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The State of Mormon Folklore Studies

Tom Mould and Eric A. Eliason

IN 1892 THE FLEDGLING *Journal of American Folklore* published Salt Lake City Unitarian minister Reverend David Utter's brief observations on Mormon customs, beliefs, and angelic narratives such as three Nephite stories. Since this time, Mormons as subject matter, and later as practitioners, have become perhaps more significant in the field of folklore than in any other academic discipline with the exception of American religious history.

Following national trends in the humanities over the last few decades, the field of folklore studies has experienced a general decline in programs and academic appointments. Yet the Mormon heartland of Utah has stood out as a state particularly committed to the discipline even as it too has begun to see cutbacks. The Chase Home Museum of Utah Folk Arts, headed by Carol Edison and Craig Miller, was the only such museum in the country until its recent closure owing to budget cuts. Jan Brunvand—arguably the most famous folklorist in the country—made his career at the University of Utah drawing on numerous LDS examples in his popularization of the folklore term *urban legend*. For many years Barre Toelken led Utah State University's well-regarded master's program in folklore, one of few in the country. USU Press has been one of the top three or four presses for academic folklore publishing, responsible for the most popular classroom textbooks and much cutting-edge folklore scholarship. USU's folklore archive houses the records of the American Folklore Society and the papers of leading folklorists such as Don Yoder and Elliott Oring. It took on all of the UCLA folklore archive's materials

when that program closed. When William A. “Bert” Wilson retired, the swath he had cut was so large that BYU hired four folklorists to replace him. Brunvand, Toelken, and Wilson are perhaps the most recognized configuration of folklore’s “Three Nephites” even outside of Utah, where Three Nephite lore is perhaps even more widely known among folklorists than among Mormons. That this is their collective nickname speaks to the fruitfully intertwined nature of Utah’s predominant religious culture and the field of folklore.

It is perhaps fitting that this inaugural issue of the *Mormon Studies Review* includes an examination of one of the oldest and most well-developed academic traditions of Mormon studies. Various understood as a culturally distinct people, religion, and region, Mormondom has naturally attracted the attention of folklorists, who define themselves in terms of their interest in the oral narratives, customs, beliefs, and vernacular material culture of exactly this kind of group. While our aim is primarily to review the current state of affairs of Mormon folklore studies, this cannot be properly done without first summarizing past surveys of the field and reconsidering their conclusions in light of recent findings and developing methodologies and theoretical approaches. In so doing, we hope this essay will inform scholars of Mormonism in all disciplines about folklore studies’ understandings of the Mormon experience.

Review of past surveys of Mormon folklore scholarship

The landscape of Mormon folklore studies has been explicitly surveyed three times during the past four decades, beginning almost one hundred years after Reverend Utter’s first published scholarship on the topic. William Wilson was the first to cast a glance backward with the goal of surveying previous scholarship in order to introduce a special issue of the *Utah Historical Quarterly* devoted to the study of Mormon folklore as well as to validate folklore studies to a Mormon audience.¹ Working

1. William A. Wilson, “A Bibliography of Studies in Mormon Folklore,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (1976): 389–94.

primarily historically, Wilson identified the first scholars to approach the subject and explained how their work, operating synergistically, spawned a fairly vibrant era of scholarship in the early years of the field. Wilson further noted that, paralleling shifts throughout the study of folklore, scholars studying Mormon folklore shifted from viewing the songs and stories they were collecting as survivals of the past to seeing them as vibrant traditions that often told much more about what is relevant and meaningful in the present than about the past they purportedly described. He also pointed to past oversights such as assuming cultural homogeneity among all Mormons, focusing on the text to the detriment of situational context and audience interpretation, ignoring the people who create and perform these folk traditions, and attending only to Utah Mormons. It is this last complaint that is particularly noteworthy since so much of the history Wilson recounted was tied to the region, where *Utah* and *Mormon* were often assumed to be synonyms—an assumption that continued long after his article.

Jill Terry (now Jill Terry Rudy) picked up where Wilson left off, attempting to capture the state of Mormon folklore studies of the 1970s and 80s.² Because Rudy was writing for the *Utah Folklife Newsletter*, it is not surprising that her lens was trained on Utah, but a more significant explanation for this focus is that the bulk of Mormon folklore scholars were located in Utah, doing their research close to home, examining a community that remained intimately tied in many minds to the Intermountain West centered in Utah but including parts of Idaho, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Colorado. Like William Wilson, Rudy noted that past studies focused heavily on collection, preservation, and interpretation, most notably of songs, ballads, and stories; but she credited Austin and Alta Fife's seminal book *Saints of Sage and Saddle* for addressing custom and belief as well.³ She also argued that the focus of folklore studies on Mormon belief in the

2. Jill Terry, "Exploring Belief and Custom: The Study of Mormon Folklore," *Utah Folklife Newsletter* 23/1 (1989): 2–5.

3. Austin E. Fife and Alta Stephens Fife, *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956).

supernatural was a particularly important contribution of the field to the understanding of Mormon culture, highlighting key religious beliefs pervasive in Mormon thought and practice.

Themes addressed in early studies continued to be explored, but with new approaches or dimensions. In addition to studies of humor attending to J. Golden Kimball anecdotes⁴ and jokes about Scandinavian immigrants,⁵ studies of various joke cycles circulating among contemporary Latter-day Saints began to emerge.⁶ Narrative study continued to prove fruitful, echoing the focus on the Three Nephites of the past, but with additional corpuses including missionary tales, spirit children stories (now more commonly known to folklorists as PBEs, or prebirth experiences), and testimonies.⁷ Rudy cast past scholarship on material culture as monolithic in conveying the image of a culturally homogenous Mormon community that Wilson warned about, and therefore heralded work in vernacular architecture, particularly by Mark Leone and Thomas

4. Claude Richards, *J. Golden Kimball: The Story of a Unique Personality* (1934; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966); Hector H. Lee, *J. Golden Kimball Stories, Together with the Brother Petersen Yarns* (Huntington, VT: Folk-Legacy Records, 1964); Thomas E. Cheney, *The Golden Legacy: A Folk History of J. Golden Kimball* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine-Smith, 1974); and Mikal Lofgren, *Wheat: Humor and Wisdom of J. Golden Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Moth House, 1980).

5. Hector Lee and Royal Madsen, "Nicknames of the Ephraimites," *Western Humanities Review* 3 (1949): 12–22; Thomas E. Cheney, "Scandinavian Immigrant Stories," *Western Folklore* 18 (1959): 99–105; Lee, *J. Golden Kimball Stories* (1964); James Boyd Christensen, "Function and Fun in Utah-Danish Nicknames," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1971): 23–29; and William A. Wilson, "Folklore of Utah's Little Scandinavia," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 47 (1979): 162.

6. For example, Jan Harold Brunvand, "As the Saints Go Marching By: Modern Jokelore Concerning Mormons," *Journal of American Folklore* 83 (1970): 53–60; William A. Wilson and Richard C. Poulsen, "The Curse of Cain and Other Stories: Blacks in Mormon Folklore," *Sunstone* 5/6 (1980): 9–13; and William A. Wilson, "The Seriousness of Mormon Humor," *Sunstone* 10/1 (1985): 6–13.

7. Carolyn Flatley Gilkey, "Mormon Testimony Meeting: Some Aspects of a Narrating Event," *Southwest Folklore* 3/4 (1979): 45–59; William A. Wilson, *On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1981); and Margaret K. Brady, "Transformations of Power: Mormon Women's Visionary Narratives," *Journal of American Folklore* 100/398 (1987): 461–68.

Carter,⁸ as important shifts toward the articulation of a more accurate heterogeneity. New explorations in folklore study, however, also began to emerge, including attention to folk speech,⁹ women,¹⁰ and new methodologies in which interview data that provided emic interpretation joined textual analysis as an increasingly meaningful way to approach folklore analysis.¹¹

A decade or so passed until, in 2004, David Stanley edited *Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources*.¹² Because of the overlap between the regional study of folklore in the Intermountain West and the religious study of Mormon folklore, the book contained numerous histories of Mormon folklore scholarship—including biographical sketches of seminal scholars such as Hector Lee, Austin and Alta Fife, and Thomas Cheney,

8. Mark P. Leone, "Archaeology as the Science of Technology: Mormon Town Plans and Fences," in *Research and Theory in Current Archaeology*, ed. Charles L. Redman (New York: Wiley, 1973), 125–50; Leone, "Why the Coalville Tabernacle Had to Be Razed," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (1973): 30–35; and Thomas Carter, "Building Zion: Folk Architecture in the Mormon Settlements of Utah's Sanpete Valley, 1849–1890" (PhD diss., Indiana University, Bloomington, 1984).

9. William A. Wilson and John B. Harris, "And They Spake with a New Tongue' (On Missionary Slang)," in *Conference on the Language of the Mormons*, ed. Harold S. Madsen and John L. Sorenson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Language Research Center, 1974), 46–48; and Margaret P. Baker, "Some Functions of Mormon In-Group Language in Creating and Maintaining Ethnic Boundaries" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 1986).

10. Gloria Cronin, "Who Shapes Oral Narrative: A Functionalist and Psychosocial Examination of the Lore of Two Mormon Female Tale-Tellers," *Mormon Letters Annual 1984* (Salt Lake City: Association for Mormon Letters, 1985), 12–21; Elaine J. Lawless, "I Know If I Don't Bear My Testimony, I'll Lose It': Why Mormon Women Bother to Speak at All," *Kentucky Folklore Record* 30 (1984): 79–96; and Margaret K. Brady, *Mormon Healer Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler's Life of "Unselfish Usefulness"* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000).

11. For example, Gilkey, "Mormon Testimony Meeting" (1979).

12. David Stanley, ed., *Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004); Eric A. Eliason, "Angels among the Mormons," in *The Big Book of Angels*, ed. Beliefnet (New York: Rodale Books, 2002), 96–104; Eliason, *Celebrating Zion: Pioneers in Mormon Popular Historical Expression* (Provo, UT: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2004); and Eliason, *The J. Golden Kimball Stories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

among others—as well as Jill Terry Rudy’s second survey of Mormon folklore scholarship.¹³ Rudy’s goal here was comprehensive: to capture the full history of Mormon folklore studies, albeit in brief. To do so, she tracked the study of Mormon folklore both historically and thematically, guided by a number of questions, including why folklorists have identified Mormons and Mormon folklore as a significant subject for study and what the study of Mormon folklore can tell us about a shared Mormon ethos. In addressing these questions, Rudy discussed how the study of Mormon folklore shifted from a regional focus to a religious one as the reach of the LDS Church expanded across the country and around the world. She echoed her own and Wilson’s previous surveys, noting that past scholarship had been heavily text-based with a particular focus on songs, stories, and the supernatural.

Material on the supernatural receives slightly different treatment now that fifteen years have passed. Instead of accolades, the focus on the supernatural has become problematic by creating too great an imbalance and a false impression that the daily lives of Latter-day Saints are consumed with supernatural encounters and experiences. While it is true that expectations for divine intercession are fundamental to Mormon thought and theology, it is also true that folklore studies have often focused on the most dramatic supernatural elements of the oral, material, and customary lore of Latter-day Saints and have provided insufficient attention to, in William Wilson’s words, stories of “the quiet lives of committed service.”¹⁴ Rudy joined Wilson in calling for a greater shift of attention from the supernatural to the committed service aspect of Mormon religious living.

In considering the work at the turn of the twenty-first century, Rudy suggested that the future of Mormon folklore studies would be more ethnographic and would address issues of identity and heritage politics.¹⁵ She noted that some of the most recent scholarship had taken a historical

13. Jill Terry Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies,” in Stanley, *Folklore in Utah*, 142–52.

14. William A. Wilson, “The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth,” *Dialogue* 22 (1989): 109.

15. Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies” (2004).

turn—namely, Margaret Brady’s biographical study of nineteenth-century folk healer and poet Mary Susannah Fowler and Eric Eliason’s work on pioneer nostalgia and J. Golden Kimball stories¹⁶—but also suggested areas that she and others hoped would be explored in greater measure. These included more attention to the LDS Church in international contexts, a focus on the contemporary lives of diverse members, performance-oriented studies, and comparative work to place the Mormon experience within larger contexts. Although more oblique in her call, she also noted the need for scholars “in and out of the church” to take up the study of Mormon folklore.¹⁷

Hindsight: Revising the past

These surveys provide an excellent picture of Mormon folklore studies up to the turn of the twenty-first century. Looking back at them with the advantage of hindsight, however, suggests room for revision, as does the decade of studies between the 2004 survey and today.

The concern about conflating regional with religious lore has meant that some histories of the development of Mormon folklore studies have ignored excellent work in vernacular architecture and material culture. For example, while Austin and Alta Fife are heralded for their book *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, Austin’s typological work on hay derricks that is regional rather than specifically Mormon is typically ignored.¹⁸ If we are

16. Brady, *Mormon Healer Folk Poet* (2000); Eric A. Eliason, “Pioneers and Recapitulation in Mormon Popular Historical Expression,” in *Usable Pasts: Traditions and Identity in North America*, ed. Tad Tuleja (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 175–211; Eliason, “Angels among the Mormons,” in *The Big Book of Angels*, ed. Beliefnet (New York: Rodale Books, 2002), 96–104; and Eliason, *Celebrating Zion: Pioneers in Mormon Popular Historical Expression* (Provo, UT: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and BYU Studies, 2004); and Eric A. Eliason, *The J. Golden Kimball Stories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

17. Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies” (2004), 151.

18. Austin E. Fife and James M. Fife, “Hay Derricks of the Great Basin and Upper Snake River Valley,” *Western Folklore* 7/3 (1948): 225–39.

to truly understand daily life, then traditions shared among, if not unique to, Mormons in the Intermountain West must also be considered as part of the scholarly history. The same is true for Carol Edison's work on cemeteries¹⁹ and regional books of folklore in the Intermountain West, such as Louie Attebery's edited book *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones*, a collection that includes a reprint of Fife's hay derrick study and one of Edison's analyses of gravestones.²⁰ The distinction between regional and religious identity is important, but the over-corrective may be too severe, requiring us to mine these regional studies for important Mormon folk expression and suggesting future work of sussing out the parallels and differences in specific folk traditions.

Concerns that Mormon folklore studies have often ignored deeply spiritual religious traditions, focusing instead on unusual supernatural occurrences, beliefs, and legends such as those about the Three Nephites, should be tempered. While the intense focus on the Three Nephites is noteworthy, it is important not to overlook a substantial body of scholarship that has attended to religious traditions more at the center of Mormon spiritual life. This corpus begins as early as 1942 with Wallace Stegner's *Mormon Country*, which, while not being an explicit analysis of religious tradition, nonetheless looks carefully at Mormon religious life.²¹ Then there are Austin and Alta Fife's description of the life cycle of Mormon religious life,²² Carolyn Gilkey's and David Knowlton's analyses of testimony narratives and meetings,²³ George Schoemaker's analysis of

19. Carol Edison, "Motorcycles, Guitars, and Bucking Broncos: Twentieth-Century Gravestones in Southeastern Idaho," in *Idaho Folklife Reader: Homesteads to Headstones*, ed. Louie W. Attebery (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 184–89; Edison, "Mormon Gravestones: A Folk Expression of Identity and Belief," *Dialogue* 22 (1989): 89–94; and Edison, "Material Culture: An Introduction and Guide to Mormon Vernacular," in *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1995), 306–35.

20. Louie W. Attebery, ed., *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985).

21. Wallace Earle Stegner, *Mormon Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1942).

22. Fife and Fife, *Saints of Sage and Saddle* (1956).

23. Gilkey, "Mormon Testimony Meeting" (1979); Carolyn Flatley Gilkey, "Verbal Per-

marriage confirmation narratives,²⁴ Eric Eliason's and Reinhold Hill's analyses of conversion narratives,²⁵ and the study of missionary customs and traditions by William A. Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy, and David Knowlton.²⁶ When tallied, the balance may still tip toward the supernaturally dramatic more than everyday lived religion, but scholarship that attends to deeply held religious belief has been a consistent part of Mormon folklore study since the second half of the twentieth century and continues to grow, as with Tom Mould's study of personal revelation narratives.²⁷

One of the most glaring omissions of Mormon folklore studies since the 1980s, not much noted by the field's chroniclers, has been its almost total failure, except for two short book reviews by William Wilson,²⁸ to engage in scholarly discussion about early Mormon "folk magic" and hermeticism, most typified by Michael Quinn's opus *Mormonism and the*

formance in Mormon Worship Services" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994); David Knowlton, "The Creation of Sacred Mormon Myth: Missionary, Native, and General Authority Accounts of a Bolivian Conversion," *Sunstone* 13/1 (1989):14–23; and Knowlton, "Belief, Metaphor, and Rhetoric: The Mormon Practice of Testimony Bearing," *Sunstone* 15/1 (1991): 21.

24. George H. Schoemaker, "Made in Heaven: Marriage Confirmation Narratives among Mormons," *Northwest Folklore* 7 (Spring 1989): 38–53.

25. Eric A. Eliason, "Toward the Folkloristic Study of Latter-day Saint Conversion Narratives," *BYU Studies* 38/1 (1999): 137–50; and Reinhold R. Hill, "Chapels, Baptismal Fonts, and the Curses of Cain: An Examination of the Obstacles to Conversion in Louisiana Mormon Conversion Narratives," *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 11 (1996): 53–66.

26. Wilson, *On Being Human* (1981); Jill Terry Rudy, "'Of Course, in Guatemala, Bananas Are Better': Exotic and Familiar Eating Experiences of Mormon Missionaries," in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 131–56; and David Knowlton, "'Gringo Jeringo': Anglo Mormon Missionary Culture in Bolivia," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. M. Cornwall, T. B. Heaton, and L. A. Young (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 218–36.

27. Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

28. William A. Wilson, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, *Brigham Young University Studies* 27/4 (1987): 96–104; and Wilson, review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, by D. Michael Quinn, *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (1989): 342–43.

Magic World View.²⁹ Quinn's research informed the work of major scholars of American religion, perhaps most notably John Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* and John L. Brooke's Bancroft Award-winning *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844*,³⁰ and has profoundly shaped scholarly understanding of not just the beginnings of Mormonism but also the cultural backdrop against which emerged America's Second Great Awakening. And while it is difficult to pinpoint a single cause of this oversight, David Allred and Eric Eliason have attempted to remedy it by bringing folkloristics to bear on the subject in several recent articles.³¹

In looking back over the past hundred years of Mormon folklore scholarship, we might also pay more attention to the kinds of methodological and theoretical shifts that Jill Terry Rudy begins to reveal in her 2004 survey. To a large extent, the study of Mormon folklore serves as a metonym for the study of folklore in the United States more broadly. The kinds of methodological and theoretical shifts occurring in the field of folklore—more emphasis on analysis and interpretation rather than collection, a greater focus on context, the application of performance theory—have occurred in the study of Mormon folklore as well. However, there are areas where the study of Mormon folklore has developed either slightly out of step with, or in anticipation of, these larger trends. In 1976 Wilson noted that more attention needed to be paid to situational context, and he was right; but we should acknowledge that Hector Lee was beginning to ask these questions of his data on Three Nephite stories as

29. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2 ed., (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

30. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1990); and John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

31. David Allred, "Early Mormon 'Magic': Insights from Folklore and from Literature," in *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, ed. Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013), 255–76; and David Allred and Eric A. Eliason, "No Big Deal: Early Mormon 'Folk Magic' in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship," *Brigham Young University Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

early as the 1940s, long before the developments in performance theory in the 1970s and 80s would begin to bring such concerns to the fore of folklore scholarship. It is also worth noting Austin Fife's use of the historic-geographic method to develop typologies of hay derricks in ways that presaged Henry Glassie's seminal study of folk housing in Middle Virginia.³² This approach is rare in the field today, though Jason Jackson has shown in his study of Yuchi dancing that such questions remain fruitfully examined in folklore study.³³

Jennifer Basquiat's examination of Haitian Mormon converts' bodies and movements as sites of, and conduits for, traditionally transmitted cultural experience³⁴ resonates with both LDS theology's emphasis on the divine nature and essential salvific role of human bodies and recent work on "bodylore" in the field of folklore.³⁵ David Hufford's experience-centered approach to religious folklore takes seriously as empirical evidence first-person accounts of encounters with spiritual and/or supernatural beings in much the same way that the field has long taken seriously people's understanding of the medicinal properties of plants or the aesthetic criteria by which people judge their own material and verbal folk art.³⁶ Hufford has found Mormon theology to be particularly well suited to interpret the kinds of pre-birth and post-death encounters that

32. Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).

33. Jason Baird Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life: Performance, Meaning, and Tradition in a Contemporary American Indian Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

34. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou, and the LDS Faith in Haiti," *Dialogue* 37/4 (2004):1–34.

35. See, for example, a special edition on bodylore in the *Journal of American Folklore* 107/423 (1994); and Katharine Young, *Bodylore* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993).

36. David Hufford, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Hufford, "Rational Skepticism and the Possibility of Unbiased Folk Belief Scholarship," *Talking Folklore* 1/9 (1990): 19–31; and Hufford, "Beings without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits," in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, ed. Barbara Walker (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995), 11–45.

people of all cultures have with loved ones, as well as the kind of encounters they have with usually human-shaped malevolent or glorious beings, a topic Eric Eliason has further fleshed out in his study of angels in the Mormon experience and pre-birth experience narratives.³⁷

Several instances of scholars in other disciplines reinventing the wheel to generate for themselves concepts akin to those central to folklore studies have occurred in recent years to the mixed delight and exasperation of folklorists long eager to promote the usefulness of their work to other disciplines. Scholars of Mormon family dynamics have followed the lead of their family studies discipline in investigating the importance of customs, traditions, and rituals to functional families.³⁸ In religious studies, the recently popular concept of “lived religion” is markedly similar to folklorists’ venerable “folklife” approach in which scholars focus on how religious, cultural, and ethnic identities are actually lived in the day-to-day practice of regular group members, rather than treated as discrete genres of expressive culture or as the definitional claims that the group’s leaders stipulate. This approach has been a central feature of folkloristics since the 1970s. It would be tempting to believe that “lived religion” was lifted whole cloth from the field of folklore were it not for the dearth of any reference to folklorists by religious studies scholars.³⁹

These instances of intellectual reinvention raise a larger question about scholarly identity. In some cases folklorists stand at the vanguard, in others they act as bricoleurs, and in still others, they and scholars from other fields work at the margins where folklore and related disciplines

37. Eric A. Eliason, “Angels among the Mormons,” in *The Big Book of Angels*, ed. Beiefnet (New York: Rodale Books, 2002), 96–104; and Eliason, “Pre-Birth Experience Narratives, Bible Scholarship, First Vision Accounts, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Religious Folklore,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming in 2014).

38. R. W. Loser et al., “Perceived Benefits of Religious Rituals in the Latter-day Saint Home,” *Review of Religious Research* 50/3 (2009): 345–62; and L. D. Marks and D. C. Dollahite, “Don’t Forget Home’: The Importance of Sacred Ritual in Families,” in *Understanding Religious Ritual: Theoretical Approaches and Innovations*, ed. J. Hoffman (New York: Routledge, 2012), 186–203.

39. Tona Hangen, “Lived Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Phil Barlow and Terryl Givens (forthcoming in 2014).

intersect. Accordingly, we should be attentive to the work undertaken by scholars outside the field who are exploring the kinds of traditions that folklorists have come to claim as central to their field. These traditions consist of ballads, folk songs, narratives (including legends, personal experience, and histories), material culture, and vernacular architecture. Accordingly, the history of Mormon folklore studies should include the work of cultural geographers and architectural historians such as Thomas Carter, Richard Francaviglia, Richard H. Jackson, Robert Layton, Donald Meinig, Lowry Nelson, and Robert Winter; sociologists such as Armand L. Mauss and anthropologist David R. Knowlton; and religious studies scholars such as Richley H. Crapo—all of whom have attended to vernacular traditions of Mormons in the same way that Jill Terry Rudy drew archaeologist Mark Leone into her earliest survey of folklore scholarship on account of his work in Mormon architecture.⁴⁰ Such a move is neither radical nor unprecedented; folklore has always been a field that has drawn loose boundaries for membership.

Somewhat more problematic, but still productively drawn into any survey of Mormon folklore studies, are the studies done by historians considering vernacular histories of the LDS Church. William Hartley's study of the story of the miracle of the gulls and crickets provides a useful example.⁴¹ Such work is somewhat discordant with folklore studies because Hartley's approach, like many historical approaches, undertakes as its primary objective to distinguish fact from fiction in the various accounts of a historical event, whereas folklorists are more apt to address questions such as what these different versions suggest about perceptions, beliefs, and values; the aesthetics of oral versions of these stories; and how generic norms influence form, function, and performance. But Hartley's study remains relevant to Mormon folklore studies because it assembles multiple versions of a key Mormon folk legend for analysis

40. Terry, "Exploring Belief and Custom" (1989); Leone, "Archaeology as the Science of Technology" (1973); and Leone, "Coalville Tabernacle" (1973).

41. William Hartley, "Mormons, Crickets, and Gulls: A New Look at an Old Story," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38/3 (1970): 224–39.

and helps to parse those areas that are supported by historical evidence and those areas that diverge based on perspective and time. Further, in the first half century of Mormon folklore studies, it has been historians rather than folklorists who have attended to folklore *about* Mormons, with Austin and Alta Fife's *Saints of Sage and Saddle* serving as the main exception, making clear the important contributions historians have made to the study of folklore.

More often identified in the history of Mormon folklore studies, however, is not disciplinary identity but tensions between academically trained scholars and amateur collectors. One of the most notable examples of this tension was when Kate B. Carter, president of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, was rumored to have been telling interviewees for her book series of faith-promoting stories not to talk to Hector Lee or any of his university colleagues who were engaged in similar work. Certainly part of this can be explained by commercial territorialism, but there is also the suggestion that Carter was worried that stories she viewed as spiritually powerful would be handled inappropriately by academics. Such tensions are hardly confined to Mormon folklore study and can be linked to the far broader "town-and-gown" tensions that are perceived as endemic and inherent. Yet in folklore this divide between academic-trained folklorist and amateurish collection remains, as evidenced by the many popular press collections of ghost stories and folktales, many of which have been reworked and retold by authors, rendering them of little use to academic folklorists.

In Mormon studies, there is a parallel divide between faith-promoting books written for church members and academic studies written by and for academic audiences. This divide is significant enough to make it difficult to argue for such faith-promoting works to be included in a survey of Mormon folklore scholarship, but it is worth pointing out that for those academic studies that tackle vernacular religious traditions, there is a good chance that analogues by both amateur collectors and LDS Church authorities also exist. For example, stories of personal revelation have been addressed by amateur author and church member JoAnn Hibbert Hamilton in *Personal Revelation: How to Recognize Promptings of*

the Spirit, emeritus General Authority Gerald N. Lund in *Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principles and Patterns of Personal Revelation*, and academic folklorist Tom Mould in *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition*.⁴²

Current state of affairs

Having examined, evaluated, and revised surveys of the state of Mormon folklore scholarship up to the turn of the twenty-first century, we come to the most recent period of scholarship, from 2000 to the present. In light of specific calls from Wilson and Rudy for study in specific areas and issues, we might ask how well the field has met those calls and what trends have since emerged.

First, it should be noted that there has not been a huge increase in Mormon folklore scholarship in the past decade. With a small number of works to examine, trends are difficult to identify. When these works are placed within the larger context of Mormon folklore research, however, it is possible to identify patterns that appear to endure by either continuing into the present or taking interesting detours.

The call for greater ethnographic fieldwork not only has been heeded but also has provided the avenue for additional strides in attending to audience interpretations and the heterogeneity of Mormon perspectives, behaviors, and traditions. The growing shift toward ethnography in Mormon folklore studies is not surprising. Folklore as a discipline developed out of two academic traditions: one based on literary texts and focused on ballads, the other ethnographic with a focus on American Indian culture and mythology. Mormon folklore studies grew out of the text-based ballad branch of the discipline, and the history of Mormon folklore

42. JoAnn Hibbert Hamilton, *Personal Revelation: How to Recognize the Promptings of the Spirit* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1998); Gerald N. Lund, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principles and Patterns of Personal Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007); and Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

scholarship has reflected this origin. But now much of the field, even for those scholars focused on narrative analysis, has shifted toward greater and more critical uses of ethnography.

In 2000 David Allred noted the fairly traditional field research practices of the Fifties that tended toward positivism, and he therefore called for the more dialogic, contested discourses that are possible through reflexive ethnography. That same year, Margaret Brady prophetically answered that call in her biography of Mary Susannah Fowler, a primarily historical work relying on archival research but including interviews with some of Fowler's descendants in a move toward reflexive ethnography. In 2011 Tom Mould continued the synthesis of ethnography and archival research as Brady had done but reversed the balance, this time with the archival data serving to provide depth and breadth to a primarily ethnographic study that moved outside the Intermountain West to North Carolina.⁴³ In between, a number of scholars have used ethnography as their primary methodology, including Eric Eliason in his study of Pioneer Day celebrations and Russian "Mormony," Jennifer Huss Basquiat in her analysis of religious practices of Haitian Mormons, Kristi Young in her analysis of creative dating traditions, and Kent Bean in his examination of the Manti Miracle Pageant.⁴⁴

These ethnographic studies have opened up views into the diversity of the traditions and perspectives of Mormons past and present. This diversity appears within congregations and among members, as Brady and Allred note, as well as across regions as Basquiat's study highlights. While the increase in regional variation has been affected by studies within the

43. Mould, *Still, the Small Voice* (2011).

44. Eliason, *Celebrating Zion* (2004); Eric A. Eliason and Gary Browning, "Crypto-Mormons or Pseudo-Mormons?: Latter-day Saints and Russia's Indigenous New Religious Movements," *Western Folklore* 61/2 (2002): 173–207; Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism" (2004); Kristi W. Young, "Now That I've Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations," *Marriage and Families* (Winter 2005): 10–17; and Kent R. Bean, "Policing the Borders of Identity at the Mormon Miracle Pageant" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2005).

United States,⁴⁵ the bulk of the scholarship has been focused internationally, with Rudy's study of foodways in Guatemala, Eliason's study of religious identity in Russia, and Underwood's study of religious identity among the Maori in New Zealand.⁴⁶ Eliason and Underwood take a primarily historical approach in their articles on Russians and Maoris. Basquiat's efforts to track shifts in practice and doctrinal interpretation among Haitians and Eliason's study of pioneer day celebrations in other countries, however, suggest a particularly rich avenue for exploring cultural variation, particularly as it suggests a vibrant vernacular tradition in a church often characterized as highly centralized, authoritative, and hierarchical.

The same is true for the more historical studies of Jessie Embry and Jorge Iber, who have been exploring Mormonism among the nonwhite minority Latter-day Saints in the United States, including Asian American and Hispanic members.⁴⁷ These studies, taken together but particularly those of Basquiat, Eliason, and Underwood, have examined how Mormon identity is constructed and maintained among men and women who must balance competing claims on national, regional, and additional religious identities, clearly fulfilling Rudy's vision of a future where the politics of identity are explored in greater detail. Further, Mould's attention to religious reputations within LDS ward units as opposed to comparatively across non-Mormon contexts attends not only to the construction of Mormon identity but also to the variation within these identities.

45. Tom Mould, "Narratives of Personal Revelation among Latter-Day Saints," *Western Folklore* 68/4 (2009): 431–80; and Mould, *Still, the Small Voice* (2011).

46. Rudy, "Bananas Are Better" (2004); Eliason and Browning, "Crypto-Mormons or Pseudo-Mormons?" (2002); and Grant Underwood, "Mormonism, the Maori and Cultural Authenticity," *Journal of Pacific History* 35/2 (2000): 133–46.

47. See, in particular, Jessie L. Embry, *"In His Own Language": Mormon Spanish-Speaking Congregations in the United States* (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1997); Embry, *Asian American Mormons: Bridging Cultures* (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1999); and Jorge Iber, *Hispanics in the Mormon Zion* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000).

Gender as one important piece of that identity has been addressed in past scholarship but remains understudied today. This work has been taken up primarily by female scholars outside the LDS Church.⁴⁸ Continued ethnographic study of traditions performed within the explicitly gendered spaces of Relief Society and the implicitly gendered spaces of church and home more generally deserves greater attention, particularly in terms of how women use these traditions to respond to the patriarchy of the church.

With ethnography comes variety and variation, situated performances, and divergence in view and opinion. It also has the potential to highlight individual performers. This potential has to a large extent gone unaddressed. There are some important exceptions. For example, Margaret Brady, as previously noted, highlighted folk poet and healer Susannah Fowler as the focus of an entire book, though it is noteworthy that Fowler had been dead for eighty years by the time Brady published her work.⁴⁹ Folk legends and heroes such as J. Golden Kimball, Porter Rockwell, and Joseph Smith have all received attention as subjects of folklore, but except for Kimball, none were viewed as folk performers. Both Thomas Cheney and Eric Eliason recognized this dual identity in Kimball (a phenomenon common in the humorous anecdotes and tall tales in which storyteller and protagonist are typically one and the same, termed a “performer-hero” by Eliason), each authoring a book of Kimball’s stories as they have continued to be shared throughout the LDS community.⁵⁰

The general lack of studies focusing on folk performers as “stars” (Henry Glassie’s term) is discussed at length in *The Individual and Tradition: Folkloristic Perspectives* and is hardly confined to Mormon folklore studies.⁵¹ In that book, however, Mould argues that a problem faced

48. For example, Lawless, “I Know If I Don’t Bear My Testimony” (1984); and Brady, “Transformations of Power” (1987).

49. Brady, *Mormon Healer Folk Poet* (2000).

50. Cheney, *Golden Legacy* (1974); and Eliason, *J. Golden Kimball Stories* (2007).

51. Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla, eds., *The Individual in Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

particularly in sacred and religious traditions is the expectation for humility in performance.⁵² Many folk traditions have no expectation for humility, and groups are hardly monolithic in this regard. Sharing personal revelation, for example, requires humility among Mormon narrators, where joke telling among the same group does not. While this may explain the lack of recognition of individual Mormon tradition bearers as “stars” in sharing personal, sacred, and spiritual experiences, it does not explain why more attention has not been paid to individual performers in traditions that do not carry the expectation for humility. Many folk genres of narrative, material culture, and foodways, for example, should be ripe for this kind of analysis that approaches individual performers as the skilled artists they are. But what anthropologist Richard Buonforte calls Mormons’ “anti-performative performance aesthetic”⁵³ has hindered efforts (such as his own) to draw scholarly attention to performative aspects of Sunday School lessons, testimony bearing, priesthood blessings, and church talks since Mormons tend to frown on overt flair in such situations, making the best performances, ironically, the ones that seem least like performances.

At tension with the shift toward ethnographic study is the call for greater work in comparative studies. Folklorists have tended not to do comparative work, favoring the case study and the attention to cultural specificity. That said, etic and comparative analyses are nonetheless important and useful (yet unfulfilled) approaches. Take conversion narratives, for example. Eliason has provided an important case study of the form, function, and aesthetics of conversion narratives within the Mormon church.⁵⁴ Additional case studies exist for other Christian faiths, as well as for non-Christian faiths around the world. It is useful to ask, then, whether there are patterns in conversion narratives that are fairly universal among Christian groups, or among world religions more generally.

52. Tom Mould, “A Backdoor into Performance,” in Cashman, Mould, and Shukla, *Individual in Tradition* (2011).

53. Personal communication to author, 1992.

54. Eliason, “Latter-day Saint Conversion Narratives” (1999).

In doing so, the case study is strengthened by allowing us to identify those aspects of conversion narratives that are more or less unique to a particular group and therefore illustrative of a distinct religious tradition.

Finally, hinted at in Rudy's 2004 survey but addressed explicitly in conversations among folklorists is the degree to which Mormon folklore studies includes non-Mormons as well as Mormons. From the very beginning with the Reverend David Utter's brief note on supernatural beliefs of Mormons in 1892, the study of Mormon folklore has been addressed by scholars outside the church. The first wave of nineteenth-century scholars specializing in Mormon folklore scholars was primarily Mormon—Thomas Cheney, Austin and Alta Fife, Hector Lee, Wayland Hand, and Lester Hubbard (but not the prominent mid-century folklorist Richard Dorson). The second wave of folklorists was primarily non-Mormon—Barre Toelken, Jan Brunvand, and Steve Siporin (but William A. Wilson was LDS). The third wave went back to being mostly Mormon—Eric Eliason, Jill Terry Rudy, David Allred, Jacqueline Thursby, and Carol Edison (but not Margaret Brady or Tom Mould).⁵⁵ Despite these shifts in the majority, the voices of insiders and outsiders have been present throughout the history of Mormon folklore studies. That said, when one considers the sustained commitment to Mormon folklore studies, the balance tips dramatically. The vast majority of the non-Mormons working in Mormon folklore have published just one or two articles; the major books and extensive number of articles that indicate leadership in the field remain authored primarily by Mormons. Folklorist Richard Dorson's influence should not be underestimated, but is remarkable that the books by Brady and Mould have been welcomed partly for the authors' status as outsiders. This response recognizes the implicit concern of apologetics by Mormon authors that has often been assumed of Mormon studies—primarily in the field of history, but also in the field of folklore.

55. See Stanley, *Folklore in Utah* (2004); and Eliason and Mould, *Latter-day Lore* (2013).

The future of Mormon folklore studies

In the past decade, the field of Mormon folklore studies has shifted toward greater ethnographic work, increased emphasis on cultural variety within the church, and the construction of multiple, disparate identities within wards and across the globe. More attention has been given to areas outside the Intermountain West and to the kinds of questions that assume variation rather than homogeneity. Yet the field has not lost its roots and continues to produce work that fits comfortably within scholarly traditions of the past to great reward. Matthew Bowman's study of Mormon conceptions of Big Foot, for example, reflects the approach that Hector Lee took in the 1940s with *Three Nephite legends*, serving as an example of solid scholarship that addresses enduring questions usefully asked today.⁵⁶ Similarly, folklorists continue to collect folklore as concrete items for deposit in archives and for analysis as text, aided by oral historians such as Robert Freeman and Dennis Wright in their extensive research project to gather the stories of Mormons in the military—again, important work that remains intellectually compelling and productive.⁵⁷

There are certainly areas in the study of Mormon folklore that are ripe for new or further analysis. For instance, Leonard Primiano has suggested the exploration of creativity within the context of an institutionalized church.⁵⁸ In the study of genre, we know that expectations for what can be conveyed—as well as how, when, and where it can be conveyed—are not inherently restrictive but can actually facilitate creativity and performance. Having the structures in place with formula, norms, and patterns as building blocks can help encourage creativity by providing

56. Matthew Bowman, "Mormon Bigfoot," *Journal of Mormon History* 33/3 (2007): 62–82; and Hector H. Lee, *The Three Nephites* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1949).

57. Robert C. Freeman and Dennis A. Wright, *Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-Day Saints in World War II* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2001) and *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003).

58. Personal communication to author, 2012.

blueprints from which to innovate. The creative process in the context of an institutionalized, hierarchical church like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will no doubt feel restrictive for some, but it will be liberating for others. How people create within these confines, norms, and expectations deserves greater attention, particularly in terms of function and aesthetics.

The continued spread of performance theory throughout folklore will likely continue to have an impact on the study of Mormon folklore as well, encouraging both ethnographic fieldwork as well as performance-based studies. Comprehensive, event-based approaches that consider multiple genres within a single performance context hold particular promise for understanding vernacular traditions. Carol Edison, for example, has conducted studies on gravestones and obituaries. A study of the intersecting traditions surrounding death that considers the distinct but related genres of gravestones and obituaries with music, foodways, narrative, and ritual related to death and mourning as a single coherent phenomenon would be particularly rewarding. Such a move would provide a more holistic and comprehensive use of ethnography in folklore fieldwork. Another approach would be to produce more ethnographies of a single ward like Susan Taber's in an attempt to capture the range of traditions of the community.⁵⁹ Although such work may seem more rewarding in an international context because of the dearth of work outside the United States, a comprehensive ethnography of this nature within the country could be equally revealing by challenging the monolithic narrative that continues to shape our understanding of Mormon folklore.

Finally, with the yearly addition of student projects to the archives at Brigham Young University and Utah State University, folklore archives will no doubt continue to provide scholars with material, whether it is for comparative, historical studies showing longitudinal shifts and trends; for targeted studies of a particular theme, topic, or genre; or for mixed method studies in which archival research is used to support ethnographic

59. Susan Buhler Taber, *Mormon Lives: A Year in the Elkton Ward* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

work, or vice versa. Between the rich archives and the continued ethnographic work of scholars in and outside Utah, the field appears no less vibrant than in the past. It does, however, show clear signs of evolution that make it clear that Mormon folklore studies is dynamic rather than stagnant and that there is room, lots of room, for continued exploration.

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