

# Prolegomena to Any Future Mormon Studies

*Joanna Brooks*

In a spiritual crisis of the individual, the truth and authenticity of the person's spiritual identity are called into question. He is placed in confrontation with reality and judged by his ability to bring himself into a valid and living relationship with the demands of his new situation. In the spiritual, social, historic crises of civilizations—and of religious institutions—the same principle applies. Growth, survival and even salvation may depend on the ability to sacrifice what is fictitious and unauthentic in the construction of one's moral, religious, or national identity. One must then enter upon a different creative task of reconstruction and renewal. This task can be carried out only in the climate of faith, of hope and of love: these three must be present in some form, even if they amount only to a natural belief in the validity and significance of human choice, a decision to invest human life with some shadow of meaning, a willingness to treat other men as other selves.

—Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>

I'LL BEGIN WITH TWO ANECDOTES, in order to situate my comments.

A well-known scholar of nineteenth-century American religion visits a seminar in which I am enrolled. Realizing that we must have mutual acquaintances, I introduce myself during a class break. Sure enough, he knows a few Mormon historians—we chat briefly and easily. Later that week the class tours a famous Los Angeles area church; our guides are members of the ministerial staff who recount for us various “miraculous” healings performed by the church's celebrity founder. After the tour the class meets for further discussion in a conference room on the premises. When the ministers leave, the visiting scholar asks, in the patient but skeptical tones of an ethnologist, if we, as scholars, believe these reported miracles.

The question strikes me as pretentious, even rude in light of the

---

1. *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 138.

church's courtesy to us. After giving it some hearty critical consideration, I decide to pose my objection in this way: I ask him, "Does it matter?" Perhaps this is a discipline difference? A theoretical divide? I phrase these questions in my best academic language—this is, after all, a competitive graduate seminar. The scholar responds by asking me how I would feel if someone told me that Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon. The reply stuns me—completely bypassing my academic questions, shifting the entire discussion to my "Mormonism," a topic definitely not on the syllabus. Equally disgusted by what passed for "academic" consideration of religion and by his assumption that my relationship to my own religious experience was in need of critical consideration by the seminar, I spent the rest of the meeting silent.

Another anecdote. On 12 October 1995, a day of massive University of California systemwide student protests against the university regents' decision to abolish "Affirmative Action" programs in admissions and hiring, I participate in an act of civil disobedience with thirty-five other UCLA student activists. Sitting in a circle blocking the intersection of Wilshire and Westwood, I realize that four of my fellow protesters were also raised Mormon. I wonder at this seeming disproportionality, and then—in good Mormon fashion—wonder if this is more than a coincidence. Is something of our Mormonism implicit in our activism? Is something activist implicit in our Mormonism?

I usually find myself quite alone with complex questions like these. Occasionally a colleague—someone raised Mormon, a young academic on a campus across the country—will post a similar concern to an electronic net board. We will spend a few posts working these things through, then resign ourselves to "real" academic work. As if our "real" academic thoughts were so easily distinguishable, as if the very mystery of our Mormonism didn't animate and shape our "secular" scholarship.

Religion in the academy? The thought makes reason stare. Ever since Hegel fled the seminary at Tübingen for a philosopher's chair, the theorists of the Enlightenment have steadily put more and more distance between their present projects and their theological roots. Modern thinkers, the logic goes, check their superstitions at the school house door. In the name of politeness and good politics, we pretend to come to the seminar table as *tabula rasa* and wear blank faces whenever the talk turns to religion in the particular or, more specifically, to our own particular religious backgrounds. Witness the mute horror with which so many scholars of matters social—even those extremely articulate in the discourses of "race," "class," and "revolution"—have responded to the insurgency of militant, Christian-identified whites in the United States. Perfectly modern critics of modernity may speculate that the Enlightenment project has run its course; claiming one's country cousins when they crash the Mod-

ern Language Association convention is another story. Postmodernity—a homecoming party for rationality’s (never) long lost funny uncle—is fine, as long as the reunion recurs in someone else’s backyard.

Likewise, a specter is haunting Mormon thought—the specter of secular scholarship. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before? Probably not: Mormonism is continually spooked by the mere idea of an outside world, though our perception of it predicates our very sense of community. Once upon a time, when pioneers built a desert kingdom, lines in the red dirt served us well. Now we are a diaspora; thinking about “Mormon-ness” requires ever more subtle and critical demarcations. The neat boundaries enforced by our “home” academic institutions constrict; some scholars find themselves put out to wander in the wilderness, heirs, ironically, to the exile consciousness so historically “Mormon.”

“Mormon Studies,” in the breadth of its projects and the particularity of its interests, often exceeds its sponsoring institutions—both ecclesiastical and academic. For those of us who find ourselves both academics and Mormons and seeking to critically navigate the places our worlds overlap, perhaps the most difficult work is finding language adequate to the task. How do we both represent our inheritance and talk well with our scholarly neighbors? Fact is, we do not always do so well—some hold purges, some have suspicions. Old stories land in the laps of new readers; the present collides with the past. One need only visit the site of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and read the mournful but evasive prose memorial to its victims to know that even spectral boundaries remain firmly in place, that ghosts are never laid to rest.<sup>2</sup>

What is “Mormon thought”? How and where do we do “Mormon Studies”? Who is authorized to construct these categories? Who is really “Mormon”? These questions haunt our scholarship. To wrestle with them alone is to become quickly overwhelmed; to assume that they are resolved is to alienate ourselves or excommunicate others from the vital work of building a mutually flourishing community. Perhaps we should take a lesson from Mormonism itself, accustomed as it is to the visitations of spirits, friendly and not: the best way to proceed in situations like this is simply to shake hands.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that the time has come for Mormon academics to take the gloves off, to engage our “Mormon-ness” and the prospect of “Mor-

---

2. My phrasing here carries echoes from two books—Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Mikal Gilmore’s treatment of his brother Gary’s famous execution and their shared Mormon heritage, *Shot in the Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1994)—both ghost stories. They uncannily intersect with and inform my thoughts on the present subject.

3. I refer here to the method of distinguishing spirits set forth by Joseph Smith in D&C 129.

mon Studies” more critically. As one raised Mormon outside the Idaho-Utah-Arizona corridor, I am not sure that my concept of “Mormon-ness” matches that of my more centrally-located colleagues. The years I spent at Brigham Young University in the early 1990s make it impossible for me to establish any easy relationship between “Mormon” and “thought.” My experience—training there as a feminist, theorist, and literary scholar—and the university’s recent treatment of Gail Houston, Brian Evenson, and others have shown me that folks who call themselves both “Mormon” and “academic” hold few compatible assumptions about “Mormon-ness” and “Mormon Studies.” Some cannot even hold civil conversations with their colleagues.

One of the most difficult aspects of “Mormon Studies” is the way the realm of the “personal” has served as a court of last resort whenever the “critical” discussions have become demanding. Feminists recognize, of course, that “the personal is political,” but this slogan takes on entirely new force when one finds herself, for example, during a midnight trip to the vending machines in the dark Stover Hall lobby confronted by her dorm mother who asks, “How dare you write [such-and-such] in that [un-sponsored publication] when you were brought here on a scholarship bearing the name of the prophet?” Or when colleagues respond to one’s sociological research with veiled (or not-so-veiled) queries about one’s private behavior and insinuations about one’s “worthiness.” Or when one finds herself submitting her written work to her ecclesiastical leaders for pre-approval, just in case? Or when one finds herself bearing tearful testimony to her employers, chagrined by the improper context for such self-revelation, but sensing that only such prostration will pacify their hostilities to her way of reading and teaching literature? Even more disruptive to “Mormon Studies” is the way some scholars shut down discussion by presuming themselves not only authorities in their fields, but authorities in matters general. Appointing themselves the guardians of faith itself, they police their classrooms and faculties like academic Danites. This presumption seems to me a gross underestimation of the nature of God, church, and faith—as if God needs English professors saving the day! Who would imagine oneself in such a proprietary role? A Mormon woman does not naturally imagine herself a general authority on anything.

Thus I find it hard to speak or even accept some of the rhetoric already in place, especially when it speaks of “our values” or assumes that I know what a “faithful Mormon” looks like. Revelation may come from above; matters academic must be worked out among scholars here below. “Mormon Studies” needs, I believe, to find a vocabulary, a way of talking about “Mormonism” that is both sufficiently learned and sufficiently invested in mutuality. This essay will pose some critical questions about

what “Mormon Studies” has heretofore meant and posit some possibilities as to what it might do, as millennium approaches.

“THE FUNCTION OF MORMON CRITICISM”?  
OR, RATHER, “WHAT IS TO BE DONE?”

To begin with, I will look at the current state of “Mormon (literary) Studies,” taking as my starting place Michael Austin’s award-winning essay “The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time.”<sup>4</sup> Austin breaks important ground as he tries to bring the work of Mormon literary critics into closer conversation with that of our secular colleagues. He picks up where Brigham Young University English professor Richard Cracroft left off, with the former Association for Mormon Letters president’s farewell charge that “this people deserves a literature grounded in Mormon metaphors.”<sup>5</sup> Austin counters Cracroft’s well-meaning but provincial patriotism with an appeal to the rhetoric of “great books.” “Great writers have always produced great books, and mediocre writers have always pandered to the popular prejudices,” he explains, no matter what literary critics do or say.<sup>6</sup>

Austin suggests that Mormon literary critics might better serve “this people” and its literature by “plac[ing] Mormonism and Mormon literature in the larger critical context” lest “others . . . offer the definitions [of Mormonism] for us” and we end up “increasingly stuck with the professional consequences of belonging to a version of ‘Mormonism’ that we had no part in constructing.”<sup>7</sup> Asserting that “Mormonism” is more than just a religion, he coins the term “Mormo-American” to “represent a cultural entity whose traditions, heritage, and experience deserve to be considered a vital part of the American mosaic.” Those hostile to the prospects of a Mormon-inclusive canon earn, in Austin’s words, the title “Mormophobe.”<sup>8</sup> While borrowing the discourse of multi-culturalism, Austin is careful to distance his project from what he perceives to be its “worst element”: “the already-inflated marketplace of victim-seekers.”<sup>9</sup> Presently, Mormons as a whole cannot claim a specific economic or political oppression—on this point I am eager to agree. I am less eager to play

4. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995) 4: 131-44.

5. *Ibid.*, 132.

6. *Ibid.*, 133.

7. *Ibid.*, 136.

8. *Ibid.*, 134. The idea of a canon—that is, an established body of texts understood to be representative of human experience—seems in itself inimical to “Mormon-ness.” The very existence of the Book of Mormon, the doctrine that other sacred texts representing other societies’ spiritual histories exist, though they have not been formally made known to us, and the principle of continuing revelation seem to call for a radically open reading practice.

9. *Ibid.*, 144.

“model minority” of the literary world, though it is this kind of “no fuss, no muss” formula for the Mormon literary-critical enterprise that Austin finally offers:

If diversity truly constitutes an independent good, and if different cultures and values really do make us stronger, then academia cannot, while being true to its own premises, deny a voice to the Mormons. . . . If, as I have argued, Mormon literature forms a vital part of the American cultural landscape, then it must be considered fair game for all kinds of literary scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

The vision, finally, is cheerful and familiar: Mormo-Americans of the world unite! The world, after all, is our campus.<sup>11</sup>

The premises of the kind of “me-too” multiculturalism Austin incorporates into his argument have been criticized and resisted by other scholars of culture—I think first here of Edward Said—who rightly point out that the sunny rhetoric of “humanities,” of the project of “civilization,” was designed to civilize and humanize the presumed sub-civil and sub-human subjects of the British empire.<sup>12</sup> Did Johnston’s army march on Utah bearing “great books”? Perhaps not. But make no mistake about it, the devotees of the “best that is said and thought,” the scholars of “sweetness and light,” have historically been hostile to unpedigreed mass cultural movements like our own.

As Mormons and academics, we find ourselves, often, on shaky ground. The critical methods we acquire carry us into unfamiliar cosmopolitan circles; the matter of “Mormonism” sends us back to the province. Austin’s own essay bears the kernel of this contradiction. Its very title echoes that of Matthew Arnold’s classic 1864 essay “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” And yet Arnold himself had a few harsh words to say about the literary tastes of our ancestors. The Mormons, he observes in *Culture and Anarchy*, “go to the patriarchs and the Old Testament . . . and having never before read anything else but their Bible, they now read their Bible over and over again, and make all manner of great discoveries there.”<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in the same book, Arnold uses the Mormons to exemplify what the project of civilization must correct, that is, man’s “natural” taste for the pathetic. Claiming that “bathos” carries the same appeal “in religion as in literature,” he criticizes a contemporary ethnographer’s account of the draw of Mormonism:

10. *Ibid.*, 144.

11. This slogan—“The world is our campus”—can be seen engraved in stone at the entrance to Brigham Young University.

12. See Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

13. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 166.

"It is easy to say," [Hepworth Dixon] writes of the Mormons, "that these saints are dupes and fanatics, to laugh at Joe Smith and his church, but what then. *The great facts remain.* Young and his people are at Utah; a church of 200,000 souls; an army of 20,000 rifles."

Arnold responds:

But if the followers of a doctrine are really dupes, or worse, and its promulgators are really fanatics, or worse, it gives the doctrine no seriousness or authority the more that there should be found 200,000 souls,—200,000 of the innumerable multitude with a natural taste for the bathos,—to hold it and 20,000 rifles to defend it. . . . [Have] Mr. Hepworth Dixon's heroes and heroines anything of the weight and significance for the best reason and spirit of man that Plato and St. Paul have? Evidently they, at present, have not; and a very small taste of them and their doctrines ought to have convinced Mr. Hepworth Dixon that they never could have.

Dismissing Dixon's assertion that the mere "magnetism" of American popular religious movements makes them worthy of learned consideration, Arnold concludes that the civilizing mission will falter as "our able and popular writers treat their Joe Smiths . . . with their so many thousand souls and so many thousand rifles, in the like exaggerated and misleading manner, and so do their best to confirm us in a bad mental habit to which we are already too prone."<sup>14</sup>

We are not the heirs of that project of civilization—after all, handcars had little room for books and now even our universities have endowments. And yes, much of the cosmopolitan world thinks we're curious creatures, Mike Wallace's *60 Minutes* "Mormonad" aside. Perhaps we have responded to our fear of academic inadequacy by emphasizing our "peculiarity." And, indeed, it is this "peculiar" sense of belonging to which we owe the very idea of a "peculiarly" Mormon scholarship. Mormonism's relationship with the scholarly world is formulated in uncertain terms, and I think we should stay there.

This is not to lobby uncritically for a circling of the wagons or for the celebration of "peculiarity for peculiarity's sake." The very fact that there are now more Latter-day Saints residing outside the United States than in it means that we have become a diaspora; received conceptions of "Mormonness" no longer fit.<sup>15</sup> What, then, is to be studied? Michael Austin proposes a move beyond the limiting "Mormon" versus "non-Mormon" literary dichotomy towards a presumably more comprehensive taxon-

14. *Ibid.*, 114.

15. For a brilliant deconstruction of traditional conceptual renderings of "Mormonness," look no farther than General Relief Society presidency member Chieko Okazaki's April 1996 general conference talk, "Bottles or Baskets?"; notes in my possession.

omy: “books by Mormons written to primarily Mormon audiences,” “books by Mormons written to non-Mormon audiences,” “books by Mormons written to non-Mormon audiences (not about Mormons),” “books by mainstream non-Mormon authors (about Mormons),” “books by mainstream authors (not about Mormons).”<sup>16</sup> The classifications proliferate. And yet, as Michel Foucault’s work shows us, bigger and better classifications still can’t dismiss our lingering subjective (and subject-centered) suspicions.<sup>17</sup> Of authors, of critics, it is asked, “But are they really Mormons?” Austin tries to diminish the importance of this query. “To the academic audience,” he argues, “questions of meeting attendance, payment of tithes, and observance of dietary laws play a less important role than they do in our internal discussions.”<sup>18</sup> Although the instruction in academic protocol is salutary, it reinstates old dichotomies and returns the issues supposedly at the heart of our newly world-wise critical enterprise—“what does it mean to be Mormon?”—to the province, for private dispute.

Though I whole-heartedly agree that Mormon literature and the Mormons who study it deserve more academic legitimacy than they currently enjoy, I am not comforted by Austin’s concluding statement that “only faithful Mormons can criticize Mormon literature as *faithful Mormons*.”<sup>19</sup> What does it mean to be a “faithful Mormon”? Where are these “internal discussions” being held, and who is invited? Do we ask authors to pass worthiness interviews at the door of the Association for Mormon Letters? The grieving, articulate resistance by some of Brigham Young University’s finest scholars to that school’s recently instated faculty “ecclesiastical endorsement” policies speaks to the dangers of this kind of critical classification.<sup>20</sup> Mormonism’s most vital cultural developments are occurring beyond the shadow of the everlasting hills or springing from closets and hiding places within those sometimes dark shadows. The practitioners of Mormon “letters” can no longer seek familiar signs—ecclesiastical credentials, odd artifacts, or old assumptions, even when they pass as “metaphors”—as evidence of some abiding, essential kernel of “Mormon-ness.”

Too much fixation on the local leaves us quibbling over caffeine and arcane points of doctrine, and I give this movement more credit than that. That we have a legacy of dissent, that we believe that common people

16. Austin, 137-42.

17. I think here of the implications of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1979) and his *Introduction to the History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

18. Austin, 140.

19. *Ibid.*, 144; emphasis in original.

20. See William A. Wilson’s letter to “BYU AAUP Chapter Members” and William Evenson’s letter to the Provo *Daily Herald*, both reprinted in *Sunstone* 19 (June 1996): 69-71.



can be heirs to all of metaphysics, that we conceive of world revolution in co-operative, practical terms, this ideological heritage could, I believe, inform a more generous scholarship and a more rigorous criticism. Do we consider our “Mormon-ness” a fascinating feature of ethnography with which to buy fifteen minutes of fame on the academic stage? Or do we use it to ground ourselves, to locate our project where it has historically been—in the boondocks, on the margins of civilization? Do we join other academics on the margin in a critical re-examination of the project of modernity? Do we scrutinize Mormonism’s complicated—sometimes profitable, sometimes oppositional—relationship to modern concepts like “identity,” “property,” “history,” “race,” and “nation”? Do we link our critique of what has heretofore passed for “civilization” to a practical vision of a mutually flourishing community, that is, Zion? What if we were to position ourselves as scholars in such a way as to, in the words of President Gordon B. Hinckley, “stand with the victims of oppression,” to be “militant for truth and goodness”?<sup>21</sup>

Yes, Mormon scholars and critics should enter broader academic conversations, with their “Mormon-ness” engaged. And engaging our “Mormon-ness,” I submit, will entail some real self-critical activity. Michael Austin speaks the mind of more than a few Mormon academics when he mimics this anxious voice: “As long as we can deflect the occasional inquiry about polygamy, racism, or the status of feminists and homosexuals in our church, we can go about our business without having to reckon directly with these ‘weird’-nesses as literary critics.” Not directly enough, at least, for my tastes. Such inquiries are not slings and arrows to be deflected in the interest of “Mormon Studies”; they are its very proving ground. Examinations of race, gender, and sexuality in Mormon contexts have yielded some of our finest recent scholarship; moreover, for some of us, these are not “marginal” issues but primary texts. Yes, we have much to contribute to wider critical conversations, and the price of admission will be some consciousness raising. Our colleagues will want to know how “they” figure into “our” stories. And we ought to be able to discuss this with them. Elsewise we cling to a reified, precious sense of our own “weirdness” and, frankly, squander our birthright.

I find myself, at this point, returning to something Matthew Arnold said in one of his more idealistic moments. To what end should scholars and critics devote their energies? Arnold perceived two camps within his own class: “We are still engaged in trying to clear and educate ourselves. . . . We go the way the human race is going, while they abolish the Irish Church by the power of the Nonconformists’ antipathy to establish-

---

21. The former quote is from Hinckley’s talk at the October 1995 general conference; the latter is from his address to the April 1996 general conference.

ments, or they enable a man to marry his deceased wife's sister."<sup>22</sup> What is to be done with our "Mormon-ness"? We can join critical conversations already in progress. Or perhaps, in the name of "Mormon-ness," we'd rather abolish all high school clubs in Utah and make it legal for a man over fifty to wed his first cousin.

#### "MORMON-NESS": CULT OR CULTURE?

Growing up in a Southern California town which was also home to the worldwide headquarters of "Ex-Mormons for Jesus," I developed my sense of "Mormon-ness" in response and resistance to the sometimes hostile campaigns of local Christian fundamentalists. There were anonymous letters taped to my junior high school locker and invitations to Billy Graham's annual Anaheim Stadium crusade etched in my yearbook; prominent local churches showed the anti-Mormon movie *The Godmakers* and mockingly displayed sacred Mormon undergarments in their Sunday meetings. On more than one occasion, when invited to social functions sponsored by local church youth groups, my sisters and I found ourselves the targets of theological ambush. The most persistent and curious charge levelled against us was that we were members of a "cult." "Mormons: Christian or Cult?" the marquee outside one church read; a friend of mine wrote a high school term paper bearing the same title.

Having elected not to read her essay, I am not sure how she arrived at the conclusion that we were (and probably still are), of course, a "cult." I am still not sure what the formal markers of our "cult" status are. Nonetheless, I find the appellation interesting, provocative, even, in terms of my present critical project. A contradictory impulse? Perhaps. I have learned, however, that seeming contradictions are often the sites of productive, even revolutionary thinking. "Go to the confusion!" I tell the students I teach. "Confusion is where your real thinking happens!" The same might apply to "Mormon Studies" as well—engaging the contradictory aspects of our "Mormon-ness," our so-called "weird-ness," especially where it touches issues of race, class, and gender, may yield our most important critical work.

Let's take "cult" as a keyword for a new type of discourse about "Mormon-ness." I suppose that we have been called a "cult" in part because our theology informs and is informed by the way we live our lives. "Cultus" has classically denoted a group devoted to the tending of natural growth; the term speaks to the ideal significance of a community's organic development. Church welfare farms, backyard gardens, food storage, parables of olive trees— "cultivation" has been very much a part

---

22. Arnold, 187.

of “Mormon-ness.” Likewise, “Mormon-ness” itself has been a cultivated phenomenon. More than a static set of received doctrines, our theology has been articulated over time—this is the source of its vitality and its self-generative power. Our understanding of what it means to be “Mormon” and the way we articulate this through social practice have also developed over time, and not always so evenly. Movements of population, instinctual syncretism, and historical necessity have made Mormon *culture* a many splendored and sometimes divergent thing. “Mormon thought” engages these fertile sites, the places where the ideal intersects the material, the dialectic of spirit and matter.

My emphasis on the word *culture* is intentional; thinking about “Mormon-ness” as culture means we think about our own academic enterprise as culture too, a component of the complex movement that is “Mormonism.” Thinking about “Mormon-ness” as culture can have significant impact on the way we do “Mormon Studies”—where the clerics of civilization and the keepers of great books use their academic capital to grant or deny others access to “truth,” workers of culture (try to) see themselves as a part of an ongoing process. Thinking about “Mormon-ness” as culture, and putting aside a proprietary sense of our “peculiarity,” we can engage our “Mormonism” in more self-conscious, critically aware ways. “Mormon Studies” is not the place to debate “Oh say, what is truth?” Such questions are best left to personal and prayerful consideration. Instead, as Mormons and academics, let us use our critical capacities to examine the terms of Mormonism’s collective, ongoing struggles to define itself.

The word “culture” captures the vital, engaged nature of such critical work in its charged, complex etymology. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams explains:

[Culture] came to mean, first, a “general state or habit of mind”, having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean “the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole”. Third, it came to mean “the general body of the arts”. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean “a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual”. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment. . . . The development of the word *culture* is a record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored.<sup>23</sup>

In the age of “industry” and “civilization,” he continues, culture has

---

23. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xvi-xvii.

come to represent “complex and radical response[s] to the new problems of social class,” to refer “back to an area of personal and apparently private experience,” to serve as a “court of human appeal,” “a mode of interpreting all our common experience, and, in this new interpretation, [as a way of] changing it.”<sup>24</sup> Culture, in Williams’s appraisal, is the site where a community works out its survival.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams derives the political and academic implications of seeing culture in this way. Over time, Williams argues, concepts like “society,” “economy,” and “arts” have been abstracted, taken out of contact with the dynamic masses, and systematized by an interested group of scholars and clerics as a “self-referring celebration of an achieved condition of refinement and order.” Everything still in process, historical developments and new social movements not falling into this polite “order of things” are thus referred to the catch-all term “culture.” “Culture,” as a “noun of process,” Williams argues, “exerts a strong pressure against the limited terms of all the other concepts. That is always its advantage; it is always also the source of its difficulties, both in definition and comprehension.”<sup>25</sup> It is precisely in this mix of “difficulty” and “advantage,” in culture’s contradictory moments, in its “weirdness,” its glass grapes and ghost dances, that Williams finds great promise. Where “civilization” takes itself for granted, “culture” is always on the move.

The civilizing mission proposed by thinkers like Arnold claims to seek universal understanding; in practice, it seems to have satisfied itself in pseudo-objective cosmopolitanism. This doesn’t leave much room for abiding and engaged Mormonism. The vegetable concept “culture,” however, provides for our particular academic project. A sense of culture, Williams claims, restores “a sense of movement within what is ordinarily abstracted as a system.”<sup>26</sup> Read with a sense of “culture,” texts become products of a specific place and time. Instead of seeking in them verification of the way things have (supposedly) always been—what Williams calls the “dominant”—critics look for markers of memory and indicators of change—elements Williams calls the “residual” and “emergent.” The result is a scholarship more aware of its own place in history. In other words, put down your lever, Archimedes, and re-join the program always already in progress.<sup>27</sup> Or, stated in more familiar terms, step out of your ivory tower and put your shoulder to the wheel.

Williams is especially interested in the “residual”—his word for how

24. *Ibid.*, xviii.

25. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 13.

26. *Ibid.*, 121.

27. My comment is informed by Myra Jehlen’s article “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism,” *Signs* (Summer 1981): 575–601.

a community recycles itself, how folks re-establish their sense of social location when forces beyond their control disrupt and dislocate their lives. In this, the “residual” is closely linked with “emergent” campaigns of local resistance—it is the stuff of which collective action is made, what we got that the guys in charge don’t. It also sounds a lot like what we got in the current shape of “Mormon culture,” that is:

certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, [which] are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual . . . which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture. . . . Thus organized religion is predominantly residual, but within this there is a significant difference between some practically alternative and oppositional meanings and values (absolute brotherhood, service to others without reward) and a larger body of incorporated meanings and values (official morality, or the social order of which the other-worldly is a separated neutralizing or ratifying component).<sup>28</sup>

Our sense that Mormonism is a peculiar phenomenon, with its own habits and contours, not “expressed or verified in terms of the dominant culture,” is a sense of the “residual.” That we believe this residue worthy of specifically identified, ongoing contemplation confirms the “emergent” character of our project. Do take note, however, of Williams’s distinction between a religious sense which continues to articulate its difference from dominant culture through “practically alternative and oppositional meanings and values” and the “official,” institutional ways religion “incorporate[s]” itself into the dominant “social order.” One is tempted here to draw a correlative distinction between the variably influenced productions of Mormon culture and the centrally organized operations of the Mormon church. As the two are not always cleanly differentiated (and are sometimes, in fact, mutually informant), a “Mormon (cultural) Studies” might have to read between the lines of the latter to understand the former. That kind of reading too would be part of the practice.

At root, it is a practice which requires sympathy and commitment—the reader puts faith in the gestures by which common people determine themselves. Academics who claim this practice of reading—often called “Cultural Studies”—dispense with presumptions of positivism or objectivity and instead seek a subjective, contextual understanding of culture. In its consideration of context, Cultural Studies turns a critical eye on its

---

28. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 122.

own situation, identifying and engaging the political and economic structures which determine cultural production and academic work. The result is (usually) charged, invested, progressive, self-critical scholarship.<sup>29</sup>

I do not intend to infer a causal relationship between a certain school of thought and better scholarship, better living, or better “Mormon-ness.” I do believe, however, that Mormon Studies done as Cultural Studies will mean less dogmatism and more conversation. If this assertion seems dogmatic in itself, consider the situation out of which it is born: the defenders of an “essential” Mormon-ness make no place for feminism; many who speak the pretty, open-ended sentences of postmodernism, Mormon-style, shift their feet. I am hungry to identify with others who share my concerns; my very work depends on it. I am hungry for a vocabulary more adequate to discussions of this complex movement, hungry to read “Mormonism” as a “noun of process,” and to do it in good fellowship.

The cultivation of fellowship, of mutuality within Mormon scholarship, will depend, I believe, on all parties’ willingness to relinquish exclusive claims to “Mormon-ness” or “Mormon truth.” Perhaps such divestment will, at first, conflict with the deep-seated “every-member-a-missionary” instinct Mormons feel whenever they speak to mixed (Mormon and non-Mormon) audiences. I am confident, however, that marvelous academic work—work that is intelligent, self-critical, and conscious—can do no damage to the wonder that is Mormonism. The serious study of culture, as I have described it above, in itself signifies commitment and faith. Hopefully our training has given us the tools to distinguish serious, committed scholarship from careless polemics; people with our credentials ought to be able to discern a Walter Martin from a Sterling McMurrin. Only one deserves scholarly attention; neither deserves our suspicion or condemnation.

To appoint ourselves the sole proprietors of essential “Mormon-ness” is to act beyond our station; moreover, it is to exercise such dominion over Mormon Studies as to render the field unfruitful. There is nothing “faith promoting” in the way some Mormon academics have, of late, policed their colleagues’ orthodoxy. There is so much fertile ground we can work over together. The places some would pave over with standard answers, I see as fields of questions.<sup>30</sup>

What can we say about the ideology of the “nation-state”? Consider

---

29. For introductory and historical overviews of this practice, see *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993); Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Stuart Hall, “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 11-23.

30. The following list of questions intentionally emulates the structure of the “I Have an Answer” column in the feminist publication *Mormon Women’s Forum*.

the Missouri extermination order, the Utah War, our turn-of-the-century drive for assimilation, the subsequent, sometimes excessive performances of American patriotism, bombings in Peru, the “downwinders,” anti-Mormon sentiments among emergent nationalist factions in the former Soviet Union, and insurgent claims to sovereignty by Mormon-affiliated or Mormon-friendly groups throughout the intermountain west. What can we say about the structural inequalities of the economy? What about Orderville, water rights debates, Cleon Skousen, and the growing disparity between rich and poor in our own population? There are many questions to ask about Mormon “ethnicity” and “nativity.” Can we contribute to critiques of “whiteness”? What made it possible for a nineteenth-century Missourite to insist that “the Lord intends that WHITE FOLKS, and not Mormons shall possess that goodly land?” At century’s end, we were caricatured alongside laundry-washing Chinese, simian-like Irish, and cigar-smoking Indians. A 1904 cartoon showed a Mormon polygamist father with African-American children; one 1905 minstrel song was titled “The Mormon Coon.”<sup>31</sup> When did we get “white,” and how? Where and how do residual racism among Mormons and the Christian Identity movement cross paths? How and why have our cultural constructions of gender changed so radically over time? How can Mormonism produce both Sonia Johnson and Rodney Turner? How has Mormon polygamy been represented in literature and pop culture? How have these representations inflected Mormon sexuality and how do they continue to do so?

When we ask questions like these, we necessarily call our own assumptions into examination. This is a call for transformative thinking, for improved dialogue, for dialectic. This is a call for a re-examination of our dissident heritage and our present academic and political sympathies. This is a call for a renewal of faith in the radical project of community-building we have traditionally called “Zion.” Collectively and critically examining Mormon culture and staking exclusive claims to “Mormonness” are two very different academic enterprises. From one emerges a vital school of thought in Zion, while the other marks turf in Provo, waiting for the kind of confirmation only apocalypse will bring.

---

31. Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Graphic Image, 1834-1914* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 75-94.