

# Beyond Missionary Stories: Voicing the Transnational Mormon Experience

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In *The American Religion*, critic Harold Bloom begins his analysis of Mormonism with this well-known prophesy about the future of Mormon literature:

A major American poet, perhaps one called a Gentile by the Latter-day Saints, some time in the future will write their early story as the epic it was. Nothing else in all of American history strikes me as *materia poetica* equal to the early Mormons. . . .<sup>1</sup>

While this prophesy is likely meant to be little more than a unanimous compliment to the Mormon people, it is nevertheless interesting for how it assumes—without hesitation—that the future author of the Mormon story will be an American telling an American story. Why is that?

Perhaps the answer to this question is obvious. Those familiar with the Mormon story know of its American beginnings and the unique place America occupies in certain strains of Mormon doctrine and folk theology. Readers of Mormon literature also know that much of it is set in Utah or other states in the Mormon cultural region, which are not exactly famous for their cosmopolitanism. America seems to be not only the setting of Mormonism and its literature, but also its protagonist, love interest, and best friend. Every other place—be it Brazil or Ghana or the Philippines—is a minor supporting character only, a foil, or a digression.

But the Mormon story is not just an American epic. From the beginning, Mormons have been global players—so much so that while they were moving westward across the North American

continent, their missionaries were venturing beyond American borders to carry out the “titanic design . . . to convert the nation and the world.”<sup>2</sup> And while Church policy was initially to encourage these converts to immigrate to the American “Zion,” such action was not always practical, and policies about gathering converts to the United States changed gradually around the turn of the last century. As early as 1890, for example, Church officials were instructing missionaries to discourage immigration in order to strengthen Church communities in other parts of the United States and the world.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Mormonism’s international presence has grown significantly. In 1950, for example, the Church had a mere 7.7 percent of its 1.1 million church members living beyond American borders. By 2008, that number had jumped to nearly 50 percent of 13.5 million church members, with Mormons living in some 170 countries or territories around the world.<sup>4</sup>

But even with this impressive international growth, the Mormon story still struggles to escape Americentric narratives. Critics have long lamented the narrow American landscape of Mormon literature. In 1974, for example, Bruce W. Jorgensen criticized the editors of *A Believing People*, the first modern Mormon literary anthology, for “implicitly [defining] Mormon literature as a subspecies of American literature.” Citing the Church’s increasingly international presence, he reasoned that while “most Mormon literature still [was] American in some sense . . . it would profit us to have an anthology that reflected” the voices of a world church.<sup>5</sup> Since then there has been no shortage of follow-ups to *A Believing People*, yet they are dominated by works of North American writers whose interests and concerns often play out against a canvas of irrigation imagery, red rock, ranching, and other aspects of rural Mormon life. Indeed, if transnational Mormon experiences occur at all in these anthologies, they generally occur within the framework of missionary labor.

Missionary fiction, to be sure, is an important subgenre of Mormon literature, especially for the way it has typically explored the tensions arising from American Mormons’ interactions with non-American peoples and cultures. Recent examples include Coke Newell’s *On the Road to Heaven* (2007) and Douglas Thayer’s *The Tree House* (2008), although both of these novels tend to ex-

plore these tensions and interactions through a decidedly American lens, often viewing anything non-American as alienating or potentially hostile. Note, for instance, how Elder Kit West, the main character of *On the Road to Heaven*, introduces readers to Colombia:

We got scattered all over western Colombia the next morning, two staying in Cali, one going south a hundred and fifty miles to Popayán, a couple heading north to a pair of little Cauca River Valley towns. I got on a bus heading halfway to the Venezuela border, eight hours north to the big city of Pereira. All alone. Okay, not all alone—there were probably forty other people on that bus with me, plus two piglets, five or six chickens, a horrendously ugly little dog, and a goat. But not another person was blond, *gringo*, or scared to death.<sup>6</sup>

For Kit, it seems, Colombia is less a real place than a series of indistinctly defined points on a map, possibly even a wrong turn waiting to happen. Moreover, it is populated with human and animal non-blond Others, “forty other people” whom Kit assumes could hardly feel as “scared to death” as he is.

This perspective, no doubt, accurately reflects that of many American Mormon missionaries, which is probably why it is so prevalent in missionary fiction. At the same time, however, it also continues a tradition of always presenting the transnational as something strange, hostile, and even violent. Later in *On the Road to Heaven*, in fact, Newell offers an extreme example of this presumed hostility of the Other when Kit, an avowed pacifist before his mission, becomes momentarily violent after a Colombian college student hits him over the head with a heavy textbook. Frustrated after nearly two years of being spit upon, berated, and called names like “son of a whore,” “Yankee exploiter,” and “capitalist pig,” Kit lashes out in a way that is inconsistent with his call and the gospel message, leaving the college student sobbing and bleeding on the ground.<sup>7</sup> It is a horrifying scene, not only because of the violence, but also because of the way Kit smugly refuses to recognize how his brutal reaction to the Colombian’s obvious resentment only validates the anti-Americanism so often directed at him. Rather than trying to understand the motives behind the Colombians’ hostility, Kit allows himself to become the very thing he says he’s not: an American bully. In the end, he even refuses to

take responsibility for his violent actions, blaming them instead on his experience in Colombia. “Sorry, man,” he tells the student, “it’s been a long two years.”<sup>8</sup>

Kit’s reaction to the Colombian student is but an extreme example of Mormon fiction’s tendency to portray non-American (even non-Utahn) lands and their inhabitants as hostile and dangerous; the disturbing scene, nevertheless, is indicative of the problems that go with presenting the non-American, often non-white Other or Other-land from the perspective of a visitor, a transplant who may speak the language but does not understand the culture. What readers get in novels like *On the Road to Heaven* is a representation of a foreign land that is heavily mediated through the naïve eyes of a young American. Rarely do readers of Mormon fiction get the counterpoint: transnational stories that ask them to tread a foreign landscape that is as commonplace to its characters as Utah is to the characters in a Douglas Thayer or Levi Peterson story.

However, while such works are relatively rare in Mormon fiction, they do exist—often not without their own set of issues and ethical problems. Todd Robert Petersen’s short story “Quietly” from his collection *Long After Dark* (2007) is a prime example. The story is set in Rwanda and follows John, a newly converted Zimbabwean, as he dedicates the grave of an African saint recently killed by the Hutus during the 1994 genocide. Throughout, Petersen uses a third-person limited point-of-view to ensure that the narrative unfolds from John’s perspective alone, forcing readers to see Africa, the Church, and its local white leadership as John sees them. In doing so, he asks white Mormon American readers especially to do something rarely done in Mormon fiction: that is, gaze *at* the white American Mormon rather than *as* one.

Such a rare redirecting of the gaze can be disorienting and discomforting for some readers, especially when the gaze is as critical as John’s. As a recent convert, John is still unsure about where he fits in the Church culture. For example, he tends to see the Church as an organization defined by binaries of white and black, American and African, and this view leaves him frustrated and resentful of white leaders who either do not understand his frustrations or dismiss them outright. Indeed, central to his frus-

trations are questions about “why Jesus Christ never came to Africa and why blacks weren’t allowed the priesthood for so long and why God suddenly changed his mind.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, John is also troubled by the way the Church seems to privilege the “trials of the American pioneers” while remaining silent about the atrocities of the Rwandan genocide.<sup>10</sup> In the story, these frustrations are directed at John’s white American branch president, who is sympathetic to John’s questions but resistant to John’s dualistic view of the Church, claiming that “John [is] too simple for the world of today.” For John, however, the American is the simple one for not seeming to “understand that things were different for blacks than they were for the whites in the Church.”<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, though, John is no heretic, no disillusioned Mormon with an angry ax to grind. While he is cynical about white American leadership, he nevertheless finds himself to be at once “oddly resistant and strangely compliant” to its guidance.<sup>12</sup> He wears his white shirt, says his prayers, learns his priesthood duties, and reads his Book of Mormon. Later in the story, when a woman challenges his belief that he “will *be* a God one day,” he even bears his testimony, stating “I just believe it because it is true.”<sup>13</sup> Still, despite these external observances and avowals, John remains (as the last sentence of the story indicates) one who is “quietly but decidedly torn” about his place in the Church and before God.<sup>14</sup>

For Petersen, John’s ambivalence toward the Church—his “decidedly torn” state—functions as a way to address not only matters of race and ethnicity from an apparently non-American perspective, but also the tensions that come with trying to establish a church nurtured in Western culture in locations where any such effort would not only be logistically difficult, but would also smack of colonialism. Petersen highlights this tension midway through the story. John has a dream in which Marie, the widow of the man whose grave he has been asked to dedicate, emerges naked from a river like an Africanized version of Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus.” Although this is more explicitly stated in an earlier version of the story, published in *Sunstone* as “The Sad Truth of His Desire,” the dream represents, on one level, the possibility of an eternal companion for John, a goddess who will spend an exalted eternity at his side in the Celestial Kingdom. On another level, though, with its allusion to Botticelli and its colonization and

eroticization of the African body, the dream is far more unsettling and suggestive of the difficult tensions at play both in John's mind and in Mormonism's efforts to negotiate cultural differences as it establishes the Church throughout the world.<sup>15</sup> Like John, the problematic Venus-like image of Marie is torn—in this case, between signifying hope for transnational Mormonism and despair over its seemingly insurmountable obstacles.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, by the end of the story, John's future as a Mormon appears uncertain, especially since being constantly and "decidedly torn" seems to be the price of exaltation.<sup>17</sup> Invoking the symbolism of the three degrees of glory, the narrative tells us that "[t]he sun burned above the trees" as John returned home, and "the brightness of it" bothered him. "The moon and stars," we learn, "were better for him at this point, the coolness of nighttime and the freedom of dreaming."<sup>18</sup> The suggestion, perhaps, is that John is considering the path of least resistance, the path that will bring him "peace of mind" in this life rather than worlds without end in the next. Petersen, however, ends the story with an ambiguous image of John "spinning in the wide mouth of infinity, stretching his hand forth and pulling it back" in a gesture of irresolution—leaving John's decision endlessly deferred.<sup>19</sup>

This unresolved ending tempts readers to make the decision for John, but what the story ultimately seeks from readers is not closure, but compassion. It asks that they strive to narrow the distance between John's subjective position and their own, internalize his experience, and even empathize with the sincerity and validity of his ambivalence and indecision. It also compels them to take seriously the notions that things are different for Mormons in Rwanda than they are for Mormons in the United States, and that applying the Western mythos of the Mormon pioneers to, say, an African genocide may be as unsuitable and inappropriate as superimposing the image of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" over Marie.

At the same time, though, in foregrounding these matters of difference and perspective, "Quietly" also raises concerns about its own authenticity as a depiction of the transnational Mormon experience. Indeed, as James Goldberg has recently argued on the AML blog, the story's portrayal of John's doubts about the priesthood ban seem more like "a vehicle for the white American author's concerns about race . . . than probable motivating con-

cerns of an actual elder from Zimbabwe.”<sup>20</sup> One could argue, likewise, that Petersen’s appropriation of Africa, along with his ventriloquy of African characters, places him in a position similar to that of the American branch president, whose efforts in the story are primarily directed toward influencing John’s thoughts, words, and deeds. With this in mind, the altogether valid question is whether or not American authors ought to attempt to voice the transnational Mormon experience when doing so runs the risk of playing the well-meaning but ultimately misguided colonizer.

My own thoughts on the question are mixed. While I recognize that the appropriation of the Other’s voice is always problematic, even when it is done with sensitivity and good intent, I resist the notion that even a good creative writer cannot attempt to channel the voice of difference without committing some grave ethical error. In a sense, I agree with Malaysian fiction writer Preeta Samarasan, who suggests that such appropriations are not necessarily unethical if they are done with empathy rather than with a desire to force the Other to speak as a puppet. After all, she writes, “We don’t need fiction to learn to empathize with those who resemble us; the real challenge is to see ourselves—to find those sometimes comforting, sometimes terrifying shared kernels of humanity—in those who are nothing like us on the surface.”<sup>21</sup> Writers who wish to represent the Other, she suggests, must seek for “that perfect balance of empathy and distance that is so hard to strike and so satisfying when struck.”<sup>22</sup>

As I see it, Mormon literature will likely remain little more than a “subspecies of American literature” if it long resists seeking after these “shared kernels of humanity” and continues to think of the transnational landscape as America’s foil, a place where American missionaries go to be tried and tested before they return home with honor. Mormon writers, of course, should not abandon missionary stories. However, as they create transnational Mormon worlds, they should strive for more empathy, building upon the strengths of stories like “Quietly,” yet also improving upon their weaknesses and rethinking their cultural presumptions. In doing so, I think, Mormon writers can avoid the pitfalls of novels like *On the Road to Heaven*, with its culturally insensitive depictions of the Other, and thus ensure that Mormon literature remains vibrant and relevant to the world-wide Church.

### Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 79.

2. *Ibid.*, 94.

3. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 139–140.

4. James B. Allen, “Mormonism in Historical Context: An Introduction,” in *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2010), xxiv.

5. Bruce W. Jorgensen, “Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9, no.4 (1974), 51.

6. Coke Newell, *On the Road to Heaven* (Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2007), 188.

7. *Ibid.*, 275.

8. *Ibid.*, 309.

9. Robert Todd Petersen, “Quietly,” *Long After Dark: Stories and a Novella* (Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2007), 40.

10. *Ibid.*, 39.

11. *Ibid.*, 40.

12. *Ibid.*, 40.

13. *Ibid.*, 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 45.

15. Robert Todd Petersen, “The Sad Truth of His Desire,” *Sunstone* 123 (2002), 51.

16. The image of Marie emerging naked from the river leads one to question the kind of hope it signifies. For John, the image suggests the possibility of finding and marrying for eternity “a woman who share[s] his faith,” which would grant him a privileged place in his Mormon community and full access to the blessings of temple-centered Mormonism (“Quietly,” 45). The image is troubling, however, in the way hope for Marie seems contingent on her embodying an erotic Western ideal of beauty. Why must her path to godhood be presented in these terms? Further, if the Botticellian image of Marie suggests hope for transnational Mormonism, are we meant to read transnational Mormonism as a kind of masculinist fantasy?

17. “Quietly,” 45.

18. *Ibid.*, 45.



19. Ibid., 45.

20. James Goldberg, "Race, Culture, White Guilt, and Mormon Letters," *Dawning of a Brighter Day*, Association for Mormon Letters, April 12, 2012, <http://blog.mormonletters.org/?p=4305> (accessed May 8, 2012).

20. Preeti Samarasan, "Putting Words in Other People's Mouths: On Empathy and Ventriloquism in Fiction," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 46, no. 1 (2007), 217.

21. Ibid., 224–5.