



The Performance of Normativity: Mormons and the Construction of an American Masculinity

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In this essay I argue that men in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have consciously adopted the ideal American masculine performance. I define this ideal through R. W. B. Lewis' book, American Adam (1959), in which he explains the symbolic relationship between the nineteenth-century American man and the Biblical Adam. I argue that Mormon men, by embracing the role of the American Adam, mastered the performance of normativity while maintaining their abject identity. Mormons have relished their outsider status, often calling themselves a "peculiar people." Their unabashed peculiarity helped secure their abjection from American culture in the nineteenth century and led to the development of a distinctly Mormon masculinity, one that passes for the ideal American masculinity. I explore early Mormon history to explain the value of abjection for Mormons, and I consider the implications of a performance of normativity staged from a position of abjection.

Mormons: A normative minority

A documentary produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormons), *Roots of an American Prophet: the Docudrama of the Restoration*, depicts their founder, Joseph Smith, as a quintessential American:

It was no accident that the Lord spoke to an *American* boy; not a scholar or a religious leader for they all trusted in the wisdom they already had, and not to the citizen of any other land, for only in America was there freedom enough for a new religion to survive. Only America was filled with enough free-thinking independent people to form the nucleus of the Church that the Lord had promised to restore. (Brown, 2002)

The history of Joseph Smith, according to the LDS Church, is also the history of a growing America. In his book, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, Klaus J. Hansen (1981) extends the relationship between Smith and American history to a relationship between Mormonism and America, "The birth of Mormonism coincided with the birth of modern America" (p. 45). Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling (2000), in

their study of contemporary Mormonism, *Mormon America: the Power and the Promise*, explain, “Mormonism began as, and still is, a uniquely American faith” (p. xviii). Mormon theology, according to the Ostlings, wove scriptural pre-ordination into the foundation of the United States of America: “Mormonism, as the movement was quickly nicknamed, provided nationalistic Americans with a very American gospel” (p. xix). The Ostlings describe Mormons as “a model minority, hardworking people with more education than the American average, deeply committed to church and family” (pp. xx-xxiv). These virtues the Ostlings use to describe Mormons are also the virtues idealistically used to define the great American man. R. Lawrence Moore (1986), in his book, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, writes: “If inculcation in the work ethic was the hallmark of true Americanism in the nineteenth-century, then Mormons were the super Americans of that century” (p. 31). Not only are Mormons linked to America through their history and their theology, they are linked through the performance of their identity. Accordingly, Mormon men might be considered the ideal example of American men, but as a minority group, they are also considered the *other*.

Hansen (1981) qualifies contemporary descriptions of the Latter-day Saints as “super-American” with the realities of nineteenth century perceptions of Mormons: “Yet for all the apparent Americanism, Mormonism was consistently seen as un- and anti-American” (p. xiii). The Ostlings also acknowledge such negative stereotypes that they contend still permeate twenty-first century images of Mormons. The persistence of these stereotypes has prompted LDS leaders and rank-and-file members to become obsessed with their image, wanting desperately to avoid accusations that they are merely a “cult” and not a “real” religion. The Mormon Church has consciously worked at overcoming these stereotypes. They are beginning to see some positive results (Mauss, 1994, p. 22), but, as the Ostlings note, Mormons are still part of a minority, and the stereotypes of the last century still haunt their image.

In this essay I argue that the history of Mormonism developed a distinctly Mormon masculinity, a masculinity that emblemizes the ideal American masculinity but does so from the position of a marginalized other. The abjection of the Mormon people from American society in the middle of the nineteenth century is critical to understanding the development of Mormon masculinity and its later relationship to American normativity. The Mormon man’s abjection and subsequent conformity stage the process of becoming normative and help mark the attributes of a normative performance.

The first vision and the power of the patriarchy

According to the official history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in the spring of 1820 a young boy by the name of Joseph Smith, Jr. was overwhelmed by the competing evangelical Christian churches that had overrun his town in western New York (Roberts, vol. 1: 53). After several years, Smith, at age fifteen, decided to take James’ advice, “If you lack wisdom let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). Smith went to a grove near his home to ask God, in prayer, which of the competing churches was the “true” church of God (Smith, 1842/1983, 1:11).

The answer to his question came in the form of a celestial vision. Smith says in his history, as published in the *Pearl of Great Price*, a companion book to the Book of Mormon, that as soon as he knelt down he was overpowered by some mysterious, evil force. He gathered all of his strength and prayed, asking God to save him from “this enemy.” He then saw a pillar of light, brighter than the sun, which delivered him from the satanic spirit. In the light he “saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” Joseph asked the divine spirits which church to join, and he was immediately told to join none of them (Smith, 1842/1983, 1:15-20; Roberts, 1965, vol. 1: 51).

According to Joseph, the two men he saw in his vision were the Lord and his “only Begotten Son,” Jesus of Nazareth. He saw the Father and the Son as two separate beings, which runs directly contrary to the traditional Christian concept of the Godhead (Allen, 1992, p. 38). Ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicene, establishing the Doctrine of the Trinity, Christian theology has viewed God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost as three manifestations of the same being (Ferguson, 1990, pp. 648-65). Nineteenth-century American Christians were not entirely committed to the Christian concept of the Trinity, and therefore they would not likely have been shocked or offended by Joseph’s vision of God introducing Jesus (May, 1992, p. 103). Nonetheless, Joseph’s view of the Godhead would have profound and all-encompassing repercussions for him and his Latter-day Saints. Smith’s anti-Trinitarian vision has armed those who oppose the Church with all the ammunition they needed to claim Mormons are not Christians.

In spite of the controversy Smith’s first vision generated for modern Mormons, it represents the purity and tenacity of the Mormon Church’s foundation. A young, innocent boy enters a forest seeking divine truth and leaves with the knowledge that he is God’s chosen one. He resisted the power of evil and was thereby able to commune with God and Jesus at the same time; he moved from humanity to apotheosis in this single instance. His vision encapsulated everything that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have come to believe in, and likewise young Joseph has come to embody all of the principles to which Mormons aspire. Eric Eliason (2001) begins his introduction to his anthology, *Mormons and Mormonism: an Introduction to an American World Religion*, with the following statement:

These accounts have come to be remembered by Mormons as the foundational sacred episodes of their religious tradition. They also established the Mormon doctrinal ideas that most clearly set them apart from traditional Christianity—namely that humans, angels, and gods are of essentially the same species of physical beings but are in different stages of development. (Eliason, 2001, p. 2)

While it might sound outlandish to a non-believer that anyone might believe they could die and become a god, this belief is a logical extension of Joseph’s first vision and a logical extension of a non-Trinitarian view of God and Jesus. Because Joseph sees two separate beings, his vision suggests that a common man has the

ability to become a god. Smith also claims that one of the beings pointed to the other and said, "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him" (Smith, 1942/1943, 1: 17). When God introduces Joseph to his "Beloved Son," He confirms that the man standing next to Him is *other* than Him. They are two separate beings; two separate gods. In traditional Christian theology, the Father and the Son could not appear in the same time and space because those two beings are actually the same entity wearing two separate guises—that of God and that of Jesus. One of the reasons for this view of the Trinity might be that the founders of the Christian Church realized the implications of three members of the Godhead at three different stages in their deification. In other words, if Jesus is the *actual* Son of God, then God and Jesus must be understood as existing on a continuum of growth, something akin to what mortal beings experience through the process of birth, life, and death.

In a documentary produced by Brigham Young University (BYU), *Joseph, Exploring the Life and the Ministry of the Prophet* (Black, 2005), Larry C. Porter, Professor Emeritus in Church History at BYU, argues that Joseph's vision was also important because it was given to a common boy. He explains: "[Joseph Smith] learned that God answers prayer. That here you have revelation, personal revelation, given to a young man who has prepared himself and has gone through that process." If you prepare yourself, according to Porter, you too can receive divine revelation. Joseph Fielding Smith (1954), President of the LDS Church from 1970-72, encouraged all Mormon men to become prophets in their own right; the potential for which was established by a fifteen year-old boy's conversation with God and Jesus:

All Saints should be prophets. Every man who can say knowingly that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world and the Only Begotten Son of God, is a prophet. Every man that holds the priesthood, and magnifies his calling, is a prophet; and he has a right to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so far as he is concerned—but not to receive revelation for the Church. There is only one who is appointed to that office. (Vol. 1: 185)

The first vision of Joseph Smith lays the foundation for a Christian religion that does not belong to the *tradition* of Christianity. The vision establishes a direct link between God and men on earth and ushered in a wave of modern-day prophecies. Those prophecies have been compiled in the LDS scriptures: the Book of Mormon (1930/1983), the *Pearl of Great Price* (1851/1983), and the *Doctrine and Covenants [D & C]* (Smith, 1835/1983). The *Pearl of Great Price* includes Smith's translation of Matthew, the Articles of Faith—the LDS statement of beliefs, Joseph Smith's history as written by him, and translations of ancient texts Smith claimed to be the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. The *D & C* contains a compilation of revelations given to Church leaders from 1831-1918. The *D & C* also includes a revelation regarding a manifesto abolishing polygamy, given by President Wilford Woodruff in 1890 and a revelation granting black men the power of priesthood, given by President Spencer W. Kimball in 1978.

The power of revelation did not rest solely in the hands of Joseph Smith. Revelation is still integral to the workings of Mormonism. All male Saints have the power to receive revelation, so long as their revelations do not contradict Joseph's.

In 1831, in the *D & C*, Joseph Smith reveals a commandment from God that only he, as the President of the Church, was entitled to receive revelations *for* the Church (1835/1983, 43: 3-6). In other words, as long as a man does not try to challenge the divine authority of the Church President, any Latter-day Saint male can commune with God and Jesus Christ and share the truths he learns with the world.

Faithful Mormon men, through the power of what the Church calls the restored priesthood, have divine power and authority (*Gospel Principles*, 1997, p. 81). The Mormon man has authority over his wife and children. He has the power to baptize, perform sacrament rituals, and heal the sick. Men in the Church supervise women, and, while she can hold positions of authority over other women within the Church structure, her decisions and activities must always be approved and monitored by a priesthood holder, any active Mormon male (*Latter-day Saint Woman*, 2000, vol.1: 93-96). Just as the Mormon woman has limitations to her authority, so too does the Mormon man. In *Gospel Principles* (1997), an instruction manual provided by LDS leadership for the edification of their members, men in the Church are cautioned about abusing their priesthood authority by unfairly dominating those in their charge: "Priesthood holders should preside in love and kindness. They should not force their families and others to obey them. The Lord has told us that the power of the priesthood cannot be controlled except in righteousness" (p. 83).

The Church's official advice to women on matters of conflict in the home, as stated in their instructional manual, *The Latter-day Woman* (2000), leaves no room for them to question abuses of the patriarchy:

After a husband and a wife have counseled together, under the inspiration of the Spirit, the husband has responsibility to make certain that the power of the priesthood call forth wisdom and understanding from heaven to bless that home. The wife and children then support those decisions with full purpose of heart. In this way the husband's position as head of the home is reinforced and greater family unity will result. (Vol. 1: 94)

The limitations to patriarchal authority are minimal in comparison to those of women in the Church, especially considering that priesthood authority does not merely reference the superiority of a husband over his wife on earth.¹ A Mormon man's power is far more pervasive than temporal dominance. His dominance and the gender norms that regulate his relationship with his wife extend into the afterlife (Basquiat, 2001, p. 24). Priesthood authority, the enactment of, and obedience to, is practice for life after death when priesthood holders, if they are worthy, will become gods and their earthly wives, if they are worthy, will become goddesses and serve as their husbands' helpmates for all eternity (Smith, 1835/1983, 132: 21-25).

The true American Adam

To the LDS Church, love for the United States of America is more than just patriotism, it is devotion to God. According to Mormon teachings and scriptures, America was founded for the purpose of the restoration of the true Gospel of Christ through God's servant, Joseph Smith. A revelation given to Joseph Smith in 1833 reads, in part: "And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land,

by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood” (Smith, 1835/1983, 101: 80). The Book of Mormon tells us that the American continent was a gift from God to his chosen people; “a land of promise” that was to be “kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations” (2 Nephi 1:5-8). God did not just give his chosen people a land upon which to build His kingdom, He gave them the greatest land on earth, “a choice land [...] above all other lands” (2 Nephi 10:19). This land came equipped with a pre-ordained institution that, whether its designers knew it or not, was designed for the coming of the Latter-day Saints.

In 1952, the LDS Church published the third edition of W. Cleon Skousen’s compilation of Mormon prophecies, *Prophecy and Modern Times*. Skousen devotes one third of his book to prophecies pertaining to America, a testament to the important role the Americas have and will play in God’s divine plan (pp. 15-16). One such reference can be found in 2 Nephi, 10: 10-11: “But behold, this land, said God, shall be a land of thine inheritance, and the Gentiles shall be blessed upon the land. And this land shall be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles, and there shall be no kings upon the land, who shall raise up unto the Gentiles.”

The glory of America, according to the Book of Mormon, exists for the Latter-day Saints. The gentiles who fought to free the land from foreign kings, Joseph’s grandfathers included, were doing the work of God in preparation for a young boy who would need free-thinking and independent people, confident in their rights to chose God’s law over man’s law. God chose Joseph to embody the characteristics of the nineteenth-century vision of the American Adam.

R. W. B. Lewis (1959), in his book, *The American Adam*, describes the nineteenth-century conception of the American Adam as “a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history” (p. 1). He seems to be, in fact, the incarnation of Manifest Destiny. The period of American literary history that spawned this myth is the same period of time in which Smith created his new religion. After the revolution, Americans saw their “new world” as raw material with which to construct their own destinies. Lewis writes:

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and *inherent* resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the fall. (p. 5) [Italics mine]

The American Adam has no source other than his own natural existence. He creates, defines, and regulates. America was a gift from God, and he, the American Adam—the collective American male consciousness—was the noble creator of this new world. Lewis explains: “This new Adam is both maker and namer; his innocent pleasure, untouched by humility, is colored by the pride of one who looks on his

work and finds it good. The things that are named seem to spring into being at the sound of the word” (1959, 51).

This is also the picture of Joseph Smith that the LDS Church circulates. He was a young, innocent boy—consistently portrayed in LDS films as a strong, handsome, blond Aryan of solid Anglo-Saxon ancestry—seeking truth when God told him that his future was that of a prophet and leader of His people. Joseph was a young poor boy, typically and commonly American, with the strength to fight off evil forces that opposed him. He was predestined to restore the true Gospel to earth, and though he would suffer at the hands of his enemies, his rewards in heaven would be great. Joseph, like all those who followed him, would some day be a god himself. Joseph was the ideal nineteenth-century American Adam, both in the metaphorical sense that Lewis describes, and in the literal sense.

Not only was Joseph the preordained prophet of God’s promised land, poised to usher in a new millennium, he was also returning God’s people to the place where all of humanity originated. One of the most unusual and quintessentially Mormon prophecies that Skousen includes in his book pertains to the Garden of Eden. In the *D & C*, section 116 and section 117: 8, Joseph reveals that the Garden of Eden was once located near Far West, Missouri, the location where the Saints had set up their Zion before being attacked by mobs and militias (Smith, 1835/1983). Klaus J. Hansen explains the significance of the Garden of Eden revelations:

The American search for the new Adam, in the understanding of Smith, was but a quest for a return of the Old Adam, another corollary of the restorationist theme. The historical reconstruction of Joseph Smith thus made it possible to conjure from the bones of an American Adam and his pre-Colombian descendants an image of America that could motivate those who believed in this past to recreate the Garden of Eden in its literal, original setting. (Hansen, 1981, 67)

According to the teachings found in the Book of Mormon, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and Smith’s own revelations from the *D & C*, the myth of the American Adam that so many nineteenth-century Americans fantasized about was real. Adam—the Biblical Adam—was born on what is now known as the North American continent. He was the first inhabitant of the land and therefore supersedes American Indian claims as the original Americans. God gave Adam the power of priesthood authority just miles away from the Latter-day Saints’ Zion, in Missouri. God granted Adam the priesthood, but, according to the Book of Moses and the *D & C*, God took the priesthood away again when the Israelites failed to keep God’s commandments (Pearl, 1851/1983, 6: 51-68; Smith, 1835/1983, 84: 18-28). God had foreordained that the priesthood would not be returned in full until Joseph Smith was born in the nineteenth century AD (Smith, 1835/1983, 1: 17). Joseph, with his power to commune freely with God and know God’s will, with his authority to create the world around him, and with the determination to follow his destiny, assumed Adam’s role in God’s plan. He became the true American Adam. Everything that happened before Joseph was born was in preparation for his coming. Joseph’s history was Adam’s future. Like the nineteenth-century myth of the American Adam and the Biblical Adam from

which that came, Joseph Smith had no history, only a future; a future that he would control by the will of God.

This future, as told in *The Book of Mormon*, is the story of America's destiny in preparation for Joseph. The story begins with a faithful Israelite, named Lehi, and his family, migrating to America around 600 BC. Lehi predicts the imminent fall of Israel to Babylon, but other Israelites refuse to listen and threaten to kill him. God tells Lehi and his family to leave Jerusalem and go to the desert. Lehi's family and another family, who joined them for the purpose of procreation, build a ship at God's command and sail across the ocean. They land somewhere in what is believed to be Central America. The two families quickly grow into a large community led by Lehi's third eldest son, Nephi. Nephi's two older brothers, Laman and Lemuel, constantly rebel against, Lehi, Nephi, and God's will. Sometime after Lehi's death, Laman and Lemuel threaten a coup, so Nephi and his righteous followers, who call themselves Nephites, leave to establish a separate kingdom far away. Anyone who chose to stay with Laman and Lemuel, instead of following Nephi, was cursed by God with dark skin. The Lamanites, as the cursed people were known, are the ancestors of today's American Indians.

The Nephites and Lamanites fight each other for the rest of the book. Occasionally, the Lamanites find God and the Nephites find sin. In the end, both the Nephites and the Lamanites are sinners, and God allows the evil, dark Lamanites to wipe His chosen white-skinned people off of the face of the earth. Throughout all of this, the Nephites kept a history of their people carved on golden plates. The last historian of the Nephites was a righteous man named Mormon. His righteous son, Moroni, takes the plates when his father dies and records the final days of the Nephites. He then carries the plates to western New York and buries them in a hill. Over one thousand years later, Moroni appears to Joseph Smith and tells him to translate the plates.

This very truncated version of the Book of Mormon story provides a framework with which to understand the primary function of the story and its repercussions for LDS theology. In 1982, LDS authorities added the subtitle, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" to the title of the Book of Mormon, thereby repositioning the Book of Mormon's function squarely within the tradition of Christianity (Brewster, 1990, p. 9; Davies, 2003, p. 64). This change was justified by the claim in the Book of Mormon that, after being raised from the dead, Jesus traveled the world teaching his gospel and telling the story of his life, his death, and his gift of eternal salvation. Early in the Book of Mormon, the Nephites are told of Jesus' coming almost six hundred years before His birth. They learn who Jesus is and what his life will mean for them (1 Nephi, 1: 9-11). The Nephites start living Jesus' teachings long before he is ever born. It is not until Christ's death and resurrection, however, that the Nephites enjoy the gifts of Christian salvation. Four hundred years later, the Lamanites destroy the Nephites and wipe Christian practices and salvation from the face of the earth.

The Book of Mormon also explains the complicated relationship of Mormon theology and culture to race. The racist assumptions that underscore most of the action in the Book of Mormon still permeate LDS teachings today, and, I argue, are an unavoidable aspect of Mormon theology because of the dependence of the Book of Mormon story on a racial binary. The story follows two loosely interwoven

structures: first, the preparation for the coming of Jesus and the destruction of his gospel by evil; second, the migration of Israelites to the Americas and their subsequent division into forces of good and evil. When the Israelites arrive in America, they quickly break off into two opposing communities, establishing a binary between Nephites and Lamanites, Christians and non-Christians, the good and the evil. God marks the evil Lamanites with dark skin, and the good Nephites are given white skin.

The contrast between the good and evil in the Book of Mormon depends on race. In *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, Newell G. Bringhurst (1981) explains that nineteenth-century Americans, fearing an impending millennium, expected a struggle between forces of good and evil. "Joseph Smith," Bringhurst writes, "painted this millennialistic struggle in contrasting racial images of black and white" (p. 7). As with Foucault's explanation of relations of power in *Discipline and Punish*, one group assumes the role of dominance and the other the role of submission, but the roles are not static and require constant regulation. The fear of lost power and abjection motivates regulation. For Mormons, the fear of evil, as marked by dark skin, serves as the regulatory motivator, the ever-present threat of abjection being written upon the body. Whiteness defines Mormon identity as much as their calling as God's chosen people because the two are completely intertwined. The Mormon's whiteness entitles them to their chosen status, and their chosen status entitles them to their whiteness.

Mormons have made considerable efforts in the last forty years to change public perception of them as racist. Their theological and historical relationship with race has made this perception difficult to change, and, in some regards, something they cannot change. The Mormon claim that they are the divinely chosen inheritors of the Promised Land and the "American dream" depends on their superiority as white people. Their whiteness, as presented in the Book of Mormon, is a gift from God. It distinguishes them, as the righteous, from the sinners. To suggest such an inherent racism in Mormon theology would shock and anger most Mormons (Smith, 2005, p. 450). Since 1978, when the Church finally granted black men the right to priesthood authority, Mormons have carefully worked to rid themselves of racism, not just for the sake of their image, but because they understand racism as wrong and immoral.

The Mormon belief that they are God's chosen people is so intertwined with the racism of the Book of Mormon that to give up one they have to give up the other. LDS theology validates Joseph's position as the American Adam by arguing that Joseph was handpicked by God to return humankind to the blissful state of the Garden of Eden. He was a good, God-fearing Anglo-Saxon boy of solid Colonial stock not marked by the curse of dark skin, who sought with compassion to bring all of God's children, dark-skinned or not, back to righteousness. With that righteousness, the evil doer's skin would be lightened, and the doors of Eden and heaven would be opened unto him or her. Joseph had to have white skin to do God's work and fulfill the destiny of Adam because the pre-cursed state of Adam's lineage was white (*Pearl of Great Price*, 1851/1983, Moses, 5: 40). With the privilege granted Joseph by his white skin, he had all of the attributes of the first man, Adam. God gave Joseph the priesthood and the knowledge of heaven and earth. Joseph, according to the Book of Mormon, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Doctrine and Covenants*, was

living out Adam's destiny by re-establishing God's covenant on earth and handing it down to a lineage of faithful Latter-day Saints. Joseph's birthplace—America—was also his birthright—the kingdom of Adam, the Promised Land of the Saints.

A trail of abjection

The Latter-day Saints were forced out of one state after another by persecution and mob violence. New York chased them away for Smith's use of the occult; Ohio ran them off for Smith's polygamous practices, opposing slavery, communicating with Indians, and building too much wealth (Quinn, 1994, p. 90); Missouri—still the site of the Mormon's Zion—and Illinois forced them further west for very much the same reasons, except that in these last two cases, the Mormons fought back and the violence escalated (Berrett, 1985, pp. 110-14, 196-199; Quinn, 1994, pp. 91, 95, 100). In each new location, the Mormons violated the sexual and social norms of the various communities, and the communities responded with brutal punishment and eventual abjection. By retreating to Utah, the Saints embraced their abjection and created a world that was not regulated by American cultural values. Their time in isolation must have been a relief to the long-persecuted Mormons because it ended, at least temporarily, their existence as the American abject. One cannot be abject if there is no dominating normative against which to be defined.

Mormons stuck together on all matters, and through their missionary work they brought new converts into the fold all the time. The citizens of the towns Mormons lived in before they moved to Utah feared becoming minorities in their own communities, and worse, minorities to strange theocratic people who called the Indians "chosen people," opposed slavery, and accumulated land and wealth at disconcerting rates (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 38-9). Mormons were seen as a terrifying and diabolical *other* that needed to be expelled from their midst.

The persecution escalated everywhere the Mormons settled. They traveled further and further west with each new banishment, with the exception of slightly eastward retrenchment to Nauvoo, Illinois. It was during the Nauvoo period, the summer of 1844, that Joseph Smith was murdered by a mob of vigilantes (Roberts, vol. 2: 274-85). Brigham Young became the next president of the Church and led his people west, hoping to establish a temporary kingdom outside of the United States borders where they could worship in peace (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, p. 44). Under Young's direction the Mormon's settled in the Salt Lake Valley in the high deserts of the Rocky Mountains. When they arrived, the land was vacant, save the original inhabitants: the Ute Indians.

In the peace and privacy of their new home, Salt Lake City, Young decided that Mormons could now practice their faith with greater commitment and less secrecy. Young became the official theocratic ruler of the Mormons. This was the design established by Smith, though he was not able to fully practice theocracy due to the Mormons' subjugation to civil law in the settled territories of the east (Quinn, 1994, pp. 86, 248; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 48-49). The practice of plural marriage increased under Young's leadership (Ivans, 1992, p. 170-1). He reinstated the law of communal living which he called the United Order. This was also one of Smith's policies, but he was unable to make it work in the east because of outside interference by gentiles. Young was now able to enforce the United Order with some

success, that is, until gentiles began to arrive in Salt Lake City in mass (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 36-37, 46-49).

The federal government, having decided to annex the Utah territory as a state, began to systematically weaken the power of LDS leaders in the Utah territory. The Mormon leadership responded by abandoning their dream of a theocratic state named Deseret, and worked to attain statehood on their own terms, but their petition was denied by Congress on the grounds of their polygamous practices (Hardy, 1992, pp. 12-13, 128-9; Roberts, vol. 3: 499-501, vol. 5: 7). When Brigham Young died in 1877, the United States government had imposed their own governor on the territory, Utah already had a large influx of “gentiles,” the United Order had failed, and polygamy was eroding the financial and political stronghold the LDS leadership had over Utah (Roberts, vol. 5: 489, 509). By 1887 the federal government had outlawed polygamy and disenfranchised the Church, confiscating all the Church’s properties and wealth (Ostling, 2000, p. 76). Both polygamy and communalism were ended by the new president, John Taylor (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, p. 48).

Taylor assumed the presidency at a time when Latter-day Saints were again losing the freedom to define themselves—the colonizers of Utah were now the colonized. The Mormons in the early years of Utah Territory had been prosperous. They made their own laws and lived their lives according to their own belief systems. When Manifest Destiny caught up with Utah, the persecution returned, but now it took place on Mormon land—land, that is, that they took from the Ute Indians, land they had developed for their own purposes (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 49-50). The Mormons were now the abject of their own society. John Taylor, in succeeding Young, was given the choice of either ending LDS practices considered deviant by mainstream America or finding a way to continue their practices without risking the wrath of abjection. Taylor and the Church leaders who followed him made a strategic choice to Americanize on their own terms (Mauss, 1994, p. 22).

The great capitulation: Mormon assimilation

According to Armand L. Mauss’ (1994) study of Mormon assimilation, *The Angel and the Beehive: the Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*, the terms of Utah’s statehood required Mormon assimilation. In his book, *Mormonism in Transition* (1986), Thomas Alexander notes that by the end of the nineteenth-century Church leaders became increasingly concerned with perceptions of Mormons by non-Mormons (p. 239). Church leaders took an aggressive position on assimilation and encouraged their members to obey American laws and participate in American culture. Anything that marked them as visibly other disappeared soon after the start of the twentieth century (Mauss, pp. 21-2, 78).

This does not mean that the Mormons completely lost their identities in the short time between the annexation of Utah, 1896, and the period of active assimilation in the early twentieth century. On the contrary, in order for the Latter-day Saints to remain the Latter-day Saints, they would have to maintain and re-emphasize some vestiges of their pre-assimilation identity, such as the health code known as the Word of Wisdom, temple ordinance work for the dead (including genealogical work), and the eternality of the family unit (Alexander, 1986, p. 307). As Mauss explains, for any “deviant” religious group to survive, they must maintain a

tension between members who support assimilation—broader social acceptance—and members who support separatism—the protection of their religious respectability (1994, p. 5).

Mormons, in other words, have maintained their uniqueness and independence by retaining aspects of their identities that led to their abjection while simultaneously finding normative acceptance—though not normativity itself—by ridding themselves of the most strikingly obvious forms of their otherness (Alexander, 1986, p. 14; Moore, 1986, p. 43; Leone, 1979, 167-8). Mormons curtailed practices that drew the most attention and brought on the most persecution by either altering the role of those practices in the Church or letting them lie dormant through the period of assimilation. This ended, according to Mauss, sometime after the 1960s when Mormons began to reassert their distinct characteristics (1994, pp. 66, 85). Through their active participation in the assimilation process, the LDS leadership developed an effective technique for holding onto their “unique identity” without suffering the wrath of social abjection. Mormons have learned to perform normativity without losing their abject identity.

Mauss explains that Latter-day Saints had developed such a distinctively Mormon way of life in Utah that dominant culture perceived them as an “un-American, anti-American, insurgent counterculture” (1994, p. 22). As a necessary part of their assimilation, both explicitly and implicitly, Mormons had shed this image. While the Church did abandon these “un-American” institutions in practice, they retained them at the level of doctrine (Mauss, 1994, p. 24). The United Order ended with the influx of gentiles into the Salt Lake Valley, but the Church operates a vast social welfare program and teaches that Zion will be communal (Moore, 1986, p. 42). Mormons banned the practice of polygamy with excommunication as the punishment for any man taking multiple wives (Ostling, 2000, pp. 67, 87), but the promise of polygamy still exists as a reward in the afterlife and still remains a defining aspect of Mormon theology (Hansen, 1981, p. 177).

On the one hand, the Church ordered the practices be stopped and, on the other hand, told members to hold them sacred. Understandably, this caused some confusion in the Church and slowed the process of eradicating polygamy (Alexander, 1986, pp. 4, 6-7). Many members were unwilling to give up this practice as it was fundamental to their understanding of the afterlife (Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, p. 50). As new, more Americanized members took leadership positions the Church took a more aggressive stance on polygamy (Cannon, 1992, p. 207). The Church was eventually able to eliminate most polygamous practices by investigating and excommunicating Saints still engaged in the practice (Hardy, 1992, pp. 290-2; Cannon, 1992, p. 213; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, p. 227).

Through such hard-line stances, the Church was gradually making its position on the matter clear: polygamy was to stop and, more importantly, civil laws were to be obeyed. The Latter-day Saints were well on their way to ridding themselves of their anti-American image. Though it took Church leaders some time to prove they were serious about assimilation, Mormons soon became fervently patriotic, law-abiding citizens, and their prospects for assimilation were looking brighter. Latter-day Saint participation in the efforts of World War I marked a new beginning for Mormons as Americans (Ostling, 2000, p. 91).

Staging the American masculine ideal

Through the process of assimilation Latter-day Saints assumed an increasingly conservative image that aligned them with the power brokers of American politics and economics, arenas that have historically blocked people of color. They adopted a corporate style of governance and secularized some of their finances (Alexander, 1986, pp. 94-8, 105-110). Church leaders more and more came from successful careers in law and business. Church authorities increasingly aligned themselves with the Republican Party. They also placed greater emphasis on issues of morality—ironically, emphasizing “sexual morality” despite their own past in practicing sexual and marital liberties beyond the Christian-American “norm” (Alexander, 1986, p. 9; Mauss, 1994, pp. 24, 29; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, p. 65; Ostling, 2000, p. 119; Hansen, 1981, p. 176). Their political stances have become increasingly conservative throughout the twentieth century. The Mormon Church aggressively opposed the New Deal during the Great Depression; they were strategic in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. In the 1970s as well, they began a practice of using electric shock therapy as a cure for homosexuality (Alexander, 1986, 37; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 69, 224). In spite of their status as the abject, Mormons have become the epitome of the silent, moral majority.

Everything about the LDS Church now takes on a corporate appearance. Even their Sunday services have a stronger resemblance to a business conference than a worship service. White men—and on occasion men of color—sit in rows of theater-style seats that line the raised stage in front of the congregation. They wear dark-colored business suits and short, conservative haircuts. The presiding Bishop only speaks to give announcements, introduce speakers, and attend to matters of Church business. He is, in other words, more like a business manager than a spiritual leader. Each week different members of the congregation, both men and women, young and old, give “talks.”² These sacrament speeches replace the sermons typically given by the minister in other churches. The talks typically sound the same following a similar pattern of speech: slow and soft with little affectation. Other members sit quietly on wooden pews that fill the large chapel. They participate in the service by singing hymns, raising their hands to confirm a decision of the Church leadership, and taking the sacrament (Leone, 1979, p. 173).

The common style of dress, speech, and building-design give Mormon houses of worship a very homogenous look and feel. Before, after, and during the Sunday service—or at any other time when Mormons congregate for that matter—the mannerisms of, and interactions between, Church members also look and feel uniform. The bishop and the members of his bishopric stand at the two entrances to the chapel and greet members as they enter the chapel. They smile and shake the hands of the adults and older children and pat the younger children on the head or back or simply let them slide past. Mormon men display confidence. They stand up straight, look each other in the eyes, shake hands with authority, hug other men without embarrassment, and emote publicly when “bearing testimony.” Anthropologist David C. Knowlton (1992) argues that Mormonism advocates, “at least officially, a limited kind of male bonding between companions, and within quorums and presidencies. Here, such male bonding is positively sanctioned to build, and express with emotion, love for one another at appropriate times.” This

controlled homosocialism gives the appearance of a strong bond that is not too intimate.

In their Sunday business suits, with their business-style haircuts and their business-style meetings, Mormon men have embodied the image of the great American capitalist. He is calm, confident, and in control. He no longer matches the stereotypes of yesterday. Mormon men today are more commonly thought of as very average white men who have some very bizarre practices. Mormon folklorists, Austin and Alta Fife (1956/1966), in their important study of Mormon culture, *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, write:

We have outlived the legend that the Mormon may be identified on sight as he goes about, complete with horns and hooves, leering indiscriminately at females. So completely has the Mormon been integrated into American culture that we have reached the point where it takes some discernment to identify him. (Fife, 1956/1966, 1)

The Fifes go on to explain that his outward appearances might let him pass as “one of us,” but his identity and cultural practices “differentiate him somewhat more than did the caricatures of the closing years of the nineteenth-century” (1956/1966, 1). With polygamy and communalism safely in the realm of theology, the aspects of Mormonism that mark them as other and, at times, relegate them to the realm of the abject, are their everyday practices. Mormons still wear sacred garments and participate in secret rituals borrowed from Smith’s early days as a Freemason (Quinn, 1994, pp. 114-5). Mormons live by a strict dietary code called the Word of Wisdom that prohibits the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and—though this tenet is rarely if ever observed—meat except in times of famine (Smith, 1835/1983, section 89). Mormons rarely swear, avoid movies with adult ratings, do not engage in pre-marital sex, dress modestly, and follow a tradition of male dominance. Mormons appear to be the romanticized Americans from the “good-old-days” in the nineteenth century.

Mormon identity today hinges almost entirely on images of men: homogenous images of conservative, white men. This image of the Mormon man enables him to “pass” in normative culture in spite of his outsider status. It is an image to which Mormon men almost monolithically conform. Mormons, however, have always had the makings of normativity. According to Bruce R. Lott (2000), early Mormon male rhetoric and action demonstrated a marked preference for “a ‘rough’ over a refined ideal of manly performance” (p. 19). Lott explains: “The single characteristic that early nineteenth-century American men believed above all distinguished them from every ‘other’ in contrast to whom they defined their manhood was their ‘manly independence’” (p. 20). Mormon men found their manly independence earlier than average American men because Mormon men married at earlier ages and were indoctrinated into work culture in adolescence (pp. 23, 61). As a result, the groundwork for assimilation, via the normalization of Mormon masculinity, was laid almost a century before the Mormon leadership encouraged members to enter into the normative fray.

Conclusion: Adam, the abject in his own kingdom

Ancient LDS history has had a profound impact on the ways that Mormons define themselves in the modern world. They are the chosen people, chosen at the dawn of time, chosen to carry out the divine mission of the first man, Adam. God chose Joseph Smith to return the power of priesthood authority to the earth and build a following of Saints who, through this power, would usher in the new millennium and return God's children to him in righteousness. Their reward for this great work is eternal life and the glory of their own personal godhood.

This reward, according to all the teachings of the LDS scriptures, will be granted to faithful white men. Women cannot have the priesthood and therefore cannot be fully empowered Gods in the afterlife, except as a Mother in Heaven who supports the Father in Heaven, the ruler of their Heavenly Kingdom. Their role in this life is to support the priesthood, and their reward in the afterlife will be the continued support of their priesthood husband, now a god. Men of color also cannot be Gods, for, according to LDS doctrine, the goal of salvation is to return to the pure state of Adam. This pure state has been defined clearly by LDS doctrine as white. A man of color, according to 3 Nephi, 2: 15, will become a white man once his salvation is granted.

It could be argued from this that the only change to the man of color entering heaven is the color of his skin. He is still the same man; only his "countenance," as it is often referred to in LDS scripture, has changed. This argument would make sense if contemporary issues of race and the application of a racial binary in the Book of Mormon were simply a question of skin color. The racism that permeates LDS scriptures and culture is, at its most fundamental level, an issue of "us" versus "them," good versus evil. The nineteenth century that gave birth to Joseph Smith and his Saints and the twentieth century that assimilated them into American culture understand people of color as the counterpoint to white people. The rhetoric and practice of such racism in the Mormon faith insist on a white vision of salvation. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the LDS Church ushers in the new image of the American Adam. He is the white, heterosexual, corporate American man: controlled, subtle, and utterly conservative. He defines his world and the past only serves to preordain his future. He is chosen by God, and he is responsible for the salvation of the women and children in his care and for the conversion and assimilation of the heathen other. He is the Mormon man, granted the divine authority of patriarchal power—essentially, a god in embryo.

As the Mormon man navigates the world of the gentiles, he must confront their lack of faith, their misunderstanding of their place in his world. The Mormon man, the American Adam, is a minority in his own Promised Land. His patriarchal authority is not recognized outside of his community. He must bow to the laws of the land, the laws that were written to enable his God-given right to rule America through divine inspiration. If he fails to follow those laws, he will be abjected from his own promised land. The Mormon man knows that through his trust in God and his adherence to God's law, he lives everyday with the ever-present threat of abjection.

The Mormon man, in spite of this threat, continues to believe and espouse his beliefs, even if in a watered-down version. His abject status in his own land has not deterred him from assuming normativity and dominance at the site of

performance. Dominant culture views the Mormon man as an outsider, a marginalized other on the verge of complete social deviance—abjection; yet, the Mormon man carries himself with the air of an insider. His marginalized status does not stop him from assuming pivotal roles in American society (Ostling, 2000, pp. 136-7; Gottlieb & Wiley, 1984, pp. 87-90).

Mormon men have become the most normative acting marginalized group in the country. Their success depends on their white, corporate appearance and on their undeterred faith that they are the American Adam. They have achieved, in their marginalization, the successful performance of normativity.

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Notes

¹ The power of the Mormon patriarch seems at times to go unchecked. In *Case Reports of the Mormon Alliance* (1996), Lavina Fielding Anderson and Janice Merrill Allred demonstrate a systemic problem of abuse within the LDS Church by male members hiding under the auspices of priesthood authority. Anderson, in her essay, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership," outlines the over-reaching authority of LDS leaders through their aggressive backlash against Mormon intellectuals in recent decades.

² In her book, *Mormon Lives: A Year in the Elkton Ward* (1993), Susan Buhler Taber provides an excellent description of the structure and style of a Mormon Church service.

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