

First Submitted: 31 July 2020 Accepted: 1 November 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/ijor.v1i1.1104>

Tar & Feathers: Agnotology, Dissent, and Queer Mormon History

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Abstract

In 2014 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) updated their official website to include information about the polygamy/polyandry practiced by Joseph Smith, their founder and prophet, and his many wives. The admission by the LDS Church reconciles the tension between information that had become readily available online since the 1990s and church-sanctioned narratives that obscured Smith's polygamy while concurrently focusing on the polygyny of Brigham Young, Smith's successor. This paper entwines queer theory with Robert Proctor's concept of agnotology—a term used to describe the epistemology of ignorance, to consider dissent from two interrelated perspectives: 1) how dissent from feminists and historians within the LDS Church challenged (mis)constructions of Mormon history, and; 2) how the Mormon practice of polygamy in the late nineteenth century dissented from Western sexual mores that conflated monogamy with Whiteness, democracy and social progression in the newly formed American Republic.

Keywords: *Mormon polygamy; Agnotology; Polyandry; Queer theology; ignorance; Joseph Smith; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint.*

Introduction

In 1945, acclaimed historian Fawn Brodie published a secular biography on the enigmatic founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), Joseph Smith.² To secular historians and book critics, *No Man Knows My History* (1945) is considered one of the best scholarly books on early Mormonism of all times (Bringhurst, 1997, 1989; Reston, 2012). However, to devout Mormons, Brodie's non-hagiographic historical biography of Smith is a malicious atrocity that good Mormons do best to avoid (Hill, 1972: 73). Brodie, a member of the LDS Church, drew the ire of church leaders for producing an account of Smith's life that rejected the *priori* assumption that Smith was a modern-day prophet of God. Her psychohistory of Smith was a strong statement of *dissent* that challenged the carefully cultivated historic renderings of Smith's life as disseminated by the LDS Church. One of the many extraordinary claims Brodie made, was that Smith had been married to more than forty women—a claim that contrasted sharply with LDS Church-sanctioned narratives that obscured Smith's polygamist practices while simultaneously focusing on the polygamy of Smith's successor, Brigham Young and other early members of the faith.

The LDS Church has a complicated history of polygamy—a practice of marrying multiple spouses simultaneously. Although it has always been common knowledge that many early members of the faith practiced polygamy both secretly and openly, Smith's polygamy had long been a matter of

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² The abbreviation "LDS Church" will be used to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mormons" to refer to members of the church, "Mormonism" to refer to the faith throughout this paper.



speculation and rumor. The construction of a misleading narrative through denial and omission commenced with Smith himself, who publicly denied his practice of “celestial marriage” to all but his closest associates until his death at the age of thirty-eight in 1844. Responding to a growing number of public accusations of sexual impropriety one month prior to his assassination, Smith is quoted as saying, “... what a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can only find one. I am the same man, and as innocent as I was fourteen years ago; and I can prove them all perjurers” (Roberts, 1912: 411). After Smith’s death, the LDS Church continued to conceal Smith’s plural marriages going so far as to publish tracts denying polygamy which were disseminated by proselyting missionaries in Europe (Gordon, 2002: 23). The ambiguity surrounding Smith’s polygamy continued until 2014, when the LDS Church quietly updated its official website to include a description of “plural marriage” as practiced by Smith (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014; Egan, 2015; Goodstein, 2014). The LDS Church website now affirms Brodie’s findings that Smith had been concurrently married to numerous women between the ages of fourteen to fifty-six.³

Included in this “new” information is the historically significant, somewhat perplexing and often overlooked fact that Smith’s practice of “celestial marriage” was not limited to men having multiple wives (polygyny), but also included women having multiple husbands (polyandry). As stated by the LDS Church, “Joseph Smith was sealed [married] to a number of women who were already married. [...] In Nauvoo, most if not all of the first husbands seem to have continued living in the same household with their wives during Joseph’s lifetime” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014: para. 20-21). The fact that some of Smith’s polygamist wives were concurrently married to other men and that these women maintained their spousal relations with their first husbands is a curiously queer admission that presents exciting scholarship opportunities.

The question must be asked, what purpose did the creation of ignorance through the suppression of history surrounding Smith’s “plural-marriages” serve and what were the consequences for those who produced dissenting scholarship? Entwining a queer mindset with Robert Proctor’s concept of agnotology—a term used to describe the epistemology of ignorance, facilitates a consideration of religious dissent from two interrelated and mutually reinforcing perspectives: 1) how *dissent* from feminists and historians within the LDS Church challenged (mis)constructions of Mormon history, and; 2) how the practice of polygamy by Smith and other early Mormons *dissents* from Western sexual mores that conflate racialized notions of family formation with social progression. Both genealogies of *dissent* illustrate how the convergence of racial and moral superiority in Western culture, predicated upon Christian monogamous sensibilities, motivated the active concealment of Smith’s non-conforming sexuality by LDS Church leadership until 2014.

The LDS Church has taken great care to control the historic accounts of early Mormonism including its founder, Smith—a feat of progressive difficulty since the 1990s. The online proliferation of information about early Mormonism has encouraged the free exchange of knowledge and the dissemination of historical records beyond the reach of church authority. Counter-publics have emerged where (ex)members of the LDS Church engage in theology, feminism, history, and matters avoided in orthodox Mormon settings (Bartlett, 2018). The 2014 LDS Church website “update” is likely the result of what is now easily accessible online to faithful church members and outsiders alike—material that refutes the “historical face lift” (Egan, 2014: para. 3) that evolved over the

³ Brodie identified forty-nine women likely married to Smith (1945: 335-336), however the LDS Church website states that the total number of Smith’s wives is unknown (2014: para. 18).



church's one-hundred-ninety years of history. Understanding the purposeful creation of ignorance regarding early LDS Church history contributes to the larger study of agnotology and presents opportunities to consider Mormon theology through a queer lens.

Constructing Ignorance

“There is a temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not. Some things that are true are not very useful.” (Packer, 1981: 5)

Boyd K. Packer, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles⁴
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The purposeful creation of ignorance surrounding the conjugal practices of early LDS Church members, particularly Smith, is an interesting case study of agnotology, a term coined by Robert Proctor to describe the epistemology of ignorance (2008). Knowledge production cannot be divorced from epistemologies of ignorance—what is known and unknown about Mormon history is the product of power, gender, race, economics, science, etc., and must be understood in relation to the cultural politics of ignorance. Reflecting on the various manifestations of ignorance making in Mormon histories exposes a variety of internal and external power regimes. As explained by Proctor, “ignorance has a history and a complex political and sexual geography and does a lot of other odd and arresting work that bears exploring” (2008: 2). Engaging with questions as to “why some knowledges are suppressed, lost, ignored, or abandoned, while others are embraced [...] reveals how ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural struggles” (Schiebinger, 2008: 152). Tuana suggests that an important consideration of an epistemology of ignorance is the recognition that ignorance is not a simple act of “omission or passive gap but is, in many cases an active production” that is often linked to issues of “authority, trust, doubt, silencing and so forth” (2008: 109, 140).

An illustrative example of ignorance by purposeful omission is a story taught to school-aged children about Smith being *tared and feathered* by an angry mob because of his religious beliefs.⁵ An abbreviated version of the story goes as follows (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997):

Soon after the church was organized, some members began to apostatize—they quit attending church meetings, opposed Joseph Smith and persecuted the Saints. One such person was Ezra Booth who wrote public letters to local newspapers questioning the church. Although Booth was excommunicated from the church, his published letters stirred up suspicion against local Mormons. One night, a group of men who believed Ezra Booth's letters, got drunk and attacked the home of Smith. They dragged Smith outside, choked him, tore off his clothes, spread hot tar over his body and covered him with feathers [abbreviated from original].

⁴The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is the second highest level of LDS Church authority acting directly under the First Presidency (the President and his two counsellors). Members of the Quorum are “called of God” through the First Presidency and are considered representatives of God.

⁵Pine tar, used in 18th & 19th century shipbuilding, was only heated to 140 degrees Fahrenheit, and consequently was unlikely to cause permanent injury. Mobs performed the act of tarring and feathering as a form of public humiliation meant to deter the victim (and others) from arousing community disdain (Bell, 2013; Levy, 2011; Irvin, 2003).

Brodie's biography of Smith includes an account of the same *tar and feathering* incident with details omitted from the official LDS Church narrative. According to Brodie (1945: 119):

Smith, his wife Emma and their adopted twins were residing under the hospitality of John Johnson in Kirkland, Ohio. Rebellion against Smith was growing locally and one night, a group of intoxicated men including Eli Johnson, the son of Smith's host, smashed their way into the home, dragging Smith into the night. The mob stripped him, beat him and covered his body with tar and feathers. Eli Johnson demanded that Joseph be castrated, accusing Smith of intimacy with his fourteen-year-old sister, Nancy Marinda [who would later become one of Joseph's polyandrous wives]. The doctor who was part of the mob declined performing the castration, and Eli Johnson subsequently decided he was content with seeing the prophet beaten [abbreviated from original].

The omission of Smith's intimacy with Nancy Marinda Johnson in church-sanctioned narratives is indicative of purposeful efforts by the LDS Church to obscure historic details, most notably the sexual proclivities of Smith, that sit in tension with Western gender and sexual mores.

It is not surprising that LDS Church officials and general membership would struggle to reconcile Smith's divine role in founding the Mormon faith with his secret conjugal practices that defied hetero-normative monogamous sensibilities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Proctor suggests that "secrets are as old as human thought and perhaps older still, judging from the fantastic variety of animal techniques of deception ranging from insect camouflage to predators stashing their prey to the myriad disguises of herbivores" (2008: 9). Ignorance, in the case of Smith's secretive marital practices, was not passive, it was an ongoing *active* engagement—a strategy propagated with *intent* by Smith, himself, and later by LDS Church officials. Historian Benjamin E. Park (2020) published an account of early Mormon history in Nauvoo, Illinois that carefully documents the efforts taken by Smith and those closest to him, in keeping his polygamy a secret.⁶ Aspects of LDS Church history deemed too controversial have long been omitted from church sanctioned narratives in order to circumvent a real or imagined danger. As Proctor suggests, acts of omission and/or censorship happen when "certain people don't want you to know certain things" and the whole point of secrecy is to "hide, to feint, to distract, to deny access, and monopolize information" (2008: 8, 19).

"Cultural occlusion—what not to know and how not to know it" (Laats, 2016: 176), plays a role in official Mormon historic narratives. Adam Laats' exploration of American-Christian historical texts in private Christian schools, found that authors and editors knowingly create content that departs from mainstream historical accounts in "order to advance a culturally distinct body of knowledge and way of knowing about the past" (2016: 176). Similarly, the LDS Church has cultivated distinct historical narratives that might be better understood as transmissions of *heritage* as opposed to *history*. Citing David Lowenthal, Laats suggests that heritage and history have different goals: heritage is a "declaration of faith," whereas history is to "understand the past on its own terms" (2016:176-177). The tension between *heritage* and *history* articulates the ongoing conflict that exists between dissenting Mormon historians and the hierarchal leadership to which they answer. Lance Chase, a historian at Brigham Young University-Hawaii (owned by the LDS Church) states, "Mormon religious orthodoxy asks the Mormon historian: 'Why expose the foibles of Church leaders and the consequent embarrassing results for Church members? How do your efforts serve in any way to promote faith?"

⁶ Even Smith's wife, Emma, was purposefully kept ignorant about the practice of polygamy and took great care in defending her husband against what she believed to be false rumors about her husband's polygamy. It is likely that Smith had over twenty wives by the time Emma became aware of Smith's polygamy (Park, 2020: 102, 104, 150, 151).



Why not stick with stories that build faith rather than destroy it” (1997: 5). Mormon heritage prioritizes “faith promotion” over historic accuracy to foster a shared sense of the divine. However, crisis lurks when historical facts challenge carefully constructed communal narratives, such as the case of Smith’s polygamy/polyandry.

Historians such as Brodie, who transgress Mormon orthodoxy to produce dissenting research are a key aspect of this agnotological puzzle. Brodie was born into the Mormon faith, and supposedly used her familial connection to her uncle, David O. McKay (who would become the ninth President of the LDS Church) to access historic records in the LDS Church archive. Brodie was no longer active within the Mormon faith when her biography of Smith was published in 1945.⁷ After publication she was excommunicated from the LDS Church in 1946 (Bringham, 1989a; 1989b; *The New York Times*, 1981). It is important to note that in 1946 there was no voluntary system of membership withdrawal—one could not formally leave the LDS Church without being subjected to the excommunication process (Mauss, 2015: 388; Haglund, 2012: para. 8). The LDS Church has a complicated history of excommunicating dissenters, and then dismissing their dissent as the bitter musings of those who have been excommunicated—a case in point, Ezra Booth, who played a role in the *tar and feathering* story. The threat of excommunication has been a guiding force in curtailing intellectual inquiries that dissent from official church history. Excommunicating those who produce and publicly share dissenting scholarship empowers LDS Church leaders to frame these projects as the “product of apostates, or those that have fallen away from Mormonism” (Basquiat, 2001: 16).

In secular circles, Brodie’s biography of Smith received largely positive reviews such as from Dale L. Morgan, a fellow historian, who characterized Brodie’s book as “the finest job of scholarship yet done in Mormon History” (as quoted in Bringham, 1989 b: 3). However, within the church, it was deemed to be a work of poisonous, anti-Mormon slander, and members were advised to stick to ‘faith-promoting material’—“a euphemism for church-approved material” (Basquiat, 2001: 17). Apostle John A. Widtsoe wrote in a church publication, “... the book is a flat failure. [...] It will be of no interest to Latter-day Saints who have correct knowledge of the history of Joseph Smith” (as quoted in Bringham, 1989 b: 4). High-ranking LDS Church apologist, Hugh Nibley from Brigham Young University wrote a bitter counter-piece entitled *No Ma’am, That’s Not History* that took aim at Brodie’s methodology and findings (Nibley, 1946; Bringham, 1997). It should be noted that Brodie would later publish another critically acclaimed yet controversial biography—*Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History* (1974) which spent thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* best-sellers list. Brodie’s biography of Jefferson was the first book to prove the longstanding sexual relationship between Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemmings, thus garnering the fury of the “Jefferson establishment” which had long denied such rumors (Wallach, 2002; Fawn McKay Brodie Papers, para. 7). Both biographies of Smith and Jefferson dissented from widely held historic narratives that erased intimacies transgressive of White, heteronormative sensibilities. Jefferson transgressed codes of miscegenation and Smith transgressed codes of monogamy.

Mauss has argued that during the first half of the twentieth century, the LDS Church rarely took action against Mormons who produced dissenting intellectual works (2015: 390-91). Brodie’s

⁷ Social science can never be disassociated from the social circumstances of its construction, and Brodie’s work and mine are no exception. Brodie described writing *No Man Knows My History* as a cathartic effort “to come to terms with my childhood” (Brodie as quoted in Bringham, 1997: 106). I find it satisfying that fifty years after its publication, I first read Brodie’s book with the same goal in mind. Feminists such as Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (1989) have long argued that *all* knowledge is situated knowledge and an ethical feminist praxis demands: 1) a relinquishing of the false promise of transcendence (the view from above); and 2) an acknowledgement of our partial view.

excommunication was an outlier amongst other dissenters.⁸ However during the second half of the century, the excommunication of intellectuals, particularly feminists and historians who produced research that sat in tension with official “faith-promoting” narratives, exponentially grew (2015: 388). From the 1970’s and onward, the impact of feminism and critical race theory within academia coalesced with a heightened interest in Mormon history. Within the LDS Church populace, a community of intellectuals engaged with such matters emerged. Intellectual inquiries such as reclaiming the divine feminine within Mormonism—a feminist project inherently linked to the early days of the Mormon faith when women held the priesthood were of interest to historians and feminists alike (Basquiat, 2001). Church leaders admonished intellectuals “to stop discussing publicly and in print certain doctrines and historical events that the hierarchy considered especially sensitive, embarrassing, or not open to discussion” (Mauss, 2015: 388). In 1992 Apostle Boyd K. Packer gave a public address at a religious educator’s symposium warning that the Church faced *danger* from three groups: gays, feminists and ‘so-called scholars or intellectuals’ (Basquiat, 2001; Stacks, 2013). According to Haglund, that same year, feminist intellectual, Lavina Fielding Anderson, presented a paper at the Sunstone Symposium (an event for scholars and intellects of Mormon faith that was not sanctioned by the church) on the “growing conflict between [LDS Church] leaders and intellectuals” referring to an “internal espionage system” that “maintained secret files” on dissenting intellectuals (2012: para. 35). The existence of the “Strengthening Church Members Committee” (Anderson, 2016: 189; Mauss, 2015: 395; Roberts, 1994: 59) was confirmed less than a year later in 1993, when church officials publicly sanctioned six dissenting Mormons (including Anderson) whose transgressions comprised two categories: historic research that transgressed church-sanctioned narratives, and feminist critique of Mormon theology. (Bushman, 2020: 162; Hanks, 2017; New York Times, 1993; Johnson, 1993).⁹

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the threat of excommunication hung over the heads of Mormon historians, feminists and other intellectuals who found themselves producing scholarship inherently at odds with church-sanctioned histories (Hanks, 2017; Anderson, 2016; Mauss, 2015). Historian Lance Chase (1997: 12) wrote,

[...] given today’s climate within the Church, this compulsion and the profession itself can be very hazardous for the Church historian. He may choose to avoid L.D.S. Church history all together, he may choose to write only faith promoting history, or given today’s climate, he may occasionally risk his church membership by writing what his research tells him really happened.

During this precarious time LDS Church leadership seemed particularly concerned “that without being spoon-fed ‘truth’ in a controlled setting, members might become convinced of new truths [...] incompatible with those promoted by the church” (Roberts, 1994: 55). In the pursuit of purposeful agnotology, historical documents that did not support current interpretation of gospel doctrine were “conveniently swept under the rug or, to be more specific, locked up in the church vaults” (Basquiat, 2001: 15). However, with the proliferation of online resources, the church was forced to shift focus from the oppression of sensitive histories to their guarded assimilation. It “is not always easy to put

⁸ Bringhurst (1989 b) suggests that David O. McKay, Brodie’s uncle who would become the ninth president of the LDS Church initiated the excommunication process on charges of apostasy with specific reference to the contents of *No Man Knows My History*.

⁹ Five were excommunicated, and one was disfellowshipped. Being disfellowshipped is a less severe punishment wherein church membership is retained, but one is unable to participate fully.



some genies ‘back in the bottle.’ Knowledge escapes, that we’d rather have confined” (Proctor, 2008: 20).

Maxine Hanks, a Mormon feminist theologian who was one of the six dissenting Mormons publicly sanctioned in 1993 has illustrated how LDS Church efforts to censor and limit feminist/historical scholarship in the 1990s shifted in the mid 2000s from “fear to embrace, inaccessibility to availability, censorship to transparency. Topics we couldn’t talk about in public and documents we couldn’t see ten years earlier were going online” (2017: 177). Additional historic works documenting the non-monogamous marriages of Smith have been published since Brodie’s 1945 biography collaborating many of her findings including Smith’s polyandry (Park, 2020; Hales, 2014; Hales, 2012; Bushman, 2005; Compton, 1997; Van Wagoner, 1985). This research was conducted in spite of the fact that access to the LDS Church archive has been and continues to be, highly controlled. In response to a growing field of knowledge production and dissemination through online platforms, the tight grip the LDS Church has held on its history has been relaxed and LDS Church leadership has shifted to a more accommodating position towards internal and external scholars.¹⁰ As Mauss states (2015: 397),

New studies of polygamy (including polyandry) in early Mormonism, of race relations in the LDS experience, controversial new biographies of church presidents, and many other books and articles independently published by LDS intellectuals which might once have resulted in church discipline, were published in the new century with complete impunity.

Additionally, the *Joseph Smith Papers Project*, a collaborative initiative by Brigham Young University and the LDS Church to provide access to a digital database of historical documents related to Smith’s life commenced in 2001.¹¹ These records have provided scholars the opportunity to explore what was once considered to be controversial (and consequently concealed) aspects of Smith’s life (Park, 2018; Hanks, 2017; Minkema, 2015).

It is important to note that although public sanctions of dissenting intellectuals through disfellowship or excommunication has abated and the LDS Church has made conciliatory gestures towards historical transparency, the doors to the extensive and privately held church archives have not been thrown open. Keith A. Erikson, who serves as the director of the Church History Library has stated that private institutions such as the LDS Church, are under no obligation to make their archived collections accessible to the public and subsequently can restrict access to information ambiguously deemed “sacred” (2020: 120, 124). John Sillito, who boasts a forty-year career as an archivist at the University of Utah and the LDS Church Historical Department recently called “for a more open approach to the kinds of records available to the scholar—at the Church History Library and elsewhere” (2020: 116).

All cultures (and institutions) will “choose some representations over others” (Basquiat, 2010: 15), however, in the case of the LDS Church, the narration of the past has been painstakingly [mis]constructed. Putting Brodie’s dissenting biography of Smith in conversation with the 2014 LDS

¹⁰ In 2011 the LDS Church noted an unprecedented number of members terminating their membership due to political conflicts (internal and external) and growing doubts about fundamental truth claims of the religion (Mauss, 2015: 397). I am included in this exodus. In 2009 I initiated the process of having my name removed from the LDS Church membership records in response to the church’s efforts to pass Proposition 8 in 2008, a California State constitutional amendment overturning the legalization of same-sex marriage. Although I am no longer a practising Mormon, the faith, culture and heritage are my birthright and I consider myself what Bartlett terms, a heterodox Mormon (2018: 145-147).

¹¹ <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org>

Church acknowledgement of Smith's non-monogamy, advances two important questions: What was/is dangerous about the Mormon historical archive; and why was/is it necessary for LDS Church officials to construct a sanitized narrative of Smith's life? Under conditions where ignorance is purposefully cultivated, such as in the case of Smith, it is of benefit to consider what types of knowledge are deemed dangerous and by which groups of people they are so judged (Tuana, 2006: 9).

Thinking of Mormon history as queer facilitates an understanding that “the Church’s twentieth-century campaign for assimilation into and acceptance by U.S. society took the form not only of giving up polygamy, but of closely promoting and adhering to national norms around marriage, patriarchal gender relations, and reproductive sexuality” (Mohrman, 2020: 529). The embodied LDS Church practice of polygamy was in and of itself an act of *dissent* against Western sexual normativities. Within the context of the early nineteenth century, the Mormon practices of polygamy/polyandry was amongst three religiously inspired experiments in alternative sexual and marital configurations that grew out of the revival-spirit that swept through western New York State in the 1820s. Shaker celibacy, complex marriage of the Onedia Community and the Mormon practice of plural marriage shared a common desire to build communities based upon the ideal of heaven on earth—an ideal which included attempts to radically redefine conventional notions of family and community (Foster, 1981). Such attempts to reconfigure the family unit threatened power regimes reliant upon power-sensitive dichotomies such as: primitive/civilized; man/woman; adult/child; and public/private. These dichotomies were used in larger projects of imperial expansion and settler colonialism, which coded any sexuality in defiance of Christian heteronormativity as markers of *savagery* and/or *barbarianism*.

Queer History

Pinning down a precise definition of queer is impossible, as queer theory actively resists a precise definition (Greenough, 2020: 45). Yet identifying some dominant themes articulated amongst most queer theorists can point us in the right direction. Queer theory is about disrupting taken-for-granted social conventions. It is about challenging and subverting the normative to show that what we think of as “stable” (such as gender, sexuality or race) is in fact, fluid (Browne and Nash, 2010: 4). It is about challenging power-structures such as capitalism, heterosexuality, marriage and religion and considering how these structures reinforce systems of oppression. Alison Rooke suggests that “queer as a body of theory is not limited to thinking about gendered and sexual subjectivities. Rather it is a philosophical commitment to contesting the logics of normativity” (2010: 29). Queer theory has a particular interest in challenging dominant regimes of sexuality and considering how these regimes have ordered and structured society. It is also characterized as fluid and dynamic, “motivating queer researchers to work against disciplinary legitimation and rigid categorization” (Jones and Adams, 2010: 204).

Adopting the strategy of a “queer-view mirror” allows us to retrospectively consider the past through the lens of the present (Greenough, 2020: 42). Katherine Mohrman has argued that the current conservatism of the LDS Church which embraces capitalism, heteronormativity, and the heteropatriarchal family is “a response to a queer past that has been too resilient to be completely eradicated from popular memory, history, and the archive itself” (2015: 145). Smith’s propensity for unsettling social and political normativities is evident in multiple arenas: his practice of polygamy/polyandry; his experiments in communal living and cooperative property ownership; his transgressions of the public/private divide; and his theocratic inclinations that conflated church and



state (Park, 2020; 2018; Talbot, 2013; Bushman, 2005). Smith managed to disrupt an impressive array of taken-for-granted social conventions of the nineteenth century in a rather queer (strange and/or odd) way. Greenough explains that “queer theologies disrupt any ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ readings of Christianity in its theological forms, including tradition, scripture, worship, fellowship, dogmas, and beliefs” (2020: 34). The absorption of the LDS Church into the larger American body politic and its claims of religious legitimacy was predicated upon the need to distance itself from a rather queer past. To be accepted in the American body politic, the LDS Church has actively suppressed its queerness by maintaining a “notoriously tight grip [...] over the production of academic work about its own history” (Mohram, 2015: 146) resulting in a carefully constructed ignorance ripe for *dissent*.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century when Smith was experimenting with communal living and non-monogamy within Mormon settlements, a cultural shift was taking place in Western societies wherein “the image of the natural, patriarchal family in alliance with pseudoscientific social Darwinism, came to constitute the organizing trope for marshaling a bewildering array of cultures into a single, global narrative ordered and managed by Europeans” (McClintock, 1995: 45). Political debates on polygamy were often grounded in a linear temporal progression of civilization which suggests that societies progress from savagery (polygamy) into civility (monogamy). Layered upon these ideas of temporal progression were scientific constructs, most notable social Darwinism that explained in pseudo-scientific terms the supposed superiority of White Europeans. As Angela Willey argues, the convergence of social Darwinism, colonialism, anthropological studies, and an insistence of social progression created a temporal and geographic ‘otherness’ that “allowed claims about marriage practices and sexual mores across cultures to stand in as evolutionary claims” (2016: 30). *Civilized* Christian monogamy was positioned as ‘evolved’ being associated with (White) Western culture. *Uncivilized* non-monogamy was characterized as primitive, racialized and associated with Islam. Early sexologist Krafft-Ebing theorized European superiority in *Psychopathia Sexualis* as being predicated upon *civilized* human love—the romantic love between one man and one woman (as discussed in Willey, 2016: 30-31). When considering the case of Mormon polygamy in the territory of Utah, Francis Lieber, one of the most influential political theorists of the nineteenth century stated, “[Monogamy] is one of the elementary distinctions—historical and actual—between European and Asiatic humanity . . . 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” (as quoted in Cotts, 2002: 115). Thus, monogamy became bound up “implicitly and explicitly with racialized notions of superiority, within the cultural, political, and economic logics that animated a colonial worldview” (Willey, 2016: 30).

In the United States, public discourse on the (White) practice of polygamy took place “at the height of the abolitionist and suffrage movements of the 1850s, shadowed the Civil War (1861-65) and the emancipation of some 4 million enslaved African Americans following the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in January 1865” (Denike, 2014: 153). In fact, discussions of polygamy and slavery were often intertwined in what the Republican presidential candidate of 1856 called the “twin relics of barbarism” (Denike, 2014; Talbot, 2013; Crowley, 2011; Gordon, 2002). Anti-polygamy sentiment in the mid to late nineteenth century employed the discursive language of treason to describe the polygamous family formations of White Mormon populations (Ertman, 2010). As Denike reveals, “snapshots of anti-polygamy sentiment make clear that to speak of the difference between monogamy and polygamy was to speak of the racial difference in a very specific way” (2014: 145). Polygamist Mormons were racialized and considered a threat to proper social, political, religious, cultural, and moral order (Denike, 2010b). Pseudo-scientific social Darwinism justified imperial logics

and the erasure of First Peoples through violence and forced assimilation. Concurrently, the fear of degeneration—“the possibility of racial decline from white fatherhood to a primordial black degeneracy incarnated in the black mother” (McClintock, 1995: 49) arose. White Mormons practising polygamy posed a threat of degeneracy to the newly formed White Republic of the United States (Denike, 2010 a). Although Biblical examples of polygamy exist (Abraham, being a prime example and the one to which Smith often referred) there was a collective consciousness that Christianity had evolved beyond polygamous practices while the *uncivilized* had not. As Denike explains, “the making of ‘the’ nation as white, in the face of all its heterogenous Aboriginal and immigrant communities, relied heavily on discourses and practices of racial purity whose theoretical justifications both mobilized and exacerbated anti-polygamy sentiment” (2014: 155).

Smith’s new religion ruptured societal scripts beyond race, sexuality and family formation. Under Smith’s leadership, Mormons experimented with a form of Christian communism wherein “members deeded their property” to the Church and received the “right to use it” back from the church (Ertman, 2010: 299). Smith also provoked political discomfort with his theocratic tendencies which blurred the lines between church and state (Park, 2020; 2018). All of these tensions became known in political circles as the “Mormon question,” as illustrated by Christine Talbot (2013: 1-2),

Polygamy generated decades of cultural conflict that contemporaries referred to, broadly, as “the Mormon question.” The conflict was more than a simple condemnation of sexual and marital practices unacceptable to Victorian norms. [...] Over the nineteenth century, white middle-class northern Protestants regarded the separation of public and private spheres as central to the meaning of Americanness. [...] Polygamy destabilized these public/private divides in ways that dissociated family and gender relations from American citizenship.

Mormon transgressions against racialized family formations, property ownership and theocracy often resulted in violence and persecution, two cases in point being the 1838 extermination order of Mormons issued by the governor of Missouri (Park, 2020: 30; Gordon, 2002: 107) and the assassination of Smith by an angry mob. Over the next fifty years, anti-polygamy angst would culminate in the passing of the *Edmunds-Tucker Act* in 1887 by United States Congress which forced the LDS Church to abandon polygamy (Cott, 2000: 119). The insistence on the right to practice polygamy in the name of religion made Mormons unworthy of constitutional protections—they were “too far afield” of what constituted good citizenry (Crowley, 2011: 217). The *Edmunds-Tucker Act* contained twenty-six sections that would eradicate polygamy, constrain theocracy in the Utah territory and link monogamy with American citizenry. For example, one section repealed woman’s suffrage in Utah and another section required men to swear an oath in support of the Constitution and laws of the United States, stating that one would “not, directly or indirectly, aid or abet, counsel or advise, any other person to commit” crimes of polygamy (*Edmunds-Tucker Act* as discussed in Crowley, 2011: 244). The United States government systematically linked the rights of citizenship, namely the right to vote, hold office or to serve on a jury to sexual and social monogamy. However, the most effective section of the *Edmunds-Tucker Act* was section thirteen that directed the United States Attorney General to institute proceedings to forfeit and escheat to the United States government property of the corporation of the LDS Church (Crowley, 2011: 251; Gordon, 2002: 196-197). The church held significant assets, and their interest in protecting those assets in conjunction with continued efforts to gain statehood for the Utah territory would ultimately result in church leadership denouncing the practice of polygamy (Cott, 2000: 118-20). In 1890 after several years of unsuccessfully resisting the provisions of the *Edmunds-Tucker Act* by legal pursuit, LDS



Church President Wilford Woodruff publicly declared that church members were to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land (Woodruff, 1890).

The convergence of racialized and moralized identities of superiority in Western culture is a legitimate motivational factor for the active suppression by the LDS Church, of knowledge about Smith's non-monogamous doctrinal teachings and embodied practice. Polygamy in the LDS Church *dissented* from western sexual mores that assumed the superiority of White nations and Christian monogamous marriage. Within a context of racialized discourse that closely identified heteronormative, monogamous marriage as being a fundamental building block of the newly formed American Republic, the survival of the LDS Church was predicated upon distancing itself from its non-normative [queer] theologies, practices and culture. If "ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural struggles" (Schiebinger, 2008: 152) then we must consider the multiple cultural struggles that resulted in the agnotology of LDS Church history. At play is an almost dizzying array of historic conditions and tensions: slavery, colonization, Western Christianity, social Darwinism, prescriptive gender roles, normative family formations, moral crusaders, economics, politics and law. The very survival of the LDS Church was predicated upon disassociating itself from practices that dissented from those commonly held in the Christian/White American Republic.

These tensions are further heightened by the secrecy that shrouded Smith's practise of polygamy and the fact that a third of Smith's wives were simultaneously married to other men (Compton, 1997; Brodie, 1945: 336). "Polyandry is one of the major problems found in Smith's polygamy and many questions surround it. Why did he at first primarily prefer polyandrous marriages? [...] In the past, polyandry has often been ignored or glossed over, but if these women merit serious attention, the topic cannot be overlooked" (Compton, 1997: 15). The fact that women actively, and by most accounts, willingly practiced polyandry, and that Smith formed intimate relationships concurrently with multiple women provides an astonishingly simple reason for the intentional efforts by the LDS Church to obscure sensitive elements of its early history. The polyandry of early Mormon women is difficult to massage into the patriarchal establishment of the modern faith and touches on issues of female sexuality that have largely been invisible.

Conclusion

Tuana reminds us that "female sexuality is a particularly fertile area for tracking the intersections of power/knowledge-ignorance" (2008: 111). It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed understanding of polyandry as practiced in secret by Smith and his many wives between 1832 up until his violent death in 1844—although the possibilities of this archival research undertaken from a queer theoretical perspective is deliciously tantalizing. But the practice of polyandry does explain the political effort by LDS Church authorities to hold in secret Smith's unorthodox sexual practices. His ideas about alternative family formations defied Western narratives of cultural progression wherein non-monogamy was associated with the *barbaric* and *uncivilized*. Having it widely known that Smith sanctioned and participated in not only polygamy, but polyandry as well, complicates narratives enmeshed with LDS Church heritage and disrupts doctrinal practices which have come to be accepted by faithful Mormons. It also subjects the Mormon faith to an additional layer of scrutiny that would challenge both insiders and outsiders alike. The practice of polygamy/polyandry violates Western moral sensibilities and contradicts gendered sexual assumptions that situate marriage and female sexuality within a reproductive framework.

Chris Greenough has made a compelling case for using queer theologies to "destabilize the structures of power which have been tied up in the religion" by asking questions about whose voices and

experiences have been excluded (2020: 5). Early members of the Mormon faith, including the polyandrous wives of Smith, adopted practices and principles that clearly defied prevailing normativities. They experimented with “utopian” ideals by offering alternative paradigms of “community” that rearticulated sexual connection and marriage. The historic legacy of Mormonism is a treasure trove for queer theorists who would like to consider the practice of polygamy as it relates to challenges of Western sexual mores, religious dogma and political power structures. Perhaps we have entered a new academic era in which the study of early Mormon polygamy can move beyond essentialist inscriptions of the women who participated in these non-normative marital arrangements. It would be reasonable to assume that the tight control by LDS Church authorities of the queer historical archive is predicated upon the assumption that its contents pose multiple dangers—to the “testimonies” of faithful members; to gender-based power structures within the church; to external criticism; and proselytizing endeavors. The purposeful ignorance and lack of exploration of certain aspect of early Mormonism, as in the case of the *Tar and Feathering* story, perpetuates and reinforces the privileging of heterosexual male sexuality within the larger faith and conflates the divine with sexual restraint. This privileging is deeply enshrined within current Mormon politics and is the primary *loci* for fundamentalist sects that have taken root outside of formal LDS Church authority. I suggest that a re-reading of Mormon history from a queer perspective is ripe with possibilities—the most notable of which would be to make that which has been made invisible (polyandrous women) once again, visible.

Acknowledgement

This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful to Janice Stewart from the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice at the University of British Columbia for encouraging me to embrace my religious heritage in my scholarship. I would also like to thank Travers from Simon Fraser University for generously providing ongoing guidance and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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