



Editorial: African Americans and Mormonism as a Case for the Consideration of Race, Class, Sexuality, and Gender in the Study of Religion

Stephen C. Finley

I recently returned from a research trip to Utah in which I spent considerable time in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections archives at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. The Charles Redd Center for Western Studies of Brigham Young University extended the invitation to me to study in-residence through a fellowship competition that is specifically intended to bring scholars to campus for work in their archives. I was particularly interested in their LDS Afro-American Oral History Project, which was a series of interviews that the Redd Center compiled with African American Latter-day Saints in the mid- to late-1980s. Alan Cherry, an African American Latter-day Saint, was instrumental given that he conducted all of the nearly 200 interviews with black Mormons throughout the United States.

My particular motivation was research for a book project tentatively entitled *Sojourners in a Strange Land: The Religious and Social Lives of African American Latter-day Saints*, and as always I am interested in gender and its intersections with class, sexuality, religion, and “race.” After study hours and on Sundays when the library was closed, I had the opportunity to travel the short distance to Salt Lake City for ethnographic interactions with African American members of the LDS community, including attending religious services, the Genesis annual picnic, the Genesis monthly meeting, and the play *I Am Jane*. The Genesis Group was formed by African American Latter-day Saints as a means of support, fellowship, and engagement with the LDS Church regarding African Americans and race relations. I should note that the Genesis Group was founded on July 8, 1971,¹ seven years to the day that Mormon President Spencer Kimball announced the “revelation” that “all worthy males” (Bringhurst & Smith, 2004, p. 1) were eligible to hold the Mormon Priesthood, which heretofore had been closed to black men. It has never been available to women. Therefore, the Genesis Group views its presence within the LDS Church as prophetic, as the harbinger of positive things to come in the future of the religious organization, especially regarding race. Consistent with the historic patriarchy of the Church whose ecclesiastical hierarchy is dominated by [white] men, however, the Genesis Group follows the same leadership structure and has very specifically defined positions for women that are delineated by the Church (Ostling & Ostling, 1999, pp. 147-58). So it is not surprising that the Genesis Group was founded by three black men: Ruffin Bridgeforth, Darius Gray, and Eugene Orr.

What this particular case-study demonstrates (or reminds us of) is the importance of paying close attention to significant indicators such as sexuality, class, race, dis[ability], and so on when engaging and theorizing about masculinity and gender in general. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) was careful to point this out in her

groundbreaking *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* in which she advances the notion of a “matrix of domination” (pp. 18; 299) in which intersecting oppressions or the intersectionality of these indicators interact with gender at various times and in particular contexts that require scholars to give rigorous attention to factors acting in collusion with gender at given moments. Hence, for our purposes, masculinity may interact with class to produce a particular dynamic in one case and with race, sexuality, and class in other instances. Again, this reminds those of us who are interested in religion and masculinity of the enormous complexity within our fields of inquiry.

My travels also reminded me of my own male privilege and the necessity for reflexivity when conducting studies that are ethnographic, “textual,” or both. What made me most conscious of my own social location was observing gender dynamics among black Mormons. What was most intriguing was the manner in which African American women asserted their agency and leadership within the Genesis Group and indeed in other ecclesiastical settings. Of course, this leadership was often in unofficial capacities rather than official ones, but it was clear that while these women have to negotiate Church-influenced domestic responsibilities and carefully crafted and doctrinally supported Church roles, they were nonetheless leaders in their community. I witnessed this in the Genesis Group activities that I attended (though men were ostensibly in authority) and in one of the religious services in which I was present. But perhaps the greatest example of this was in the arts.

I had strategically planned my visit to Utah so that I could give the appropriate attention to the primary material that I was there to study at BYU but also because in addition to the Genesis activities, the play *I Am Jane* was premiering during my excursion. The play was about Jane Elizabeth Manning James, an early Mormon pioneer who was black. As the leader of her family, Ms. James traveled with them—mostly by foot—from Connecticut to Nauvoo, Illinois in 1843 to join the Mormon founder and prophet, Joseph Smith. Astounded by her commitment to travel hundreds of miles, Smith and his wife Emma embraced James as “family” (albeit some of her relationship with them was domestic) (Coleman, 2003). The play, about Jane’s religious and social life, was a great example of the intersection of gender, race, class, religion, and sexuality, and how they often act in tandem, but it also depicted the patriarchy of both the Mormon Church and American culture in a way that caused me to reflect on my own social location as a man and as a scholar.

Tamu Smith played the lead role of Jane, and this was most *a propos*, for Ms. Smith is a vocal leader for justice in the LDS Church. What was clear to me was that as she and other women such as Patricia Stringer, Adris Brunbidge, Ellie Mae Isaac, and Marguerite Cephias Driessen struggle against racism in the Church, they also (though often unspoken) seek to disrupt the reproduction of co-constitutive constrictions such as gender in which all men participate in maintaining to one extent or another and benefit from its privilege. The articles that are published in JMMS challenge us to (re)think about gender and masculinity in complex ways, and—like my recent ethnographic endeavors and *I Am Jane*—to embrace reflexive considerations about the ways in which masculinity and male privilege impact the work that we do. Black Latter-day Saints are as fascinating as they are unique, and I embrace the challenge that my exploration of their religious and social lives offer to

be self-critical about my social position and the importance of class, race, and sexuality when studying and theorizing gender and religion.

References

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Notes

¹ <http://www.ldsgenesigroup.org/history.htm>. Accessed July 5, 2010.

Stephen C. Finley
Louisiana State University/USA
e: scfinley@lsu.edu