

## “Gender Troubles” and Mormon Women’s Voices

Laura L. Bush, *Faithful Transgressions in the American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women’s Autobiographical Acts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004), 264 pp.

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“Faithful transgression,” a concept developed by Laura L. Bush in this thought-provoking study of Mormon women’s autobiographies, is a concept worth keeping. It’s not “loyal opposition” because it doesn’t openly or politically oppose; faithful transgressions are the quiet, personal choices of women’s lives, their attempts to construct unique selves in the face of an overwhelmingly patriarchal and hierarchical religious culture. As Bush explains, “I use the phrase ‘faithful transgression’ to describe moments in the text when each writer, explicitly or implicitly, commits herself in writing to trust her own ideas and authority over official religious authority while also conceiving of and depicting herself to be a ‘faithful’ member of the church.” *Faithful Transgressions* gently and generously explores the ambiguities, for both its author and her subjects, of being Mormon in the increasingly feminist world of twentieth-century America.

The variations on this theme, which Bush explores in six autobiographies, make for fascinating reading. Though each of the texts Bush examines is unique, she finds connections among them in a paradigm of Mormon autobiography modeled on Joseph Smith’s First Vision narrative, a paradigm that includes five key conventions: first, the women autobiographers testify and witness religious “truth”; second they explain LDS doctrine and, as women, claim the authority to do so; third, they assert a place for themselves in Mormon culture and history; fourth, they defend Mormonism against a perceived antagonism from non-Mormons; and finally, they aim to address this audience of antagonists outside of mainstream Mormonism. Though this paradigm falls short of accounting for some of the more intriguing aspects of Mormon women’s autobiography, it serves as a fine starting point for Bush’s rhetorical study of the construction of narrative in conversation with a dominant religious culture.

The six works she deals with are Mary Ann Hafen, *Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860: A Woman’s Life on the Mormon Frontier* (1938; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother*, edited by Obert C. Tanner (1941; 3rd ed., Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983); Juanita Brooks, *Quicksand and Cactus: A Memoir of the Southern Mormon Frontier* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1992); Wynetta Willis Martin, *Black Mormon Tells Her Story* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing, 1972); Terry Tempest Wil-

liams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); and Phyllis Barber, *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* (1992; rpt., Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994).

The paradigm works best for the autobiographies of Mary Ann Hafen and Annie Clark Tanner, and these two chapters are Bush's tightest and most analytically concise. But their neatness is also their shortcoming, based as it is on a simple opposition that Bush problematizes elsewhere. Hafen's transgressions, for example, are hardly transgressive, even for her time. As she reveals a level of discomfort with polygamy and what it means for women, she does so in the language of motherhood and claims an authority in that role not unusual for late Victorian women who accepted the principle of separate spheres. Likewise constructing herself as *A Mormon Mother* and finding authority in that role, Annie Clark Tanner builds a critique of polygamy that is more biting and more famous than Hafen's. Yet even as she finds the Mormon doctrine of polygamy flawed, she never lets it affect her feeling for the religion generally or her place in it. Her "courageous transgression" is her unequivocal condemnation of polygamy, which outside of Mormonism, would hardly seem a searing critique, but which, in the context of a culture committed to hierarchy and black and white thinking, was a serious transgression indeed.

To accept the concept of faithful transgression, then, Bush must locate these narratives securely in this culture of dichotomous thinking, where right and wrong are clear concepts and transgressions are easily identifiable. Because she finds this context in the Mormon culture of the Intermountain West, Bush sometimes conflates the commitment to Mormonism to a commitment to community, family, or tradition, rather than to faith or doctrine; and her view of dissent is colored by a sense of authoritarian oppression that most readers will not be able to perceive in the same way Western Mormon readers will, although Jon Krakauer deftly captures its outlines in his recent *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

For me, an East Coast Mormon (and, I confess, a faithful transgressor), the truly "faithful" transgressions in Bush's text are not so easily contained. Bush's examination of the autobiographies of Juanita Brooks and Terry Tempest Williams make for the most appealing reading, as a result, because these autobiographies are especially multifaceted and slippery, not easily pinned to a paradigm. These writers find a commitment to Mormonism not just by default, culturally, or in reaction to powerful authority, but in many ways by complex, contradictory choice. The line between in and out that many Mormon dissenters have been mapping at great personal cost at least since *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* were founded more than thirty years ago finds nuanced illustration in these two chapters, sometimes despite the author's attempts to clearly delineate it.

Juanita Brooks's dissent, like Phyllis Barber's in a later chapter, is in challeng-

ing authority generally, while maintaining identification with her Mormon community and claiming its faith. As Bush points out, Brooks "constructed her identity from childhood as a person committed to telling the truth and willing to question authority when circumstances merited it" (80). Readers both inside and outside Mormonism will be familiar with her history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and many will understand the cultural risk she took in writing it. But her insistence on maintaining a Mormon identity—of, in fact, locating that identity in the desire to find and tell the truth—is a concept of Mormonism that appeals even as it fails to hold up in her case. In my experience in Mormon culture, Brooks is figured inevitably as "fallen away" from Mormonism, even hostile to it. What constitutes Mormon identity, then, and who polices its parameters? Can Brooks claim Mormonism as an identity, and on what ground can she stake that claim?

Likewise, Terry Tempest Williams's figuring of herself as Mormon, as a "radical soul in a conservative religion" (146), is hard to maintain in the context of her many transgressions of orthodoxy in *Refuge*, her autobiographical text. Though Williams has arguably had more influence on the self-construction of young reflective Mormons than anyone but Eugene England, among most Mormons she would not generally be considered "one of us" and would certainly never have been selected as the representative of Mormonism to the outside world that she became with this book. The book, too, strains against the confines of Mormon autobiography as Bush defines it, but one could hardly put together a study of Mormon women's autobiography without discussing the critically acclaimed *Refuge*. Bush's paradigm becomes most revealing, then, in its failure to account for the two most literary and widely respected of the autobiographies she studies, those by Brooks and Williams. Are these, then, Mormon autobiographies?

This is where Bush's book fails to live up to the promise of its more thorny questions. Though she has clearly done her homework, especially in her intricate theoretical introduction where she reviews the work of contemporary autobiographical theorists, she does not follow through on the implications of their insights. Rather than locate these autobiographical texts in the contemporary discussion of identity formation or constructed subjectivity, Bush chooses to position herself unproblematically within gendered Mormon constructs of identity. She asserts the naiveté of her texts, claiming that her six autobiographical writers believe in a unity in their life experiences, a wholeness they can impart truthfully to their readers in a language they control. The assumption here (that the only autobiographies postmodern theories apply to are unconventional ones) keeps Bush from developing the best questions she poses. Gertrude Stein and Roland Barthes are not the only writers who construct identity, who attempt to create a subject in language or a developing self in community, who can't control the in-