

“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-

stabilities in their texts, and who can't predict the ways that readers will re-construct them.

In the end, Bush argues that her authors construct texts intentionally in conversation with Mormonism, patriarchal culture, gender expectations, truth, and, above all, authority, not with selfhood or language. Bush's interest, then, is rhetorical, lying more with the construction of narrative than the construction of identity, a fine approach, but one that leaves the most captivating questions of the evolving genre of autobiography unexplored. Scratch the surface of these narratives, and Bush finds, not a postmodern autobiographical subject in construction, but a modernist self, a fully realized person who stands up to authority to name herself someone apart from the obedient body of Mormonism.

With one notable exception. Wynetta Willis Martin's *Black Mormon Tells Her Story* is problematic on so many levels that I find it to be Bush's most courageous chapter for the academic transgressions she commits with her own assumptions. In this, her longest chapter, Bush lets the text do work that its author cannot claim. As a result, "the real story of racism in the Mormon Church inevitably leaks out" (135) as Martin writes what is essentially an apologia for that racism. Here language and identity escape the autobiographer's grasp, and Bush allows that the text can do work that the intentional author could never have intended.

Full disclosure: I know Laura Bush. I like Laura Bush. In graduate school fifteen years ago, I was impressed with her seriousness and her formidable intellect. I see that seriousness and intellect still at work in *Faithful Transgressions*. Despite its few flaws—the unexplored theoretical promise of its genre, the places where it reads like an unreconstructed dissertation—it is an important book. It works from a (largely unstated) premise that the tensions revealed in faithful transgressions can be breached, that Mormonism, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich famously claimed, is more flexible and feminism larger than we have imagined. It takes Mormon women and the all-too-often silent choices of their lives seriously. This book allows Bush to construct a larger model of Mormon narrative and identity than Mormon culture has yet produced, a model many women, even faithful transgressors, can live with.

Sinnamon Twist

Linda Hoffman Kimball, *The Marketing of "Sister B"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 160 pp.

Reviewed by Mary Ellen Robertson, Claremont Graduate School M.A. in women's studies in religion

Mild-mannered Mormon housewife uses her background in chemistry and family science to whip up a batch of tantalizing cinnamon fragrance as a last-minute party favor for a visiting teaching luncheon. Little did Donna Brooks realize how quickly her creation would propel her out of Rottingham, Massachusetts, and into the spotlight.

Donna's concoction captures the attention of a New York-based marketer attending the luncheon with a former roommate. Lucy Hobbes believes the cinnamon-scented oil has potential and urges Donna to "talk business" with her later. After a dinner meeting with Lucy and promoter Gloria Hewett, Donna signs on; and her new contacts set the marketing machine in motion.

Donna has a substantial cheering section—populated by her devoted and supportive husband, Hank, her mercurial teenage daughter Stephanie, mischief-making sons Simon, Nate, and Ben, and her ever-present best friend from the ward, Margo Cabot. Also along for the ride: Donna's new visiting teaching companion, Juliet Benton; Big Apple marketing's photographer Lois Wheaton; and the sonorous stake public affairs representative, Meredith Monson, who encourages Donna to use her entrepreneurial opportunities to promote the Church.

Although the marketing process seems straightforward, Donna is in for a few surprises. She signs contracts without reading the fine print and is shocked to discover what Gloria has in mind for the print advertising: barely clad models pushing her fragrance now dubbed *Sinamon*. Donna pitches a fit and enlists the help of a lawyer recommended by Sister Monson. Inspired by Donna's impassioned reaction, Gloria suggests they use *her* in the ad campaign. While Donna can't change the name of the product, her wholesome image and spunk are certainly a more palatable alternative than what the New York folks had in mind.

Donna's inner "lioness" surfaces again at her first photo shoot. Makeup artists and hair stylists revamp her homespun appearance, but her wardrobe becomes an issue when the snooty wardrobe designer insists Donna strip on the spot and put on the outfit he's picked out:

"Look—Rico, is it?" Donna said in a steely, no-nonsense tone. "You're going to have to leave now if you want me to try these on."

Rico looked dumbfounded. "Get over it, honey," he said. "I'm not here for my jollies. There's not time to tiptoe around."

"You listen to me, honey," Donna barked back. "No way am I going to drop my trousers in front of you." She could feel her lioness surging. "There is some stuff about my clothing that you wouldn't get, and I'm not in a mood to go into it with you. You can forget the tank top, too. Get me something with sleeves."

"Unacceptable," said Rico fiercely.

"Unacceptable or not, I *do not* wear tank tops and I am not going to

discuss it with *you*." . . . When it comes to privacy and clothing—and garments—she was not going to be bullied by some little tyrant. (54–55)

Though Donna feels a little guilty for dispatching Rico harshly, she also feels appreciated for her lioness-like ability to stand up for herself. It's an attribute that serves her well during the frenzied pre-Christmas marketing campaign for Sinnamon. As the pace increases, so do the stressors. Donna wonders whether the time spent away from her family is worth the rewards of bringing her product—evocative of home and hearth—to the masses.

Even when the cost to her orderly, predictable life seems perilously high, Donna faces her challenges with a sometimes-ferocious grace. Sinnamon gives her a wild ride for a few months; then Donna is altogether happy to step back into the normalcy of after-school snacks, managing her brood, and keeping household entropy in check. Even the task of cooking dinner for the family takes on unanticipated allure when compared to her hectic cross-country promotional tour.

Donna's handlers recognize and capitalize on her "Everywoman" qualities. It's part of what sells. Yet there are moments when Donna's lack of finesse shines through the veneer. Though she can be strong, Donna also vacillates and second-guesses herself—and is especially sensitive to the criticisms coming from members of her ward and negative feedback from her own children. It's strange that Donna can take on the New York publicity machine and emerge victorious again and again, yet she deflates so completely over her teenage daughter's assessment of her appearance. She seems to take to heart Stephanie's comment: "When it comes to image, Mom, you can't trust your own instincts!" (34–35)

Donna also abdicates responsibility for knowing the contents of the contracts she's signed and tunes out when her lawyer tries to explain the details to her. She bounces between "what do I know about this" green and feeling as if she can easily navigate the public sphere. She is talented and accomplished and has dimension to her life, so where does the tendency to recoil from her own abilities come from? Perhaps this bothers me because I can relate to it a little *too* well.

Donna's world is populated with some colorful characters. The people in Donna's ward are probably the most recognizable of the "types." There is a Mormon couple transplanted to the East Coast for graduate school; the wife frets about putting her daughter in preschool (the horror!) and counts down the days until she can move back to her beloved Pocatello. Donna has a crusty, inactive woman on her visiting teaching route and her companion is a single woman with a Ph.D. (As Donna notes, Ph.D. and single woman are often synonymous in Mormon culture.)

Meredith Monson, the stake public relations director, proves a delicious foil and a perpetual fly in the ointment of Donna's adventures. Sister Monson has something of a Jane Austen tang to her—she's the boorish guest oblivious to the myriad ways she transgresses social and even spiritual proprieties. Every time she

weighs in, she chides Donna for neglecting to mention missionary work or food storage during her latest public appearance for Sinnamon. Sister Monson's relentless criticism under the guise of "helping" someone less savvy about public relations and the Outside World quickly becomes patronizing and evokes another appearance of Donna's lioness—and deservedly so.

At one point, Donna muses: "Is Sinnamon my product, or because I'm Mormon, am I supposed to be marketing the gospel along with it? If I decide to 'let my light so shine' and all that, do I have to screw in the public-image light bulb that Sister Monson wants? The one that says we don't throw spit wads at bishops or get tattoos? Or is it my own kind of light bulb that laughs and likes to think that God might be laughing with me?" (86)

While the story does touch on some weightier matters—such as identity issues and the obligations of Mormons in the spotlight—it generally stays out of heavy-handed, moralizing territory. It's a fun read and lends credibility to the idea that we peculiar people can poke fun at ourselves and survive a good-natured ribbing. And we may yet have Erma Bombecks of our own.

Saving the Germans from Themselves?

Alan Keele, *In Search of the Supernal: Pre-Existence, Eternal Marriage, and Apotheosis in German Literary, Operatic and Cinematic Texts* (Münster, Germany: Agenda Verlag, 2003), 347 pp.

Reviewed by Sandy Straubhaar, Germanic Studies Department, University of Texas at Austin

This engaging labor-of-love book is a pleasure to read even if one does not always agree with its arguments. In it, BYU German professor Alan Keele mines German literature and drama for what he calls the supernal: specifically, for narratives that echo LDS concepts of preexistence, eternal marriage and apotheosis—with some attention paid as well to a subgroup of related themes, including the hero-journey, metanoia (or repentance), the temple, and human community.

As Keele points out in his foreword, Germans have a particularly resonant history with these sorts of ideas, having produced a literary and philosophical tradition in which such ongoing leitmotifs are numerous. But, as he also notes, the concept of a divine potential in the human species posits also a diabolical potential: single-minded obsession with one's potential godhood can trigger a downward spiral into diabolical acts of hubris, as the history of Germany through the mid-twentieth century shows only too clearly. Keele puts it this way: "No national culture has fostered a richer tradition of supernal idealism than