Two Extremes: Persisting Dualities in Portrayals of Black Mormons

Joshua Wagner

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_stwriting

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_stwriting/17
Two Extremes:
Persisting Dualities in Portrayals of Black Mormons

Quincy D. Newell’s lecture “Narrating Jane” touched on many topics relevant to race relations and how they have been viewed in the LDS Church throughout the last two centuries. More specifically, Newell discussed an African American woman named Jane Elizabeth Manning James, an LDS convert born in the early 1800s in Connecticut, who had a close relationship with the Prophet Joseph Smith. In her lecture, Newell addressed how LDS people have talked about Jane, “an early African American Mormon woman,” a discussion that did not ensue until many decades following her death.

Newell argued that around the turn of the century, Jane became well-known because she both provided a model for living a devout LDS life, and helped the LDS Church construct an optimal past while they looked toward the future.¹ Her story became widely used due to the fact that she was both black and deeply committed to her religion, despite hardships that occurred in her life. However, Newell presented a duality that exists in the retelling of Jane’s story. On the one hand, many tend to universalize Jane’s story in an attempt to make it more relatable. In doing so, however, her racial personality and particularity are drained in order to make her relatable to a wider, largely non-black denomination. Alternatively, some tend to dwell on and overemphasize her racial particularity, which leads to her story largely being filled with stereotypical elements, rather than the reality of her experiences.²

² Ibid.
Newell concludes by explaining that Jane’s story provides us with an opportunity to think about race in Church history.\(^3\) Her life and its story are not comfortable, nor accessible. However, while the racism and racial elements are largely ignored, her life has the potential to provide for a grappling with the Church’s racial past in ways that cannot otherwise be attained.

In recent decades, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had to grapple with a racially-charged past in order to move towards a global future. In doing so, the Church must boldly confront those that “consider any reference or ‘remembrance of’ Mormonism’s ‘racial past...an embarrassment and a hindrance to multiracial evangelism’.”\(^4\) While the church largely professes a desire to “preach the message of Mormonism ‘without regard for race or color’,” as seen with the story of Jane, this message can seem rather skewed and disjointed.\(^5\) As with the presentation of Jane’s story, modern portrayals of black Latter-day Saints also demonstrate a duality in how these black Saints are represented, both in church media and in individual congregations. However, these portrayals often seem like overreaching attempts by the church as a whole to rush to accept black members with open arms, “without having to confront the unpleasant, negative historical and theological questions” that surround the issue of African American Mormons.\(^6\) In the LDS Church today, the duality that emerges in the telling of Jane’s story continues to be a constant presence in both the portrayal of black members of the church in the media, as well as in the lives of individual black Mormons.

**Portrayals of Early and Modern African American Mormons**

---

3 Newell, “Narrating Jane.”
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 3.
As with Jane, many early African American members of the church are often overlooked or misrepresented in the annals of church history. In 1978, the church published an article discussing Elijah Abel, a faithful, early black member of the fledgling LDS Church. However, that article, while failing to mention that Elijah Abel had been ordained to the priesthood and even been a member of the Seventy, largely “misrepresented the true status of black Latter-day Saints in the early LDS Church” and “deprived contemporary African Americans, both within Mormonism and in American society at large, of positive role models from the early Latter-day Saint movement.” The article also held no mention of other important African American members of the early LDS Church such as Walker Lewis, who had been ordained to the priesthood by a younger brother of Joseph Smith. Other early black members of the church, including Samuel D. Chambers and Mary Lucile Bankhead, rarely if ever enter the telling of church history.

However, in recent years the church has made a concerted effort to begin to include such stories in the chronicles of its history. In doing so, it has “focus[ed] attention particularly upon the achievements of black Mormons, past and present,” as can be seen with the unfolding of Jane’s story, more than a century after her death. Such stories attempt, as with Jane’s, to make the early African American members of the church relatable to modern members. In

---

7 Bringhurst and Smith, introduction to Black and Mormon, 4.
8 Ibid.
9 Jessie L. Embry, Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 41-42.
doing so, “the church has looked for ways of constructively engaging black people as current and future church members” in an attempt to overcome the rocky past of racial tension.\textsuperscript{11}

Nevertheless, a more recent focus has been concentrated on African American members of the church today. In recent decades, “a handful of prominent, high-profile African Americans have joined the church,”\textsuperscript{12} and in doing so, have begun to take new places as symbolic representatives of black members of the church. One early member of recent years was Eldridge Cleaver, a one-time radical Black Panther Party leader, whose baptism in 1982 “was widely noted in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States.”\textsuperscript{13} Additionally, such musicians such as rhythm-and-blues singer Gladys Knight and British-born pop singer Alex Boye have garnered wide fan-bases and attention throughout the United States. These black individuals, while often championing and embracing their own ethnicity, are often seen by other members of the LDS church through racially particular tones, as mentioned by Newell. These converts are not only seen as members of the church, but are intimately understood and linked to black identity. As stated by Darron T. Smith, “white members of the church love to hear stories about people of color who have joined the church and made a transition to the LDS ‘way of life’.”\textsuperscript{14} These famous black members of the church provide that opportunity, but in doing so retain that racial particularity that Newell discussed, which hinders a real understanding of their experiences as members of the church.

\textsuperscript{11} Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 83.
\textsuperscript{12} Bringhurst and Smith, introduction to \textit{Black and Mormon}, 6.
\textsuperscript{13} Bringhurst and Smith, introduction to \textit{Black and Mormon}, 6.
One excellent modern example of excessive focus on racial particularities is that of politician Mia Love, an LDS African American woman who now serves in the United States Congress. When running for office, she herself often utilized these stereotypes in media campaigns and pushes for electoral power. In a Newsweek article discussing Love’s political success, the writer mentions almost immediately that “on her quest to become the first black female Republican in Congress, she is not just the only black person” in many campaign meetings, but is often “the only person of any color” at all. Additionally, the writer recounts a moment after Love spoke in Chicago when “a black woman in the audience got up and said, ‘I don’t understand how you can be a black female living in Utah as a Republican in today’s America’.” While Love’s response to the woman indicated a rejection of stereotypes in Love’s own life, her political campaign was thoroughly portrayed as a stride in Utah’s progress away from racial tension and towards full integration. However, in doing so, Utahans have merely painted Mia Love’s story with those racial stereotypes that largely overshadow her individual accomplishments as a politician.

Reactions to Racial Differences in Individual Congregations

Aside from official church portrayals and media coverage, individual members of the LDS church also frequently portray this duality in the face of racial interactions, as explained by Newell. As an example of this duality, individual members of the church have a tendency to either overgeneralize in their understandings of black identity, or ignore any racial indications in an attempt to relate with African American members of the church. Among the many feelings

---

16 Ross, “From Utah With Love.”
shared between black and white members of the church are “feelings of being treated categorically as blacks instead of as individuals” and “exaggerated attention as ‘novelties’ of some kind in their treatment by whites.”17 Interestingly, those same individuals who shared such feelings also “recognized that these difficulties...tended to occur between blacks and whites in America generally, not just in LDS congregations.”18

As described by Newell, a frequent “manifestation of cultural ignorance” on the part of non-black members of the church “was over-enthusiasm” in the face of racial differences.19 In the words of one black LDS convert, “they were really making a big deal out of [my race], and we were people just like everybody else.”20 Similarly, in many instances, “black saints often find that they have to go out of their way to dispel stereotypes” that are perpetuated throughout Mormon congregations.21 Jessie L. Embry, a BYU historian whose work entitled Black Saints in a White Church serves as a compilation of oral histories of African American members of the LDS Church even said: “I didn’t realize that while I idealized [black members of the church] I also stereotyped them.”22 By idealizing stereotypical so-called black ideals and characteristics, these members are neglecting to effectively accept these black members of the church as individuals, and are instead clinging to old schools of thought. At the conclusion of her work, Embry concluded that “most white Mormons seem well-intentioned—some overly so—or are at least

---

17 Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 86.
18 Ibid.
19 Embry, Black Saints in a White Church, 149.
20 Embry, Black Saints in a White Church, 149.
21 Ibid, 142.
22 Ibid, xi.
willing to be reeducated...so most black Mormons find that they are accepted as equals, though aware of a subtle undercurrent of discrimination that usually disappears with time.”\textsuperscript{23}

**Official Church Publications Concerning African American Mormons**

While a large trend has consistently existed throughout the church of “avoidance of race talk” in matters of historical racial tensions, modern LDS Church media has made a concerted effort to portray black members of the church as an integral part of the global organization.\textsuperscript{24} Ever since the 1980s, “temporary surges in missionary success with black Americans...have often been reported anecdotally” and have been touted as paramount successes in church expansion.\textsuperscript{25} Additionally, church publications of the time had a “general tendency to present blacks as prime facilitators of Mormon growth and expansion throughout the world,” even when faced with enduring racial problems.\textsuperscript{26} As a case study, Africa was promoted as a new frontier for the growth of the church in many ways. Following growth in black membership of the church in such countries as Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa, “the *Church News* looked to black Africa in presenting an image of blacks as prime instruments of Mormon membership growth.”\textsuperscript{27} While continuing to neglect the question of historical racial tensions, the church began to publicize the success of its missionary efforts in Africa, with hopes of surmounting the historical questions with future successes. Indeed, when the South African Temple was dedicated in 1985, it was depicted “to reflect Mormon racial harmony and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Embry, Black Saints in a White Church, 157.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion,” 150.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Mauss, “Casting off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 85.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 114.
\end{itemize}
to portend future Church growth.”

Pictures were shown of white and black members of the church embracing at the dedication, celebrating together as the house of worship was dedicated prior to use. However, the truth was that the vast majority of congregations in South Africa remained segregated along racial lines. Additionally, church growth in Nigeria and Ghana soon reached their peaks and leveled off with a steady number of members, thus halting what was being depicted as unprecedented growth. While being depicted as the “new gospel frontier,” the conversion of large numbers of Africans and African Americans soon began to slow, and those racial tensions from the church’s history soon returned, demanding recognition more than ever before.

What Now?

In the face of such exposure to racial questions that plague the LDS Church, the church is confronted with the challenge of finding ways to appease those that question its racial past. Many believe that “to change its image as a racist organization, the church needs to forthrightly confront its past history of racial exclusion and discrimination.” In recent years, the LDS Church has done just that, and attempted to confront these problems head-on. The Church has recently made a concerted effort to reach out and meet many of the historical issues that have plagued it for so long, including that of racial exclusion. In a recent essay entitled “Race and the Priesthood,” the church recognizes and admits to a tumultuous history of racial tensions, and

---

28 Bringhurst, “The Image of Blacks Within Mormonism,” 118.
29 Ibid, 119
30 Ibid, 118
31 Bringhurst and Smith, introduction to Black and Mormon, 7.
attempts to explain the many circumstances that played into such conditions.\textsuperscript{32} Such outreach and acceptance of historical tensions demonstrates a resolution on the part of the church to confront these racial issues and act accordingly.

However, despite the history of the racial conflicts within the church, modern members both black and white believe today that “at the operational level, there is a conscientious outreach by the church toward black people everywhere.”\textsuperscript{33} Beginning in the 1980s, the Church “demonstrated a capacity to outgrow old prejudices and to manifest a greater awareness and sensitivity to the problems and needs of black people both within and outside the Church.”\textsuperscript{34} Since that time, the church has made a concerted effort to include black members in all aspects of worship and cultural acceptance, including an embrace of black history. Perhaps stemming directly from the increased missionary efforts of the 1980s in Africa, “Latter-day Saints have developed a growing sensitivity to and/or willingness to concern themselves with various problems affecting black people both within the United States and abroad.”\textsuperscript{35} In his article entitled “The Image of Blacks Within Mormonism,” Newell G. Bringham cites multiple instances in which the church as a whole fasted and contributed millions of dollars in efforts to alleviate the effects of famine in East Africa.\textsuperscript{36}

In conclusion, while the history of the church is wrought with attempts to bridge the duality described by Newell in the lecture about Jane’s story, the church seems to be making a vast attempt to mitigate these extremes. Although these efforts are sometimes misguided and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{33} Mauss, “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain’,” 82.
\textsuperscript{34} Bringhurst, “The Image of Blacks Within Mormonism,” 122-23.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 121.
\textsuperscript{36} Bringhurst, “The Image of Blacks Within Mormonism,” 122.
\end{flushright}
misdirected, many members of the LDS faith agree that “there has been a growth...of basic
Mormon attitudes and perceptions of black people and their problems and concerns” in recent
years, thanks to the church’s ever-expanding global outreach. 37 While the church is still learning
to cope with and find a medium between these extremes, individual members are widely
moving forward within the global atmosphere that the church has provided. In essence,
although “the LDS African American experience is one of integration and discrimination...it
promises hope for assimilation as black and white Mormons replace stereotypes with individual
faces.” 38

Bibliography

37 Bringhurst, “The Image of Blacks Within Mormonism,” 122.
38 Embry, Black Saints in a White Church, xv.


