Of Many Hearts and Many Minds:
The Mormon Novel and the Post-Utopian Challenge of Assimilation

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Between 1887 and 1900, around 172 utopian novels were published in America, with at least 129 more published by 1920. Among these novels was Nephi Anderson’s *Added Upon* (1898), one of the first novels written and published in book form by a Mormon author. Indeed, for much of their nineteenth-century history, Mormons had denounced the novel as worldly entertainment that corrupted youth and propagated offensive Mormon stereotypes. This changed, however, when Mormons recognized in novels like Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1887) the form’s utopian potential for promoting social betterment, teaching wholesome moral values, and attracting hitherto unreachable audiences with its popular appeal.

Ironically, this shift in attitude toward the novel came at a time when the Mormons, once militantly isolationist in their Utah home, sought greater assimilation with the American mainstream by abandoning overt utopian practices, such as polygamy and communal living, which had long alienated them from the nation’s Protestant majority. In my dissertation, I explain this ironic and timely shift by arguing that Mormons, sensing the cultural cost of assimilation, embraced the novel as a way to preserve their utopian *principles*—if not their utopian *practices*—when capitulations to mainstream America led them to take what I call a “post-utopian” stance toward society. In a sense, the novel, as a popular mode of entertainment for the American middle-class, provided Mormons with a way to express and pursue their commitment to utopian social betterment without appearing radically different from the rest of the nation. Moreover, as it developed, the novel also enabled Mormons to contribute to and engage American literary culture, construct Mormon identities, and explore their ambivalent encounters with others from inside and outside their ranks.

To make this argument, I have organized my dissertation into two parts. The first part is theoretical, consisting of two chapters that provide an overview of Mormon utopianism and theorize the Mormon novel as an expression of potent, but repressed utopian longings. Chapter one deals specifically with the utopian origins of the Mormon novel, tracing its beginnings to the utopian communities that emerged in America during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. I show how nineteenth-century Mormonism’s experimentation with utopian communalism, coupled with an intense millennialism, influenced writers like Parley P. Pratt, John Lyon, and Eliza R. Snow to express their desire for a better world through poetry and fiction. I pay special attention to how their works track the evolution of “Zion,” Mormonism’s principal utopian ideal, from early notions about a City of Zion—the New Jerusalem Mormons attempted to build in western Missouri in the 1830s—to a more abstract concept of a place where the righteous gather together as a people united in “one heart and one mind.”

In chapter two I introduce and theorize Mormonism’s “post-utopian condition,” an ongoing cultural phase that describes Mormonism’s paradoxical desire to be at once a “peculiar people” and a recognized member of mainstream America. Drawing upon the utopian theory of Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson, I suggest that Mormonism’s twentieth-century turn from utopian experimentation towards mainstream acceptability was less a wholesale abandonment of its utopian principles and more a recasting of them to fit dominate cultural norms. Following Jameson’s definition of “utopia” as “a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness,” I argue that the paradoxical stance towards mainstream America that emerges from this recasting is a subversive “post-utopian” effort to preserve its utopian ideals of hope and social betterment without overtly taking a radical stance against the status quo. Working primarily with Anderson’s *Added Upon*, I
suggest that the Mormon novel emerges at this time as a cultural site where the Mormon Zion—now a malleable, decentered concept open to a “post-utopian” free play of meaning—can be imagined and reimagined towards utopian ends, including the conceptualization of an inclusive Zion comprised of “many hearts and many minds.”

The second part of my dissertation applies this understanding to four analytical chapters that address ways Mormon novels have responded to post-utopian challenges to Mormon assimilation at the beginning and end of the twentieth century. Chapter three focuses on how the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels of Nephi Anderson embraced the conventions of popular didactic American novels, including utopian and Social Gospel novels, to promote assimilation and the construction of a post-utopian Mormon identity based on monogamy, righteous character, and Progressive Era politics. I particularly draw upon his novels *The Castle Builder* (1902), *Romance of a Missionary* (1919), and *Dorian* (1921) to show how he—like many of his Jewish and African-American contemporaries—used the novel to make a case for the Americanness of a marginalized people.

Chapter four looks at a group of late twentieth-century Mormon novels that respond to both the utopianism of late twentieth-century America’s counterculture and Mormonism’s institutional resistance to it. Outlining the history of this resistance, particularly the rise of an anti-assimilationist movement within Mormonism called “Correlation,” I show how liberal Mormons used the novel to challenge Correlation’s conservative call for uniformity and conformity. Focusing specifically on Levi S. Peterson’s *The Backslider* (1986) and Linda Sillitoe’s *Sideways to the Sun* (1988), I examine how these works borrow from the fiction of writers like Flannery O’Connor and John Updike to develop an approach called “Faithful Realism” to make a case for a more liberal understanding of “faithful” Mormon identity and Zion’s capacity for accommodating those whom Correlation marginalizes.

Chapters five and six focus on the future of the Mormon novel as the concept of Zion continues to evolve under the post-utopian condition. Chapter five looks at two recent postmodern Mormon historical novels about the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre—Marilyn McMeem Brown’s *The Wine Dark Sea of Grass* (2001) and Judith Freeman’s *Red Water* (2002)—and shows how they present challenges to orthodox understandings of Mormon history. I contextualize these novels within ongoing debates in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century about the presentation and function of history in the Mormon community, particularly in light of Correlation’s preference for faith-promoting narratives that sideline aspects of Mormon history that seem to challenge the divinity of its claims. I argue that Mormon historical fiction has the post-utopian potential to promote an approach to history that makes space for ambiguity and uncertainty in a way that allows individuals to come to terms with troubling aspects of the Mormon past.

Finally, chapter six explores how transnational Mormon novels address the challenges of extending a post-utopian understanding of Mormonism beyond the borders of the United States. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Mormon literature continues to be a “sub-species of American literature,” and transnational Mormon novels still tend to explore regions beyond U.S. borders solely through the lens of white American Mormons. Using Margaret Blair Young’s *Salvador* (1993), Toni Sorensen Brown’s *Redemption Road* (2005), and Ryan McIlvain’s *Elders* (2013), I identify ways the Mormon novel has tried to imagine Zion on a global scale. I also suggest possibilities for the future of the transnational Mormon novel.

Each of these chapters approaches the Mormon novel from trends in American fiction, making an argument for its place in the American literary tradition. Like other works about minority and ethnic-American literatures, it raises questions about the consequences of cultural assimilation, the function of literature and utopianism in constructing minority identities and communities, and the challenge of defining boundaries for these communities with respect to broader worlds.