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Essential Writings*

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## Review Panel

Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblich, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

*Reviewed by Anthea Butler, Martha Bradley-Evans, and Taylor G. Petrey*

**ANTHEA BUTLER:** With Mormonism attracting greater academic and popular interest in America, there has never been a more appropriate time for the volume *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*. It is an excellent, stand-alone volume that takes seriously the questions and work of Mormon women wrestling with their historical, current, and future roles in a denomination that offers the priesthood only to men, and only since 1978 to men of African descent. Like many women in other conservative religious groups, Mormon women are wrestling with their faith and reconciling their roles in the world within a religious tradition that limits their authority. So while this is a volume having to do with a rich history of primary documents and speeches on Mormon feminism in the last forty years, it is very important to place these documents in the context of a broader understanding of gender in religions that are focused on family and on God (or in this case, Heavenly Father) as male.

The editors state in the introduction that “a Mormon feminist is anyone who identifies both with the Mormon movement and with the centuries-old struggle for women’s equality, dignity, well-being, and full participation that we call feminism.” While this may seem to be a simple statement, it is loaded with profound significance. For many Mormon

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women, the idea of being a Mormon as well as a feminist is unthinkable and incompatible with the faith. The authors take this issue seriously in the introduction to *Mormon Feminism* by linking Mormon feminism to four major issues: Mormon history, Mormon theology (specifically on the priesthood), the role of Heavenly Mother, and Mormon scriptures. Doing so helps set down the lines of the forty-plus years of discourse that they lay out convincingly, while taking into consideration the concerns and issues of those who disagree with feminism.

The organization of this volume, while chronological, spans the genesis of feminism in the LDS context and provides a helpful framework in which to engage the stages of Mormon women and feminism. They are “Foundations” (1970s), “Lived Contradictions” (1980s), “Defining Moments” (1990s), and “Resurgence” (2000 and beyond). These decade divisions define the specific stages in Mormon feminism and also indirectly show how the development of feminism within Mormonism raised serious questions about the history of the LDS Church and doctrinal pronouncements. It also gives academics a framework to pair Mormon women’s quest for feminism alongside women in other religious groups like Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and Islam.

The “Foundations” section begins with the “Pink Issue,” the 1971 issue of *Dialogue* centered on perspectives of Mormon women. This document provides a helpful anchor for understanding how Mormon women were facing a rapidly changing culture while attempting to reconcile their lives and roles within the church. The section also covers engagement with major historical issues both within and outside the church, most prominently the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). It may come as a surprise (as it did to me) that many Mormons were at first supportive of the ERA and that a heavily Mormon state, Idaho, voted for the amendment. In 1975, however, as the editors point out, the church announced its opposition to the amendment in the *Deseret News* in 1975. In a sense, this opposition would sharpen the tensions between Mormon women who had questions not only about their role within the church but also about doctrine. Sonia Johnson’s 1979 piece “Patriarchal Panic: Sexual Politics in the Mormon Church” was an especially

insightful addition that showed how the campaign in the Mormon community against the ERA divided the church between those who supported the ERA and also those who were against it. Johnson was excommunicated in December 1979 by church leaders. While the ERA would ultimately suffer defeat in 1983, it is interesting how the fight for its passage would illuminate the questions of Mormon women regarding their place in the church.

Two important doctrinal questions pervading each section of this volume involve the priesthood and Heavenly Mother. The priesthood is given to men only, and while God is commonly referred to in LDS doctrine as “Heavenly Father,” there is no explicit and detailed information about “Heavenly Mother” in official doctrine. Mormon feminists from the 1970s forward would discuss and question both doctrines. LDS women’s push for the priesthood could be understood in one sense as resembling the push for women’s ordination in other Christian religious traditions such as Catholicism, but it is more encompassing than that. In her 1991 essay “Women and the Priesthood” (pp. 119–24), Nadine McCombs Hansen lays out both scriptural and historical arguments for women receiving the priesthood, coupling it with the revelation for black men to ascend to the priesthood. “I wonder, if we had not been so adamantly certain that the Negro doctrine could never change,” she asks, “might it have changed sooner than it did? What part do we, the membership, play in change?” In 2014 the argument was carried forward by a Samoan woman, Lani Wendt Young, in “Rejoice in the Diversity of Our Sisterhood: A Samoan Mormon Feminist Voice on Ordain Women.” While Young does not desire the priesthood for herself, she relates the troubling stories of domestic abuse in both the Samoan and LDS context. The line “Men get the priesthood and women get motherhood” cuts to the core, especially when, as Young relates, it is said to a woman who cannot have children.

These stories, along with the primary documents, bring to the forefront a perhaps unintended but important consequence: *Mormon Feminism* not only questions the role of women in the church, it also chronicles a history of feminist women’s engagement with doctrine.

The two went hand in hand. One of the useful resources in the volume, “Suggested Readings by Topic,” lists nine separate texts dealing with “Mother in Heaven,” only one less than the ten dealing with Mormon feminism. These important inclusions show the historical genesis of LDS thinking on the concept of Heavenly Mother, the historical connections to beliefs and practices, and the ways in which women found comfort in thinking of not only Heavenly Father but also Heavenly Mother as part of their cherished beliefs.

As an outsider to Mormonism, I came to this volume with both excitement and trepidation—excitement to have the opportunity to read about Mormon women in their own words, unfiltered. *Mormon Feminism* helped me begin to understand the rich historical connections of Mormon women to other religious women in America. The trepidation on my part, as an outsider, is the realization of the fine line women walk, and often step over, as intellectuals and seekers who question the tenets of their faith. Like women in conservative Christian, Jewish, or Muslim traditions, Mormon women have had to negotiate the line between speaking up for themselves and maintaining social cohesion. Many times, other women create perilous situations for women who desire more freedom and autonomy. Many who disagree with the texts in this book are fellow Mormon women who see feminism as usurping their places within the church and as heresy. If the last segment of the book, “Resurgence,” is any indication, the topic of Mormon feminism will remain culturally and academically relevant for some time to come.

I am also very appreciative of the attention paid in the volume to diversity issues of Mormon women. The inclusion of not only Wendt Young’s article, but also Janan Graham Russell’s “Black Bodies in White Spaces” and Gina Colvin’s “Ordain Women, but . . . : A Womanist Perspective,” demonstrates the inclusive nature of this compilation. One of the current and historical issues in feminism has been the differences between white feminist and feminists of color. Engaging nonwhite Mormon women feminist thinking is an important step to counteracting some of the historical tensions and also understanding the contradictions that outsiders may believe Mormon women of color face in the LDS Church.

In spite of these tensions, *Mormon Feminism* is an in-depth, accessible resource for Mormon studies, religious studies, feminist studies, and gender studies. It is also accessible to the lay person who is not an academic, something that the editors paid close attention to. The well-organized wealth of resources includes a glossary of terms for those not familiar with Mormonism and lists of additional terms and suggested readings. The editors have also provided introductions addressing historical context for all of the primary documents included in the volume. For scholars and interested persons both inside and outside of the church, these are valuable resources for further study. *Mormon Feminism* is an excellent collection and, for the layperson and academic alike, an invaluable resource for understanding an important, but often muted, segment of LDS life.

**Anthea Butler** is associate professor of religion and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Making a Sanctified World: Women in the Church of God in Christ*, published by the University of North Carolina Press. She is currently pursuing a project on African American women, literacy, and religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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**MARTHA BRADLEY-EVANS:** The real power in this collection of writing by LDS women is the way it reveals the many ways of being Mormon and of thinking and practicing Mormonism. To be sure, one's ability to thrive while being Mormon and feminist is situational, depending greatly on the nature of a ward's culture or on the open-mindedness of a bishop. According to historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Mormon feminism "is a complex and multiple identity, capable of dynamism, independence, and resilience" (p. 193). *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* demonstrates ways that women have found personal equilibrium or disequilibrium while interrogating gender in the LDS Church. My own work and experience in the church suggests a complex tapestry

of women struggling to understand where they belong, what they can contribute, and how to find meaning in their lives as spiritual beings.

There were many times in the reading of this volume that I wished I had read the words of Claudia Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, or Lisa Hawkins—three Mormon feminist contributors to this volume—at different moments in my life. This is probably true for other readers as well. Many Mormon feminists (or closet feminists) feel a profound sense of isolation or difference that separates them from the community offered by a congregation, perhaps what they most crave and value. But what some essays or poems in this book suggest is that there are many variations of Mormon women, that diversity actually strengthens the church. As is true of the variety of trees that make a forest, or biodiversity that guarantees greater sustainability for the system, this diversity of viewpoint and experience can potentially create greater resiliency for the church as an institution and create room for a greater variety of human beings to be welcomed into the mix. In the words of Chieko Okazaki, former member of the Relief Society general presidency, “it is the diversity in our circumstances that gives us compassionate hearts” (p. 275).

Some of these essays suggest an image of a time when women did not feel safe expressing their viewpoints or acting on their values or did not feel respected for their difference. Again, this is strikingly situational. The ideal would be the communion of a circle of friends like those who met to discuss their feminist views in Boston in the 1970s, or the connection that women feel in virtual communities formed through blogs, which isn’t all that different from the camaraderie that pioneer women felt talking across a quilt design as they shared their lives. But not all Mormon feminists have had this important experience or acceptance.

Hear the hope in the words of Joanna Brooks in her poem “Invocation/Benediction,” which reads in part:

Mother, Father, give me vision.  
Give me strength to work hours past my daughters’ bedtime.  
Give me an incandescent all-night garage

with a quorum of thimble-thumbed grandmothers sitting on  
borrowed folding chairs.

We will gather all the lost scraps and stitch them together:

A quilt big enough to warm all our generations:

all the lost, found, rich, poor, good, bad, in, out, old, new, country,  
city, dusty, shiny ones;

A quilt big enough to cover all the alfalfa fields in the Great Basin.

Bigger. We are piecing together a quilt with no edges.

God, make me brave enough to love my people.

How wonderful it is to have a people to love. (p. 247)

The editors of this collection seem to suggest it is women who must piece the “quilt with no edges,” a “quilt big enough to warm all our generations,” finding better ways to listen to the stories of others, to welcome home those who choose to move out and in, to remember how it was for others, to make meaning.

In the introduction, Joanna Brooks writes that while working on this volume, “I have felt the presence—sometimes palpable—of Mormon feminists, past, present, and future.” Rachel Hunt Steenblik writes similarly, “It was a gift to consciously and consistently turn my heart (and mind) to my spiritual foremothers and sisters. The work of remembering felt at times both harrowing and holy.” And, finally, Hannah Wheelwright says that she is thankful to her parents “for instilling in me a strong moral compass and a faith that inspires the courage to act on it.” There is much in these three simple comments that reveals the heart of this book—an acknowledgement of the continuity of story, the richness of connections to past women’s lives, and the inheritance of a moral way of living one’s life in part to honor those who have lived before. Writing the history of their lives, living our own in the context of the modern era, and trying to make sense of it all is a sort of moral imperative for these three women, and one that I share. The immense generosity of those who shared their work, their poetry, their essays, or other forms of writing in order to join with women who wrote and spoke in the early church and with those who continue to the present is at times profoundly moving, inspiring, and dismaying, and it never fails to provoke thought.



The authors have chosen to include key pieces from the early 1970s to the present that depict the lives of Mormon feminists and their efforts to find meaning in their experience as members of the LDS Church. They feature essays written about many of the critical issues and perceived inconsistencies in practice or belief that cause women to ask questions and that produce, in the authors' words, "a palpable tension that Mormon women process in a number of different ways." The authors suggest that "Mormon feminism is the name for the community where we can explore these questions openly and together." Importantly, and perhaps creating the most important rationale for this collection, they write:

Each Mormon feminist finds herself coming into these questions at a different moment in her life. This can be a disorienting experience, especially given the deep confidence many Mormons place in our faith's ability to answer most of life's challenges and questions. But Mormon feminism offers the welcome message that none of us is alone in our questions, nor are we the first to ask them. We can learn much from those who have been living, researching, and writing about these questions for the last forty years. (p. 8)

*Mormon Feminism* includes the range of approaches that Mormon feminists have taken in their work—from the examination of theology by Margaret Toscano, Janice Allred, or Maxine Hanks to historical work by Jill Derr, Claudia Bushman, or Linda Wilcox and poetry by Lisa Hawkins or Carol Lynn Pearson. These women have used their gifts for meaning-making, trying to understand their own lives and those of others.

Finally—and maybe it's the whole point—*Mormon Feminism* assumes that personal narratives create a sort of common ground with roots that run deep into the Mormon past and present and connect us to each other regardless of where we end up. It challenges readers, as author Neylan McBaine articulated, to "allow [themselves] for a moment to step into the shoes of someone who struggles with finding her place" (p. 259). Evoking a type of religious empathy, these stories show us that the world looks and feels different to each of us, and our own understanding of our life experience as Mormon women will be enriched by imagining that of

others. Kudos to the editors for making this important book happen; it is, in my estimation, essential reading, especially for Mormon women.

**Martha Bradley-Evans** is senior associate vice president of academic affairs, dean of undergraduate studies, and professor in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Utah. Her book *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority and Equal Rights* details the LDS Church's fight against the Equal Rights Amendment.

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**TAYLOR G. PETREY:** This critical volume presents a history that previously had only been scattered, passed on orally, and learned over decades. The book is a compilation of social commentary, scriptural analysis, personal essays, historical studies, poetry, blog posts, and theology. The editors introduce each entry with a short explanation about the author, the historical context of the piece, and some of its impact. For many of the entries, there is also a short bibliographic section with additional resources on the same topic.

The volume posits a fundamental compatibility between the principles of feminism and the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormon feminist project is, then, to identify points of inequality and rectify them in “the creation of a Zion community of equals.”<sup>1</sup> The editors repeat Claudia Bushman's framework (pp. 36–39) for the founding principles of Mormon feminism—to strengthen the church and its women—in the introductory remarks throughout the volume. Guided by this perspective, the assemblage of documents is inspiring, heartbreaking, and ultimately optimistic about the future of Mormon feminism.

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1. Joanna Brooks, “Mormon Feminism: An Introduction,” in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, ed. Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblich, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press), 7.

As a reader, I am left with two major sets of questions, one about the past and another about the future. Concerning the past, I wonder what narratives scholars may explore in the historiography of Mormon feminism. The basic historical trajectory of this volume divides modern Mormon feminism into four periods that represent moments of growth, tension, or decline: the 1970s are “foundations,” the 1980s are “lived contradictions,” the 1990s are “defining moments,” and the 2000s are “resurgence.” These periods are largely, though not entirely, explained within the context of Mormon feminism’s own travails, especially as the movement came into direct conflict with church authority. The trajectory of this narrative represents similar themes of Mormon feminist views of history, such as the idea of contraction of the social and ecclesiastical roles for women over the course of the twentieth century. Some Mormon women felt the contraction in their own lives (such as the brief policy barring women from praying in church meetings), and others discovered the elimination of women’s past spiritual and ritual practices, such as healing, the role of women in church governance, and the loss of the Relief Society’s independence.

The longest section, “Foundations,” lays out the origins of Mormon feminism and the agenda that continues to dominate and define the movement: a focus on Heavenly Mother, on priesthood ordination and ordinances for women, and on unequal distribution of gender roles in the home and beyond. This early bubbling up is followed by conflicts with the LDS Church. The church’s opposition to the ERA, announced in 1975, strained the proposed compatibility between feminism and church teachings that many feminists were putting forward; it also exposed both the depth of the problem the church had with women’s equality in the home, church, and society and the risks that Mormon women activists faced.

The next section, “Lived Contradictions,” shows how conflict between the church and feminists produced divisions between Mormon feminists themselves. The early 1980s saw serious tension between those feminists who were content to work within the institution and those who were coming into conflict with it. This tension reflected a paradox

that is at the heart of how women have been shaped by the church and by the different kinds of Mormon feminist responses to the church. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explains, “That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints simultaneously enlarges and diminishes women should hardly be surprising since it was born and has grown to maturity in a larger society which does the same” (p. 115). Sometimes the enlarging felt greater, and sometimes the diminishing more acute.

In the 1990s Mormon feminism flourished and was followed by “defining moments”—that is, conflicts with the LDS Church over doctrine and practice. Then, over the next decade, there seems to have been a deafening silence of Mormon feminism, prompting Peggy Fletcher Stack to ask the famous question in the early 2000s, “Where have all the Mormon feminists gone?” The question itself seemed to anticipate a new rise of Mormon feminism beginning in the early 2000s. The era of what the editors term “resurgence” in Mormon feminism is associated with the rise of blogging and a new round of Mormon feminist organizations that continued to exhibit disagreement about how exactly to engage the church, culminating once again in open conflicts between feminists and church authorities. This is the moment in which Mormon feminism now finds itself, and it remains to be seen whether this pattern will continue to repeat.

This historical narrative of Mormon feminism’s rise and fall raises a number of important historiographical questions. How does this structure contribute to our imagination of this movement? How does this structure correspond to cultural trends beyond the scope of Mormonism? While the book seems to occasionally locate Mormon feminism within the broader context of American feminist movements, it more often loses sight of this context, remaining within a local history of Mormon women talking to Mormons about Mormon history. What remains to be done is to think about how the history of Mormon feminism contributes to a history of American feminism. How do the various agendas of Mormon feminism participate in broader trends? For instance, how do academic movements for women’s history shape Mormon feminism? How does the Mormon feminist appeal to Heavenly Mother compare to similar

goddess worship movements in feminist and New Age engagement with religion? What connections exist between the push for Mormon women's priesthood ordination and similar women's ordination movements in other traditions in the 1970s and 80s? How do different wings of Mormon feminism exhibit broader feminist debates about activism and theory? Further, how do the conservative responses to Mormon feminism fit within broader trends in American conservative movements?

So much for the questions about the past. What of the future? In the contemporary resurgence, the volume editors identify five "key questions" for the future of Mormon feminism, including "priesthood for women, women's role in temple rites, the doctrinal persistence of polygamy, the absence of Heavenly Mother from Mormon worship and practice, and the enfranchisement of women's voices in day-to-day LDS church decision-making." These are largely the same issues that emerged in Mormon feminism's foundational period four decades ago. For the future, the editors add to this list the "concerns raised by Mormon women of color" (p. 227). This final agenda item may be more profoundly transformative than just adding to the legacy list. With the promised attention on race, the actual attention remains strikingly thin. The first primary source to deal with this issue is referenced on page 267 (out of 292) and dates to 2013. Whether the split between Mormon feminist and womanist values will follow the same pattern as in other religious communities, or can learn from those tensions and adjust and accommodate for differences, is an open question. The recent firestorm over the release of the artwork titled *Black Eve* revealed significant disagreement between feminist and womanist reactions.<sup>21</sup>

Besides race, issues of gender and sexuality have posed another significant challenge to broader feminist movements. Going forward, I wonder how Mormon feminism will relate to same-sex marriage, trans topics, and queer critique. There is essentially no discussion of these topics in this volume. Perhaps this absence is expected, as feminist and

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2. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon Painting of a Black Eve Draws Fire, but Not for the Reasons You Might Think," *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 17, 2016. Updated March 19, 2016, <http://www.sltrib.com/home/3672712-155/mormon-painting-of-a-black-eve>.

LGBT Mormon history have largely been considered separate areas of inquiry. Further, the anxiety Mormon feminists have had over the so-called lavender menace goes back to the 1970s, when Mormon and US culture first rejected women's liberation because of a perceived threat that it would lead to "homosexual marriage." Since then, Mormon feminists have often emphasized Mormon and feminine credentials as a basis of legitimacy and have eschewed their non-gender-conforming peers. No doubt written with some irony, Claudia Bushman domesticated Mormon feminism from the outset: "We benefit from outside interests (from the home) and can usually manage them without skimping on the baked goods" (p. 37).

In a 1979 letter quoted in *Mormon Feminism* from the members of the Alice Louise Reynolds Forum to LDS Church president Spencer W. Kimball, the writers lamented the plight Mormon feminists faced in the church: "In a classic example of guilt by association, Mormon feminists are being linked to the destruction of the family, homosexual marriages, and abortion." The relationship between the church's position on homosexuality and Mormon feminist views on homosexuality remains to be explored. The rise of gay and lesbian Mormon activism historically parallels Mormon feminist activism, but there is no existing treatment of the relationship between these two movements. How future Mormon feminists might engage issues of nonnormative gender and sexuality is a question that this volume leaves still unaddressed.

**Taylor G. Petrey** is Lucinda Hinsdale Stone Associate Professor of Religion at Kalamazoo College (ThD, MTS, Harvard Divinity School). He is the author of *Resurrecting Parts: Early Christians on Desire, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference* (Routledge, 2015). He is a research associate at the Women's Studies in Religion Program and visiting associate professor of women's studies and sexuality at Harvard Divinity School. His current project is provisionally titled "Divining Gender: Mormonism and Sexual Difference."