

**Make Yourselves Gods:  
Sex, Secularism, and the Radiant Body of  
Early Mormonism**

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The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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## Make Yourselves Gods: Sex, Secularism, and the Radiant Body of Early Mormonism

On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1841, a young woman stood beneath an elm tree in far western Illinois. This was Louisa Beaman, twenty-six, and at this point in her life an orphan. Her father had died in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837; her mother, only a few months before, in 1840. In the aftermath of that latter calamity, Beaman had gone to live with her sister Mary, and with Mary's husband, Joseph Bates Noble and it was that man, Joseph Noble, who now stood before her. But not only him.

Joseph Noble was a devout Mormon. He had moved from New York to Kirtland in 1834, with the earliest Mormon émigrés, had suffered the reversals and disappointments – indeed the terrors – of Mormon displacement. (During the ghastly Missouri War of 1838, governor Lilburn Boggs issued his infamous “extermination order” – “The Mormons must now be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state if necessary for the public peace” – and the Mormons were in fact massacred, at Haun's Mill.) But in 1840 something extraordinary happened to Joseph Noble. As if in recognition of this longstanding devotion, the prophet himself had shared with him a momentous secret. None other than Joseph Smith (author, prophet, leader) had personally instructed him, Noble reported years later, in “the principle of celestial or plural marriage, or a plurality of wives.” Smith's startling request was that Noble perform the sealing between Smith and Noble's orphaned sister-in-law, Louisa. This would be, according to later testimony, “the first Marriage Ceremony according to the Patriarchal order of Marriage ever performed in this dispensation.” (Smith appears to have been married polygamously to two other women by this time.) The honor of the request could not have been lost on Noble. “In revealing this to you,” Smith is reported to have said to Noble, “I have placed my life in your hands, therefore do not betray me.”<sup>1</sup>

Noble did not betray the prophet, though his treatment of his orphaned sister-in-law is a matter considerably more equivocal. In what Todd Compton calls the “family tradition” of her future husband, Brigham Young, Beaman is said to have “asked the Lord in fervent prayer for a testimony concerning the principle.” In this version, such testimony was given to her, and she accepted it.<sup>2</sup>

And so she found herself under an elm tree, on a day in early April, standing before her brother-in-law and the prophet Joseph himself. And yet this was to be a queerer than ordinary wedding, and not only because it was by design a rebuke to, and a supersession of, any merely civil rite, or even because the groom was himself already a married man. In part as a measure of the severity of these disruptions of the normative frame of antebellum social and sexual life, Louisa Beaman attended her marriage *in disguise*. But not just any disguise. In a journal entry decades later, Franklin D. Richards would write, “Br. Joseph B. Noble being the master of ceremonies was present and During the visit related that he performed the first sealing ceremony in this Dispensation in

which he united Sister Louisa Beaman to the prophet Joseph in May – I think the 5<sup>th</sup> day in 1841 during the evening under the Elm tree in Nauvoo. The Bride disguised in a coat and hat.”<sup>3</sup> Louisa Beaman – who would go on to be a figure of defining importance in early Mormon feminism – was married to the prophet, in “the first Marriage Ceremony according to the Patriarchal order,” disguised as a man.

Mormonism, as this delectable tableau suggests, is one of those historical phenomena always over-performing itself, disturbing the parameters that separate the fictive from the putatively real – recalling to us, that is, the historicity of our categories. (Smith has something of this in mind when he writes, ““No man knows my history. I don’t blame you for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.”<sup>4</sup>) The book I am now finishing, *Make Yourself Gods: Early Mormonism, the Fate of the Flesh, and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism*, tells the story of the Mormons from the period of their emergence as a dissident sect, notable as much for their post-Protestant heterodoxy as for a dramatically non-normative sexual imagination, through to their renunciation of polygamy at century’s end. That 1890 renunciation, with which the Mormons at last attained statehood for Utah – transforming them into reluctant monogamists and enfranchised U.S. subjects – marked, too, the culmination of a fantastically vexed history, in which the Mormons had appeared by turns as heretics, sex-radicals, American Mohammedans, racialized refugees, anti-imperialists, colonizers, and eventual white nationalists, protected in their citizenship less by the secular state’s offer of official “toleration” than by the complex wages of a sovereign whiteness. The pitch of the book, you could say, is that the Mormons were, in certain precise ways I wish to specify, deviant, *queer* – a queer populace emerging *before* the advent of erotic categories like hetero- and homosexuality – and that this is so much the case that we can profit greatly, both historically and conceptually, by approaching them through the idioms of queer theory, queer historiography, and queer critique. Marked out in their committed derangements of normative intimacy as not only perverts but, in that, as *dubious white people*, Indian-like, Asiatic, Mohammedan, the Mormons make for an especially vivid chapter in the racial history of American sexuality.

But there’s more. For as I try to show in some detail, Mormon depravity was read most commonly as both cause *and* effect of a deranged practice of what I will call *bad belief*: a failure, in all, to hew to the coordinates of religion as they came to be assembled under the aegis of secularism. The book is in this respect a kind of polemic. Speaking in concert with a wealth of practitioners of postsecular critique (Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Tomoko Masuzawa, Joan Scott, John Modern), the book uses the story of the Mormons to vivify a counter position about what secularism *is*: not what results from the dissolution of religion in public life; not the happy extirpation of benighted orthodoxy; nor quite a climate of pluralistic fragilized belief, or scene of fair play among theological options; nor again a sociality anchored in a capacity for adjudication and free choice among the multiplying possibilities for belief in a rationalizing and therefore disenchanting world and, therefore, a liberated world. The unceasing attacks on Mormonism, and the specific terms in which they were prosecuted, bring into exceptional focus a contrary rendering of

secularism as, rather, a “normative sociality” and “disciplinary structure,” one intimately involved in the harnessing of the terrain of ritual, practice, belief, and spirit to the imperatives of a settler colonial empire coming to understand itself more and more entirely in the framework of a redemptive liberalism.<sup>5</sup> (Secularism, I will suggest, is a sententious story imperial liberalism likes to tell about itself.) So secularism, in this iteration, will mark out the styles of *adapted, enforced compatibility* with liberal rationality that allow a given set of belief-practices to come into legibility as “religion” at all, rather than as, say, credulity, fanaticism, superstition, backwardness, “fundamentalism,” or any of the other sub-varieties of *bad belief*.

Secularism, I’m going to suggest too, has flesh and sinew, has a body; the radiant body of early Mormon theology does not accord with it. Again, these interwoven, mutually indicating perversions – bad sex, bad belief – were *racializing*: made up, in fact, the very grammar, the stuff and substance, of nineteenth century racialization. Listen to Representative Justin Morrill, using polygamy and its counterfeited religiosity to argue against Utah statehood in 1856: “Under the guise of religion this people has established and seek to maintain and perpetuate, a Mohammedan barbarism revolting to the civilized world.”<sup>6</sup> The Mormons help us bring into focus not just an economy, or a discursive regime, but a *biopolitics*: a technology of power that (as Foucault renders it) optimizes the life of populations, suturing the self-disciplining of individual bodies to larger groupings made coherent through their statistical regularities as projected over gulfs of time larger than the life-span. Crucially, biopower differentiates sharply among those orders of life that improve the species, and so are meant to flourish, and those that, because they are figured as *threats* to the health of vigor of a “general population,” are marked out contrastingly as degenerate, unimprovable, expendable life. The story of the Mormons, who were only barely *not* exterminated in nineteenth-century America, throws into stark relief what I call the biopolitics of secularism.

(If you want to tell a story about the disciplinary force of secularism, the Mormons are a great object: they begin as a pure form of *bad belief* and emerge in the following century as the paradigmatic case of *good religion*. My book is about what has to happen to make that so.)

## Joy

Quickly, then: allow me to assure you that the Mormons were regarded as deviants. (“To speak of all the immoralities and obscenities sanctioned by the Mormon Law, would be impossible here,” says an 1855 Putnam’s editorial to which we’ll have occasion to return.<sup>7</sup>) My first major point is that Mormon perversity, though it was read then (and, sometimes, now) as merely the expression of the carnal avariciousness of its monomaniacal, perhaps sociopathic, founders, is in fact rooted in a *theology*, an intricate cosmology tuned especially closely to the matter of the body, and of pleasure, and of their worldly import. Polygamy is not some inessential temple rite, a merely notional appendage to the more

pressing theological insights and doctrinal imperatives that define the faith in its earliest years. It is rather a central provision of Smith's cosmology.

How so? Briefly: at the center of early Mormon cosmology is the ideal of exaltation – the movement of the human toward its destiny in divinity, in godhead. *You have got to learn how to make yourselves gods*, Smith would say in 1844. This, Smith would reveal, is “the great secret.” The culminating secret is not simply that God, in essence, *has a biography*: that God was a man who became a god (though that is itself a fine bit of anti-Calvinist heresy). Nor is it even that God himself *had a body*, and has indeed never surrendered it. (Smith would write variously about the celestialized embodiment – the divine carnality – of God.) The secret is not that God is still speaking, that God had a body, or that he has one still. It is rather that you yourself, in the grain of your mortal flesh, are living an embodied life that itself bends toward divinization. *You have got to learn how to make yourselves gods*.<sup>8</sup> Becoming a god, though, is in this dispensation not a matter of redemption, or radical translation. Rather, it is a matter of what Smith calls *believing and receiving*: an arduous coming into relation to the very nearly inconceivable fact that you are, as a living person, a human in the mortal world, already living in the body of a god unenlarged. *All spirit is matter*, Smith tells us, by which he means that there are not two kinds of flesh – fallen and unfallen – but *one* and one only: that to live in a body is to be constituted by, made of, the same stuff as God – to be mantled in divinity.<sup>9</sup> (Christianity has conspired to get you to *forget* this, in part through its Pauline chastisement of the flesh.)

Here, precisely, is where polygamy enters the scene. For polygamy, to speak again too quickly, is *how* you learn how to make yourself a god: how you train your body – not least through the hugely denaturalizing force of its *pleasures* – to come into the all but inconceivable realization that it is not fallen, not mired in Pauline corruption, but the very stuff of your incipient divinity. In Smith's cosmology, the body is both a revelation and a constant surprise, and so also (as for Freud) a kind of challenge: a scene of potential undoing. But what it promises to undo, in those passages of disorienting delight that are proper to it, are precisely those traditions that discipline the body, that induce us to misrecognize the *sweetnesses* of embodied living as temptations, deceitful prompts in the direction of sin and crime. (“This is good doctrine,” Smith says. “*It tastes good...* You say honey is sweet and so do I. I can also taste the spirit and principles of eternal life, and so can you. I know it is good and that when I tell you of these words of eternal life... you are bound to receive them as sweet. *You taste them and I know you believe them.*”) Deceits? Temptations? In Smith, the disordering delights of the body are nothing of the kind. They are rather the harbingers of an order apart from the orthodoxies of sanctified religion, and for that matter from the deflating managerial rationalizations of the body to which these, in the sweep of secularizing disciplines, were increasingly conjoined. They are foretastes of godliness: intimations of an immortality not premised on the transcendence of the flesh. God offers us these revelations of grace, Smith insists, “in the view of no eternal dissolution of our earthly tabernacles.” Or, in a more compact formation: “the great



principle of happiness consists in having a body.” Or again: “Men are that they might have joy.”<sup>10</sup>

The advent of polygamy in Mormonism is in all these respects not an aberration but a culmination. “*Then shall they be Gods*,” Smith says in the polygamy revelation, yoking into tight relation plural marriage and exaltation.<sup>11</sup> This is polygamy in all its theological multifacetedness: a doctrine making legible a counter-Calvinist vision of the divinity of the mortal body; a training-ground, anchored in dailyness, for the arduous denaturalization of the Christianized, Pauline body; an intimate form built to recognize, rather than rebuke, the pleasures of carnality, inasmuch as those pleasures deliver back to us the good (if only glancingly *conceivable*) news that not only does life transpire in a world not fallen away from divinity, we ourselves inhabit *unfallen flesh*, bodies insusceptible to the secular mechanics of disenchantment or re-enchantment because, from the first, coterminous with the flesh of God. In polygamy, Smith discovers at last an arrangement of intimate life proper to the outsized carnal capacities, the incipient exaltation, of an embodied humankind. (It’s the way you *live out* the stunning fact that you are alive in the body of a god unenlarged.)

### Extermination

This, then, is Mormonism as a *radical theory of embodied life*. About which there is, of course, much to say. For if early Mormonism rests its claims on a body in this fashion universalized, it also *deuniversalizes* that body, in a number of overlapping, unsystematized, fantastically incoherent ways. To take only the nearest, greatest unparsed dilemma: Do women *also* inhabit the bodies of gods? Or is exaltation a capacity granted only to men? Is the celestial sphere itself hierarchized, *gendered*? Despite the seeming clarity of the polygamy revelation itself – “if any man... have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, *for they belong to him*,” the text reads<sup>12</sup> – the matter was in fact one of great live uncertainty. (Smith’s suggestive commentaries on scripture and policy before the Female Relief Society, between 1842 and 1844, suggested a great deal about the unforecasted possibilities for female divinization, and for a fate for the female body that was *not* bioreproductivity or subservience. My book takes up more expansively the knotty problem of Mormon feminism, and of a style of feminist critique that achieves escape velocity from secularizing presumption.)

But there’s more to say still about the *stakes* of Mormonism’s theory of embodied life, and about how they played out. Given their committed depravities, it is perhaps not much of a surprise that every decade or so in the mid- to late-nineteenth century the United States, or some non-negligible subset of its population, went to war with the deviant and seditious Mormons. We can list them, each properly named keyed to the ambition, plainly stated, to *exterminate* Mormonism: “The Missouri War” of 1838, the “Illinois War” of 1844, the very nearly annihilating “Utah War” of 1857-8, and after this the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862, the Poland Bill of 1874, the Reynolds v. United States decision of 1879, the Edmunds Act of 1882, and finally the Edmunds-Tucker Act

of 1887, whereby the polygamous Mormons became a curious species of sexual outlaw, committing crimes against monogamy and the sanctified national order for which it stood. In and through all of this a great proliferating genre of anti-Mormon fulmination came into vivid life, and its terms are remarkable. I think of one William P. Richards, of Macomb, Illinois, who in the teeth of Mormon expulsion from Illinois (after Smith was assassinated by a mob) had called for the creation of a section of land to be parceled off and “forever set apart and known and designated as the *Mormon Reserve*.”<sup>13</sup> (The Indian Removal Act had been signed into law more than a decade earlier, in 1830, though the Seminole War had only recently come to its uneasy conclusion, in 1842.) Removal, resettlement, reservation, mob violence, land seizure, forced migration, heathenishness: these are the recurrent tropes of early anti-Mormonism. We can say, at the very least, that the Mormons’ persistent and multivalent departures from the codes of secular liberalism that we have been noting were not lost on their countrymen. They were, to the contrary, registered again and again in the shifting idioms of *racialization*, whereby the Mormons were made over into a racially-dubious populace, said to be poisoned in body by orthodoxy and erring belief, figured by alternating turns as Indian, Mohammedan, as African or Asiatic despots, as slave-like sycophants to domineering theological masters.

We return here, though, to those deuniversalizations of the radiant body. For the Mormons were hardly silent in response to these multifaceted and interwoven accusations, these declines, in the metrics of the national imaginary, to the status of *expendable life*. In response they do more than defend polygamy (though they do that) and speak up for their own righteousness as *colonizers*, redeemers of the savage West, and good subjects who well know the necessity of *racial hierarchy* in the realm of political authority. (Though they do this too. “Negros shall not rule us,” Young writes in 1852, in an act of law denying priesthood authority to African Americans.<sup>14</sup>) Rather, I argue, over the course of the violent century the Mormons look to mobilize all the vagrant and under-systematized elements of Mormon theology *toward* the pole of normativity – toward the guise, if not the fact, of virtuous (if tenuous) basically liberal citizenry. They grapple with their losing place in a biopolitics of secularism by professing themselves, in certain ways, more normative than merely normal, producing a strategy of distinction through, in essence, *hypernormativity*.

To take the example of plural marriage: Mormons were quick to defend polygamy by insisting not on its perversity but on the hyperbolized gendered normativity it propagated. In tracts by Pratt and Udney Hay Jacobs, a pro-polygamy line emerged, one conspicuously not anchored in the divinized body. No, Mormons said in many voices (and STILL say), this merely looks like perversion. The practice of plural patriarchal marriage merely seems to conjugate a body – pleasure-fired, protodivine – that violates the codes of secular being and belonging, and in this way renders Mormonism as something *apart* from “religion” and nearer to superstition, barbarism, credulity, bad belief. No! Rather, the line went, it is a practice rooted not in pleasure but *bioreproductivity*, one that in this way amounts finally – and these are the words of contemporary historian Richard Bushman – to a *family theology*. (“The marriage revelation culminated in the emergence of family

theology. More than any previous revelation, *this one put family first.*"<sup>15</sup>) And better still, it was one that *corrects* the declining patriarchy of the Gentile world by propounding the godlier, holier, more *absolutely hierarchized* patriarchal order of plural patriarch marriage. "Let no woman unite herself in marriage with any man," Orson Pratt had written, "unless she has fully resolved to submit herself wholly to his counsel and to let him govern as the head," for such are "sacred bonds of eternal union" and such is "the divine order of family government."<sup>16</sup> Brigham Young turned the point more directly: "There is no woman on the face of the earth that can save herself," Young declaimed, "but if she ever comes into the Celestial Kingdom, she must be led in by some man— God knew what Eve was. He was acquainted with woman thousands and millions of years before."<sup>17</sup>

If Bushman's account makes for a kind of de-pervverting misreading – and I think it does – it nevertheless excavates for us a certain crucial doubleness in the carnal imagination of early Mormonism. It recalls to us the way the divinized body of polygamy, with all its unassimilabilities, might, in moments of crisis or need, be switched out for the forcibly disciplined bodies of polygamous *wives*: biologized, reproductive, subject to hierarchy, sequestered in the family. In this way the bodies of women were less afterthoughts to the polygamous imagination than its anchors, the occluded site of its most prominent, if conflicted, self-justifications. Indeed, one way of reading back through these redemptive post-polygamy accounts is to say that early Mormonism looked essentially to annex all the most miraculous corporeal feats of female embodiment – *enlargement* or *expansion* or the godlikeness entailed in *the creation of life* – to the bodies of Mormon *men* experiencing exaltation.

(It should be noted that de-eroticizing contemporary accounts of polygamy essentially repeat, verbatim, Mormon self-defenses from the nineteenth-century: they look to produce a Mormonism already in-step with liberalism, and to retrospectively refashion them as good religionists, misapprehended citizens, *liberals* already. My persistent claim is: they were not.)

### **Hypernormativity, or, Proto-homonationalism**

Of course, for the Mormons there was a lot riding on these claims, the making-legible of these normative counter-possibilities. For the Mormons had, in a range of interwoven ways, made themselves *available* for delegitimation – and not only via the obvious scandal of polygamy. Mormonism was also, from the first, spectacularly entangled with indigeneity – an indigeneity itself not easily deracialized. Think only for a moment about their sacred text, *The Book of Mormon*. It is a work that on its face seems just conventionally, ordinarily racist in its distinctions, with good-guy white Nephites doing battle with the accused dark-skinned Lamanites in an epic race war (that's the story: Old Testament fan fiction, tuned to the bigotries of settler-colonial America). And yet it was a text that was nevertheless taken up, by the Mormons and others, as a species of *anti-imperial critique*. As devout Mormons readers were themselves quick to recognize, *The Book of Mormon* tells a declension story – a story about the decimation of the white Nephites – about imperial

hubris and the steep decline of a once-righteous people overthrown by their own pride. It was a story self-blindedness, backsliding, of *how empires fall*. For refugee Mormons, the analogies were easy to read. “I am prophet enough,” Brigham Young declaimed in 1849, “to prophesy the downfall of the Government that has driven us out.”<sup>18</sup> Just so, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Garland Hunt wrote back to Washington, D. C., in May of 1855: the Mormons, he warned, have “created a distinction in the minds of the Indian tribes of this territory between the Mormons and the people of the United States... their first object will be to teach these savages that they are the rightful owners of the American soil, and that it has been wrongly taken from them by the whites.”<sup>19</sup> This was the anti-imperial critique of *The Book of Mormon* materialized, coming to frightening life, in the West. The Mormons did indeed sustain quasi-identifications with Native peoples, and these were crossed with unlikely commonalities: both Natives and Mormons thought of themselves as *sovereign people*; both were non-monogamous, both were understood to be zealots, *heathens*. If these identifications for the Mormons were, scripturally at least, compulsory (a Mormon term for Natives: *brother Laman*) they were also intolerable.

Consider the critical lead editorial from *Putnam's*, titled simply THE MORMONS: “Monogamy is sanctioned by our religion,” we are told, but “goes beyond our religion... Monogamy does not only go with the Caucasian race, the Europeans and their descendants, beyond Christianity it goes beyond Common Law”:

It is one of the elementary distinctions – historical and actual – between European and Asiatic humanity. It is one of the frames of our thoughts, and molds of our feelings; it is a psychological condition of our jural consciousness, of our liberty, of our literature, of our aspirations, of our religious convictions, and of our domestic being and family relation, the foundation of all that is called polity. It is one of the pre-existing conditions of our existence as civilized white men... Strike it out, and you destroy our very being; and when we say *our*, we mean our race.<sup>20</sup>

Religion and *beyond* religion: these are the coordinates within which the editorial moves. Notably, what italicizes the editorialist’s disgust is not Mormon theology, or not quite. Nor is it precisely the mere fact of Mormon erotic errancy, though this is indeed the occasion for an especially fulsome performance of horror. Rather, because of their derangements of normative intimacy, which are themselves wholly entangled with a set of devotional practices that the devious Mormon leadership has conspired to counterfeit as “religion,” the Mormons figure here as *race-traitors*, sliding in the metrics of national life from the realm of potential citizens to that of *expendable life*. Whatever we might incline to call “religion” and “sex” are not separate or separable integers here. They are not distorting mirrors in which the hard facts of lineage or phenotype reappear in “illogical” combination (as certain liberalizing critics will write, puzzled at how the Mormons could be racialized, since, the claim goes, they were *really white*). They are, rather, *what race is*: the conceptual grounding-points through which expendability and non-expendability and the degrees of distinction between them are given their substance. So when a Jack London

character declares, “They ain’t whites... they’re Mormons” – when he insists, in essence, that the devotional practice of polygamy is *racializing* – we are not in the presence of any failure of logic or reason.<sup>21</sup> We are bearing witness, rather, to the biopolitics of secularism: to the fused, disciplinary calibration of sex, racial status, and religiosity that would shape itself into hegemonic coherence in the later century.

And, of course, none of this would have been lost on Native peoples. Consider the 1883 “Religious Crimes Code,” authorized by Secretary of the Interior Henry M. Teller (who had jurisdiction over the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and codified as a “Code of Indian Offenses.” The rules drawn up by Hiram Price, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, specified as crimes sun- and ghost-dances, communitarian holding of property (i.e. non-male household heads), and, of course, PLURAL MARRIAGE. From the perspective of the state, Native “offenses” to civilization were not solely about property or sex or “so-called” dances and feasts, in and of themselves. They were rather, and quite explicitly, a fused compound of erotic depravity, disordered intimate and economic life (disempowering to the man who would be “head of a family”), and committed *heathenishness*, with each element coming into salience as it ratified the others. This is the racializing discipline of imperial secularism.<sup>22</sup>

There is, in this context, little to surprise us in the desperate urgency of Mormon avowals of a normativity scaling toward a kind of *hypernormalcy* – defenses of polygamy as not perversity but familialism, not rupture but deep tradition, not anchored in divinized embodiment but bioreproduction. Nor, for that matter, is there much to surprise us in the extravagances of Mormon racism under Young (redoubled commitments to the exclusion of African Americans, abandonments of hopes to convert the Lamanites, and escalating *identification* with the political orders of the racial state) or in their afterlives in what Hickman calls Mormonism’s “deplorable record of theological racism.”<sup>23</sup> In all this, we can hear a familiar trope of fragilized American whiteness: a straining dis-identificatory effort not to be mistaken for nonwhite, misapprehended as the Indians they resemble, with their perversities, their backwardness, their a-civilizational arrangements of life. It is part of the long labor of shoring up the everywhere-contested whiteness of the Mormons themselves, a labor undertaken in the belief – the *correct* belief – that without whiteness there could be no hope for *sovereignty*, in whatever meager or compromised form. The fate of the Lamanites in the West gave especially vivid testament to the cataclysm of failed sovereignty in the imperial U.S. Indeed, the Mormons finally renounce polygamy in the fall of 1890, precisely two months before the culminating massacre of the Lakota at Wounded Knee, and they do so proclaiming (in Woodruff’s words) that they have become “politically speaking a ward or dependent” of the American state. His remarks diagnose, with eerie precision, how the Mormons understood themselves to have been *Indianized*: marked out as expendable life, made fit for extermination.<sup>24</sup>

In these senses the Mormons seem to me to be an early iteration of what Jasbir Puar calls homonationalism. They are pioneers, that is, in their efforts to destigmatize their own religio-erotic errancy through the fervent performance of a countervailing normativity (in the dispensation of genders, for instance) and the championing of,

precisely, the racial entitlements proper to the white imperial state. If transforming themselves into a new religion was what was needed – a post-polygamous religion, one that had jettisoned its pleasure-fired body, speeding toward godhead in a celestialized carnality, trading it out wholly for family theology – this they would do. And they would emerge as, precisely, a good religion – *the American religion*, Harold Bloom says – which is to say: a religion *tolerable by the lights of secularism*. Now, we might read this as a story about the wondrous munificence of tolerant liberal inclusiveness. (See how a place at the table of good religion can be set, even for such oddballs as the Mormons!) Or you could read here something of the transformative disciplinary force of the biopolitics of American secularism.

### **Conclusion: Theodicy**

“The secular state does not guarantee toleration: it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear.”

- Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003)

There are, just now, an almost infinite number of ways we might instrumentalize the point I’ve been making about secularism as a biopolitics, from the subtle to the crude, given how wildly overstuffed our current moment is with the floating signifiers of racialized religion and desecularized races: the policed beaches of France, American “travel” bans, Breitbartian disquisitions on whether or not “Islam” *is a religion*, and all the grim rest of it. The racializing discipline of secular liberalism is, we could say, among the *least* occluded governing aspects of our fragmented modernity. Take, then, only one example among the crowded multitude. Think once more of the broad evangelical mistrust of a public figure like President Barack Obama, whose fluency in the idioms of Protestant devotionality exceeded, by many powers, that of any comparable American figure one might name. And yet, from the perspective of a white Protestant religiosity *embraced* under the biopolitical regime of secularism, his practice could *only* read as a suspect devotionality, whatever its earnestness or political purpose or achieved oracular power. Such is the desecularization of the raced body, where “the secular” figures in the key of sanctified practice, tolerable belief, *good religion*.

This, then, is what it means to think of secularism as *the racialized theodicy of hegemonic liberalism*. And it is in these terms that I have tried to take hold of the trajectories of early Mormonism as part of a developing biopolitics of secularism. For the Mormons, whose relations to the promises of secular belonging were excruciatingly vexed – marked at once by a strident refusal of its terms of legitimacy *and* a longing for whatever political legitimacy was required for sovereignty – the *answers* to the questions posed by secularity, in respect to sexual propriety and racial authority, were not especially hard to decipher. They were written, with all needed clarity, in letters of blood and fire. The queerly infantilized “Indian,” whose decimation in the West the Mormons observed closely, and in fact expedited; the “Negro” incapable of the spiritual discipline required to endure a priesthood

authority, and so resigned to servility; the “Mohammedan” despot, with his cruel authority and his deviant carnal indulgence: these were only a few of the proximate figures against which the Mormons, with their weird sex and fantastic cosmology, would set out to define themselves, often cutting distinctions only the more insistent for being so vanishingly fine. Disciplined by state and non-state authorities, figured in biopolitical terms as a veritably existential menace to the nation, the Mormons recalibrated the terms of that very cosmology, routing its promise of a divinizing body back through the narrow channel of dyadic reproductive heterosexuality and neutering its anti-imperial critique in the name of what would at best be paternalism and at worse a dug-in commitment to racist delegitimation. They became Americans.

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- . “High Priests Quorum Record,” Church History Library, [https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE6158773&page=96](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE6158773&page=96)



## ENDNOTES

1. Todd Compton *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 59. Noble is quoted in Wilford Woodruff's journal, from 22 January, 1869. Cited in Compton, 653.
2. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 59.
3. The entry is from Franklin D. Richards journal from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, 1869. Both Woodruff, quoted above, and Richards, are recounting the conversation of Joseph Noble. See Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 654.
4. Joseph Smith, *The Essential Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 245. Here and later I am quoting from the "amalgamated text" of the King Follett Discourse, as assembled by Stan Larson and included in *The Essential Joseph Smith*, 232-245, 235-36. As observed by the editors of the Joseph Smith Papers, the discourse was transcribed by several observers – William Richards, Wilford Woodruff, Thomas Bullock, William Clayton among them – and these transcriptions began to be condensed, amalgamated, and published as soon as the summer of 1844. For multiple transcriptions, and something of the history of the discourse, see <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/site/accounts-of-the-king-follett-sermon>. For ease of reference I will continue to cite *The Essential Joseph Smith* when possible.
5. John Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11, 8.

6. This is from Morrill's "Utah Territory and Its Laws – Polygamy and Its License," quoted in *At Sword's Point, Part I: A Documentary History of the Utah War to 1858*, ed. William P MacKinnon (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 87.
7. "The Mormons," *Putnam's Monthly* 5:27 (March 1855): 225-236, 234.
8. Smith, *The Essential Joseph Smith*, 235-236.
9. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, The Pearl of Great Price* (1981), 266.
10. Smith, *The Essential Joseph Smith*, 240; Smith, "Account of Meeting and Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by William Clayton," <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/account-of-meeting-and-discourse-5-january-1841-as-reported-by-william-clayton/4> ; *The Book of Mormon*, Nephi 2:25.
11. Smith, *The Essential Joseph Smith*, 194.
12. Smith, *The Essential Joseph Smith*, 198.
13. Quoted in W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Struggle for Mormon Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 72.
14. See *The Teachings of President Brigham Young, Vol. 3 (1852-1854)*, ed. Fred C. Collier (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1987), 49.
15. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 445, my emphasis.

16. Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage – an Excerpt," in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, 275.
17. From a document reproduced in the web archive *The First Fifty Years of the Female Relief Society*, <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/part-1/1-13>. The website reproduces passages from Brigham Young, Discourse, Mar. 9, 1845; original of the document, from the High Priests Quorum record, found here:  
[https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE6158773&page=96](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE6158773&page=96)
18. Quoted in John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 197.
19. Quoted in Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 91-92.
20. "The Mormons," 234.
21. Jack London, *The Star Rover* (1915; New York: Macmillan, 1963), 131.
22. "Code of Indian Offenses," Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Code\\_of\\_Indian\\_Offenses](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Code_of_Indian_Offenses).
23. Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86:3 (September 2014): 434
24. Quoted in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 135.