopian movement. By continuing to exclude gays from Mormon activity, the contemporary church argues that all are *not* alike unto God. "The Lord's Table," from

37. Thanks to Elbert Peck for suggesting this third tension. Interestingly, the notion of a failed utopia serves as another parallel between "gay" and "Mormon" letters. Gay poets from Whitman to Ginsberg, writes critic Tom Yingling, have confronted (utopian) America's failure to accommodate (utopian) gay cultures. See Tom Yingling, "Homosexuality and Utopian Discourse in American Poetry," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, eds. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 135-46, esp. 142.

his early work, best exemplifies this tension:

> The banquet table was spread,
> But I could no longer smell
> Satisfaction in the room.
>
> I couldn't swallow the smiles
> Nor could I decipher
> The language I once knew.
>
> But still I joined them,
> Nibbling crusts of dry bread
> And sipping tepid water.
>
> The elders' faces grew old
> Like the legends
> That seasoned my youth.
>
> I sat in silent pews
> Staring past the chancel,
> Wanting more.
>
> I hungered to be
> Consumed, and left
> Emaciated.

The despondent voice of religious disillusionment is figured, again, in terms of vocabulary: the language once familiar has become indecipherable. Certainly not all writing that embodies the tension between utopian Mormonism and its inevitable limitations will contain a response identical to Liu's. What is important for critics to recognize, though, is that the poem is the legitimate product of religious experience: Who has the authority to determine whether the response is authentically "Mormon"?

In comparison to my first suggestion, that we view Liu's and other "Mormon" writing as located in certain shared tensions, the second possible approach is even less concerned with answering the question "Is this 'Mormon' literature?" Informed by cultural studies/new literary historicism methodologies, critics could place Liu's poems in conversation with a number of other contemporary texts to examine ways his poems help explain Mormon—and (Asian) American, and gay—experience at a certain historical moment. For example, reading the intersection of religion and gay sexuality in Liu's poems against other texts that comment on the intersection of Mormonism and homosexuality (anything, really, ranging from essays in *Peculiar People* to Elder Boyd Packer's "Three Dangers" talk to the discourse surrounding gay clubs in Salt Lake high

schools or gay marriage in Hawaii[38]) not only helps us understand this particular dynamic in Liu's poems, but lets the poems help us better understand the contemporary church. This is an approach similar to that taken by Paul Giles, whose mammoth book *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* refuses to investigate or address "Catholic" "authenticity," but works instead from an assumption that the art of people who have grown out of Catholic traditions—from Orestes Brownson to Robert Altmann—can tell us much about not only those traditions, but also about American society in general.[39]

As with the first approach I outlined, this one requires an essay of its own to develop fully. Just thinking of Liu's poems in this way, though, as part of what Barthes calls "the infinite text,"[40] seems full of potential. Stacking cultural texts on top of one another in good new historicist fashion provides an intertextual counterpart for the abstract idea of overlapping identities. Liu, after all, was "the only one at church/ with [his] *Norton Anthology*," he reminds us in a poem anthologized in Gene England and Dennis Clark's *Harvest*.[41] Intertextuality as governing metaphor also helps us understand poems like "Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall," from *Burnt Offerings*, which casts anonymous sexual encounters in rest stop bathrooms in language that recalls the Mormon temple: the poet places (temple roll) "prayers on squares of one-ply paper," kneels at a toilet-altar, passes through guarded partitions, finds an ambivalent holiness in the encounter itself, and reemerges, consigned to "walk out of our secrets into the world." Reading this poem as a Mormon temple experience—and Tim's poems often seem to recast anonymous sexual encounters in religious language—simply cannot explain, though, the poem in its entirety: the fact that he brings Whitman along to read while he waits is our cue to recognize the multiple traditions, the fundamental intertextuality, from which the poem emerges. If we read it against Tim's "The Lord's Table" (above), particularly the lines "Nor could I decipher/ The language I once knew," we can also see the language of gay identity (*Leaves of Grass* and the "erotic hieroglyphs" etched on bathroom walls) in

38. Ron Schow, Wayne Schow, and Marybeth Raynes, eds., *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Boyd K. Packer, "Address to All-Church Correlating Committee," 18 May 1993, in which he identifies, as three main dangers to the church, feminists, "so-called" scholars, and gays and lesbians; on the Salt Lake clubs and Mormon opposition to gay marriage, see news sections in several recent issues of *Sunstone*.

39. Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See esp. chap. 1, "Methodological Introduction: Tracing the Transformation of Religion."

40. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1975), 36.

41. Tim Liu, "Final Preparations," in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, eds. Eugene England and Dennis Clark (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1989), 250.

tension with the vocabulary of Liu's childhood religion. In "Reading Whitman in a Toilet Stall," we see Liu reforge "Mormon" identity on (or in) his own terms.

The approaches I have outlined to explore the "Mormon" aspects of Liu's poems should cause us to recognize that the category "Mormon" is not as cut and dried—or even as helpful—as some would like to make it. In fact, I would conclude that the question "Is this literature 'Mormon'?" has more negative effects than it opens critical possibilities. Liu's poems force readers to confront the multiplicity of Mormonisms and possible "Mormon" critical positions. They suggest that the next century, a century of Mormon diaspora, will see discussions that include terms like "gay Mormon," "Mormon feminist," "Asian American Mormon," "Latin American Mormon," and, importantly, "white, mountain-western Mormon"—none of which, especially the latter, will be synonymous with what we now call "Mormon." Even now Liu's poems require readers to acknowledge that Richard Cracroft's "faithful" Mormons are not *essentially* Mormon: they are but one group—a group that performs its Mormonness, Gates and *Little Tree* would remind us, as much as any other kinds of Mormons do. And these others, Liu included, are not strangers or foreigners, but fellow citizens in the largest body of people who can lay claim to the name "Mormon."