

Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 240pp.

Mormonism and White Supremacy as an Explanation of Mormonism's Relationship with White Supremacy

James C. Jones

Mormonism and White Supremacy is almost exactly what you would expect from a book with such a title. A brilliant and well-researched thesis analyzing the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to its present showing how we went from a revolutionary and even progressive faith to one that embraces the traditions and conventions of white supremacy, despite our theology condemning it.

One of the first things I look for in any work addressing any facet of white supremacy by a non-Black author is for the author to name their positionality. While it is true that white supremacy negatively affects all people, those without racial obstacles to power, access, and other means to an abundant life (i.e. white people) are not conditioned to address it, either because of ignorance or, as Dr. Brooks regularly quotes George Lipsitz, the possessive investment in whiteness. In other words, a white author needs to acknowledge that regardless of their academic credentials, they are examining white supremacy through a white lens, which makes for a less than perfect analysis. Dr. Brooks does so fairly quickly.

The second thing I was looking for was an articulation of something that myself and many other Black members have always at least

suspected: that the lack of Black people in our congregations is not coincidental or accidental. The thesis of the book actually seems to be that Mormonism's overwhelmingly white congregations and white politics is a result of a habit of choosing white comfort and power over Black humanity and solidarity, analyzing some key moments in Mormon history to demonstrate this.

Brooks also makes it clear that the whole church ought to know its racial history and why the church is in its current position with Black folks. But the reality is the church is resistant to doing that work. As I write this it has been about a month since the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd shook the U.S. In the midst of the subsequent civil unrest, the church made public statements twice where they have been able to condemn looting and property destruction, but not police brutality and white supremacy. Many members followed suit. This situation continues to show how necessary a work like this is for Latter-day Saints.

Brooks sees an opportunity and responsibility to inform Latter-day Saints of the church's problematic history and also what that knowledge will require of them. Though the latter is not accomplished in very specific terms, it's still more than I am conditioned to expect from LDS scholars on LDS subjects.

That said, there's little, if anything, that is new in this work when it comes to the conversation on race in Mormonism's history. While well timed, well researched, and probably the most efficient resource on this subject, she frequently quotes scholars and other public figures who've done work on the subject and the thesis is a foregone conclusion to anyone who has been having this conversation or reading from authors who've discussed race and the church at length.

Further, those already engaged in these conversations are seeking a way to move them forward and dismantle the white supremacy present in Mormonism, but, at most, this gets a single chapter treatment to the amount of seven pages in a 200+ page work. In those seven pages, she outlines three methods of social transformation and the model

that got the highest word count of the three depends on the highest church leaders. Unless any of them are anti-racism activists I don't quite understand why a chapter on dismantling white supremacy would give so much airtime to what those preserving it can do, considering the church's history and considering that those in positions of power and privilege don't just relinquish it because those on the margins ask. Another model briefly mentions Ordain Women as a possible and stronger model of direct activism which felt a bit off, given their habitual centering of white feminism. Our movement, which Brooks rightly acknowledged has not chosen such a path, is currently led primarily by Black women. That is not an accident.

As implied by the brevity of the chapter, none of these models are explored at length. Her intention was to explain Mormonism's relationship with white supremacy rather than be an activist. Even still, she seems to make it clear that she's on board with breaking white supremacy's hold on the church, but to make it all the way to the final chapter without getting a specific "how" was slightly disappointing. It may not be her place to do so, but if she was capable of quoting the work of others to explain white supremacy in the church, surely she could've used the words of the movement's leaders in the chapter she included on dismantling it.

I would recommend this book to anyone new to conversations on racism in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's critical to understand how we got here, come to terms with the church's anti-Black racism, and normalize conversations about the church's problematic past and present if we are to properly reckon with it. Fulfilling the church's mission to "proclaim the gospel" and "perfect the saints" depends on it.

JAMES JONES {jamcjon@gmail.com} is the co-producer and co-host of *Beyond The Block*, a podcast that centers the marginalized in Mormonism. A former musician turned podcaster and voice actor, he resides in Boston, MA where he is preparing for divinity school.