

## Ceci n'est pas une Mormon Studies Book

Peter Coviello. *Make Yourself Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 324 pp. Index. Paper: \$29.00. ISBN: 9780226474335.

*Reviewed by Joanna Brooks*

When I first sidled up to *Make Yourself Gods*, I did so in the spirit of the Mormon Creed: “Mind your own business and let everybody else do likewise” (Trademark: 1842). Yes, I was suspicious. I knew Peter Coviello as a brilliant earlier Americanist, a well-regarded scholar of sexuality, masculinity, nationhood, and so on, the kind of person who gets invited places like the Institute for Advanced Study. But since when did he advancedly study Mormonism? And, more importantly to Mormon purposes, who did he know? (Nota bene for non-Mormon readers: “Do you know so-and-so?” constitutes the first six conversational turns when Mormons meet one another. See also: kinship.).

That’s why I turned straight to the acknowledgments. Where I didn’t see any Mormons I knew among the paragraphs of most-thanked persons, though somewhere six or seven paragraphs down he did acknowledge a few who knew “greatly more about Mormonism” than he did, and one of them was a Mormon! Who I knew! And very much like and trust! Though she really doesn’t hang out in the random Mormon studies places—that fractured constellation of mini-conferences, podcasts, and all-comers events—where we do as much fighting, gossiping, and managing of orthodoxies, institutions, relationships, and personalities as we do advanced studying. Though we *really*

*are advanced* in our own peculiar way. (See also: counterpublic; minor transnationalism.)

But flipping next through the endnotes I found that though Covello does not hang out with us, he does read us. Which is great! He reads lots of us! Even the women—at least the white ones. His all-time faves: Hickman, Givens, Reeve. But he also insists on calling us “the Mormons,” which for me conjures up something from the 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair—and more to the substance of the point insists that this book IS NOT A WORK OF MORMON STUDIES. Please see page 248, footnote 18: “It is worth saying frontally: to the degree that Mormon studies is engaged, however directly or obliquely, in a project of legitimation, [this book] situates itself apart from it. It is committed to bringing queer theory to the scene of postsecular critique, and to tracking the forces that took hold of early Mormonism and bent it—often violently—toward the disciplinary norm of secular belonging.” By which I think he means the sorry parts of our business are his business because they (we?) exemplify how the modern-nationalist-imperial fiction of secularization has killed the “queer affordances” of Mormonism. They (we?) are numbered among the body count. And you, non-Mormon reader, could be next!

Mind you, I’m not trying to appropriate “nothing about us without us” as the Mormon creed 2.0. The politics of representation matter to Mormons, but not in the same way that they matter to communities whose identities correspond with disparities in life, health, political, and economic outcomes. My Mormon identity has never prevented me from getting a mortgage or made it more likely for me to be pulled over by the cops, though it has elicited some truly bone-headed comments from well-meaning faculty in my doctoral program. In fact, because Mormons tend to be so entangled in our own business (see: boundary maintenance, complex post-traumatic stress) we don’t always see ourselves with perspective. Once in a while it’s really nice to be seen—really seen—in all our maddening splendor by someone who is not one of us. (Thank you, Jan Shipps!) We learn new things that way. Just as I learned

by reading Sir Richard Burton's *City of the Saints* that one of my Dorton ancestors (an early citizen of Lehi, Utah) drank beer while lounging in a haystack. Which I love.

So after I read the endnotes and acknowledgments and the first few pages, I put the book down for a while. I passed by it every few days. I picked it up and flipped at random to a page in the middle. That's another Mormon reading method—the scripture chase / random flip / proof text. I once had a friend who decided to marry a guy she didn't like all that much by turning to a page of scripture at random and doing what it said. And when I did this with *Make Ourselves Gods* (WHICH IS NOT MORMON STUDIES) I have to say I liked what Coviello saw. The prophetic enormity of Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young's inner and intimate worlds and her anguish with Mormonism's "mono-maniacal" turn of territorial theocratic Brighamite Mormonism? *Been there*. The Book of Mormon and Benito Cereno? *Yes. Yes. Stunning*. Modern Mormonism as a "cautionary tale" about assimilation? *Amen, and amen*. The story checks out. I am so glad someone can see this in us.

And yet. As I was preparing to write this review, I spent a Sunday morning walking on the beach with a friend who is also the leader of Equality Utah—a gay Mormon man—an icon, really—who has lived the life and worked activist miracles making Utah more habitable for the gay kids who happen to be born there. We spent several minutes recounting the traumas—individual, collective, historical—that likely drove our ancestors to Mormonism and the traumas they (and we ourselves) accumulated in our Mormon lives. That's a standard feature of most conversations I have with progressive (and not at all secularized) Mormon people these days. And it constitutes for us a domain of tremendous power and intimacy, a shared domain of difference.

In some respects, our recounting of traumas proves Coviello's point about the body count of modernly assimilated Mormonism. But the distance between the domain of queer / Mormon conversation and the domain of the book is serious. The book betrays little sense of this

contemporary queer / Mormon conversation, its ongoing power and intimacy. Perhaps this is because it pretty much refuses intimacy with contemporary Mormons (“the Mormons”; them/ us?). And in so doing it proves that narratives (even professedly anti-secularist ones) secularize to their own purposes when they use lives as a cautionary tale. They miss entirely how weird we are still. They still do not see the marvelous shame I wear—to this day, quietly, but proudly—whenever I walk into the world of my profession.

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## Got Wheat?

Christopher James Blythe. *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 348 pp. Illustrations, index. Hardcover: \$74.00. ISBN: 9780190080280.

*Reviewed by Amy Hoyt*

Growing up in the LDS faith, my parents always dutifully had large quantities of wheat, rice, beans, and all other manner of food stored—food we never ate in our daily lives. While they rarely discussed end-time catastrophe, I was aware that our food storage was a temporal preparation for a series of events that would be forthcoming, including plagues, famine and all the dramatic events detailed in scripture. I appreciated the idea but didn’t quite understand how we would actually survive on the food they had stored. I grew up, went to college