

## Mormon Poetry, 2012 to the Present

*Review by Bert Fuller*

*any real religion is a big slow poem  
while a poem is a small fast religion  
—Les Murray*

Over the last few decades, universities have become the home of contemporary poetry in the United States, where nearly every major poet is also an academic. Poets, like other professors, teach classes, publish in tiered journals, sit on committees, undergo tenure review, secure grants, win prizes, attend conferences, and oversee graduate students. The result is that poetry, whatever else may be said of it, is a recognized industry of intellectual activity within university culture. It constitutes an academic discourse not unlike history or sociology. Within this broader context, it is not surprising that Mormon poetry, too, is a largely academic enterprise. In the past few years, since the publication of *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-First-Century Mormon Poets* (Peculiar Pages, 2011), there has been an immodest outpouring of Mormon verse. These publications deserve the attention of those invested in the full expression of Mormon intellectual culture, and the following essay seeks to provide a synoptic view of this vast material along with brief critical commentary. Hundreds of poets have published work relevant to this review, and I have therefore limited the scope to only those exhibiting the greatest aesthetic and cognitive impact.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For various reasons, I was unable to include discussions of the following important works: Claire Åkebrand's *What Was Left of the Stars*, Matthew James Babcock's *Strange Terrain*, Lisa Bickmore's *Ephemerist*, Timothy Liu's *Kingdom Come: A Fantasia*, Rachel Hunt Steenblik's *Mother's Milk*, Jeffrey Tucker's *Kill February*, and the lyrics by R. John Williams (cf. interview by Sage Turk, *Infants on Thrones*, podcast audio, September 2, 2016, <http://infantsonthrones.com/the-new-atheists-guide-to-not-being-a-total-asshole-episode-4-music/>).

First, Kimberly Johnson. Her third poetry collection to date, *Uncommon Prayer*, is unlike its predecessors, *Leviathan with a Hook* or *A Metaphorical God*, in that it displays a clear overall design. Each of *Uncommon Prayer*'s poems is a self-contained supplication, and there are fifty poems in all (think Pentecost, or Jubilee). These appear across three sections: twelve in *Book of Hours*, twelve in *Uncommon Prayers*, and twenty-six in *Siege Psalter*. The book opens at the start of a new day, closes near midnight on the third day, and begins and ends with the votive slogan "somewhere on the other side"—words which, thanks to their rhetorical force as extended diacope, hover at the edge of each poem individually. The sections, too, have their own symmetries. Like the *Cathemerinon* of Prudentius, *Book of Hours* presents a breviary of the Divine Office with its poems formatted into verse paragraphs, not to mention the punning tulips present at morning prayer and benediction. *Uncommon Prayers* also begins during the day and ends at night but with its orations uttered in couplets. Lastly, *Siege Psalter* is an alphabet poem akin to Jeremiah's Lamentations or the sacred ramblings of Kit Smart. It kicks off with George Herbert's characterization of prayer as "Engine against th' Almighty," then proceeds to barrage Alpha-and-Omega with each letter of the NATO phonetic alphabet—Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, etc. From start to finish Johnson never lets up. I've read the poems in *Uncommon Prayer* some twenty times, and it continually articulates "the grand historic sweep of hurt" (40). It exposes with regularity pains I did not know were mine while proffering the occasional salve. Its Latinate diction, its biblical and poetic fluency, its botanical, codicological, and liturgical terminologies, its mundane materiality, and its temporal

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43:29–57:21). Additionally, there are the poets included in Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds., *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): Elouise Bell, Joanna Brooks, Lisa Bolin Hawkins, Susan Elizabeth Howe, Violet Tew Kimball, Margaret Rampton Munk, Carol Lynn Pearson, Claire Whitaker Peterson, Linda Sillitoe, and Lorie Winder Stromberg.

sensitivity to clock and sky and the flipping pages of a book combine to create a well-crafted triptych of reverent irreverence that answers in verse the rising tide of postsecularism.

There is also a translation by Johnson of Hesiod, Homer's ancient competitor. As to why Hesiod, I would pose the following speculations. First, Johnson rightly points out that Hesiod stands at the head of Western lyricism, a perennial focus of her work. Hesiod likewise initiates the georgic tradition, which Johnson favors and which her other translation project, Virgil, imitated preparatory to epic. Additionally, Hesiod writes of *eris*, or strife, a technical concept suffusing Johnson's Miltonic Mormonism—or rather her Mormonic Miltonism. Most significant, however, is the fact that, astonishingly, Johnson is the first poet of note to compose full versions of both *Theogony* and *Works and Days* since Hesiod himself. Partial translations by George Chapman, Thomas Hooke, and Giacomo Leopardi command their own interest. But Johnson is the only one-stop Hesiod shop outside the realms of historicist philology, i.e. translations by classical scholars. Because she treats “the line as a discrete poetic object” (p. x), as something that cannot be reduced, sublimated, or allegorized, Johnson stretches Greek usage beyond the semantic limits set by lexicographers. Whatever else, Johnson's Hesiod is certainly the most readable English version available, notwithstanding cavils I have with transliteration irregularities and idiosyncratic alliteration patterns.

Next is Kristen Eliason, a Kimberly Johnson protégé and author of *Picture Dictionary*. The book, formatted as a bilingual dictionary, chronicles Eliason's experiences teaching English in 2006 in Kan'onji, Kagawa, as well as her bewildering grief following the death of her partner, Trent Johnson (1982–2005), who drowned on Memorial Day at Gunlock Reservoir. A complex book, *Picture Dictionary* journeys throughout the Mormon Corridor and southern Japan, puts into action scores of characters, narrates events asynchronously, and incorporates elements from several genres: travel memoir, school story, pastoral elegy à la *Lycidas*, confession, dream vision, requiem à la *In Memoriam*

A.H.H., pilgrim allegory, abecedary, and anatomy à la Burton. Adding to these complexities, the book, like any useful dictionary, contains as many unfamiliar words as familiar ones. For instance, the term *hanami* was new to me, and it is key to unlocking the general pattern. It refers to a Japanese spring celebration, where partygoers appreciate nature's transient beauty by watching cherry blossoms drop. These flowers—"cascading toward the base of the falls"—come to represent the dying youth, and a page devoted to *hanami* appears after each section. The sections, of which there are ten, are organized according to the katakana syllabary, and each section is made up of entries that look like this:

SHINJU, n.

Fig. 87: a rope, a rock, a body of water.

Double suicide. He asks her *did he jump* and it has to be translated like this: big eyes, quiet asking. The missionaries translate for him, then you, *no, he fell* and then as a translator's note, the tall one adds, *yeah, because who would do that if they had a girl as pretty as you are?* To this she has no response, other than *no, no, he would never jump*. She would have jumped.

All entries include a Japanese headword, the part of speech, a numbered figure printed in red, and at least one translation that is usually accompanied by some cinematic dialogue and narration. In this entry, Eliason adapts a convention of Japanese puppet-theater in light of actual events. She uses italics for speech, refers to herself in the second and third persons, leaves the *he* unidentified, and keeps the elders nameless. In other entries, Eliason employs quotation marks, the first person, personal names, translator's notes, and myriad fictional sources. Fortunately, such stylistic variation most often facilitates poetic intent; however, typos throughout the book demonstrate that it would have benefitted from a tighter copyedit. Rather, the issue lies with general formatting procedures, since increased typographic consistency would have improved the mimesis of presenting a "real" dictionary. Neverthe-

less, *Picture Dictionary* is a unique bricolage of loss and recognition, pleading and blasphemies, petty lusts, selflessness, irony, sincerity, and the rare sentimental indulgence. With its images of sliding doors and blood-red oranges, it stands as an efficacious “study in the fragmentation of recorded memory as language relative to the demands of grief on cognitive process” (s.v. *chikugoyaku*).

Third on the list is John Talbot, Mormonism’s greatest metrist and wit. Deliciously self-aware without being self-conscious, Talbot recognizes that his very virtues could account for the unpopularity of his first book:

let’s just say  
 Nobody took it for the hit parade.  
 I kid you not, I do not own one copy.  
 It took me months to give them all away. (11)

These lines contain no confession of regret as his next move is to quote a poem of his own then cleverly provide, in meter, a metrical analysis of it. Here we find a poet plying his trade, playful and confident, even when the market is bad. But what Talbot may not know is that his second book, *Rough Translation*, coincidentally addresses what has of late become a hot topic in Mormon studies, at least since photographs of the brown seer stone were released. Reading this book, one wonders at times if what Talbot does with Horace is anything like what Smith did to Genesis, but I leave such questions to those more invested in the topic than I myself am. What interests me is fiction, and in that realm Talbot excels.

The prologue, “The King’s Tattoo,” recounts in twenty pages of blank verse, first, Talbot’s golden days before his “rough translation” from Sudbury, Massachusetts, to the Intermountain West, and then second, a personal visitation by the ghost of King Philip, aka Metacomet (1639–76), one night after the poet’s wife (Sandy) and son (James) had gone to sleep. Metacomet does not speak but reveals a full-body tattoo depicting an imagined history of Sudbury’s land and people, which

includes Talbot (24) and his colonial forebears (26). The tattoo recalls the blood and bucolics of Aeneas's and Achilles's shields, which are portrayed on the front cover, but disappears once the narrator suspects the Spirit of plagiarism (29). The prologue then ends with a purposefully half-assed invocation of the muse, and this statement of subject matter:

That I would know  
The paradox of other people's words  
Becoming wholly mine through love's translation. (30)

A sturdy chunk of verse, "The King's Tattoo" sets up characters, cadences, and geography that appear in the poems that follow. Genuinely funny and heroic, it, along with the collection's forty-plus other pieces, represents the finest example of family history in Mormon letters of which I am aware. I cite from "After the Latin (14)" for supporting evidence:

"Married a poet, lot of good it did me"—  
That's how you joke, half-joking, with your friends

...

See him stoop—  
*Your* poet—over his OED, indifferent  
To sunset and the candles and the  
Elegant way that your hair is braided!

This is a crime. It may cost him his soul.  
May cost him you. And yet would you believe  
That all those books he so adores, his  
Cloying obsession with sound and syntax,

Rotate, along with him, in sympathetic  
Traction around your star? (89)

Rounding out the discussion of poetry patronized at Brigham Young University, we turn to *Genius Loci* by Lance Larsen and *Salt* by

Susan Elizabeth Howe. My comments here will be brief, serving mostly to highlight representative passages.<sup>2</sup>

*Genius Loci* is Larsen's fourth collection and is, like its predecessors, eminently readable. To those for whom poetry is all medieval forest, Larsen offers a way out—or in, depending on your intent. He is a master not only of the accessible style at the level of line and stanza but a master as well of flowing one poem into the next, often accomplished through volta-suppression. An hour will pass before realizing you just sauntered through fifteen odes despite knowing little of Pindar or Keats. And, vitally, Larsen is a poet of substance and sustains multiple readings over time, unlike much work by other important plain speakers such as Mary Oliver or Rupi Kaur. Part of his strategy is to eschew what he calls “that stink of Latin” (55), which would include a certain Roman allusiveness more common in someone like Talbot. *Genius Loci* nonetheless reaches into the classical past through honoring its ever-present household gods. These numinous guardians often manifest as animal spirits, whether beast, fish, creeping thing, or fowls of the air:

I slip outside into a corridor of clarity and breeze—  
that pinking time when owls home to barns, when bats  
  
fold their genius into gloves of sleep and cranes  
whoop in the morning like freckled boys on stilts. (22)

Or they intrude in the form of natural phenomena, such as shadows, clouds, or sunlight falling past trees:

as if a flock of angels had chewed  
summer into lace. (54)

The general ethos of *Genius Loci* is nature redeemed, though not in the traditional sense. Death still lacks its sting (see e.g. “Between the Heaves of Storm”), but Death, in Larsen's world, shall not die. In lieu of Isaiah's

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2. For a fuller review see Tyler Chadwick, “Susan Elizabeth Howe, *Salt*; Lance Larsen, *Genius Loci*,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2016): 195–202.

lions and lambs, we read of the midnight cricket thrown to “some wilder throat already singing” (53), or of a severed deer head (12), or a gutted fish “sliced from anus to sunset” (4). Such violence is innocent but du jour, intelligent yet routine. It embodies—by implication only, to be sure—Mormon notions of “one eternal round” and “doing that which has been done on other worlds.” At stake here is not doctrinal content but imaginative limits.<sup>3</sup> Within Mormon cosmology, it is not possible to conceive of an end to birth or dying, so nature redeemed must reify death, not annihilate it. Despite death’s permanent recurrence, however, and the uncertainty such a concept introduces to the Western religious imagination, Larsen maintains a profound trust towards the universe. Focusing intensely on death, *Genius Loci* nevertheless promotes fully and persuasively a healthy and happy engagement with life. I cannot recommend it enough.

Howe, editor of the delightful anthology *Discoveries*, uses the poems in *Salt* as preservatives and seasoning. In “Another Parable of the Cave,” she revitalizes the legend of Timpanogos, first put to verse by Edward Tuttle. In “Desecration” she conjures with dazzling mythopoeia the ancient gods of Utah’s Carbon County, formerly expelled by

[the] hysterical priest  
of a weak god who required  
the extermination of history  
lest his lack of power be exposed. (28)

The fulcrum poem, “The Law of Salt,” puts the mineral at the heart of Elohim’s labor:

From God’s body sweat flowed

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3. Frederick Turner outlines such imaginative limits in the afterword to his book, *Paradise* (Cincinnati: David Robert Books, 2004). He claims that the contemporary world admits four dominant paradigms of paradise, and that Mormonism is the most articulate expression of the one traceable to William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Among LDS poets, Lance Larsen is this paradigm’s purest example.

into the seas during the six days  
He worked on the world.

*This was the beginning of salt. (31)*

“Family Trees” exemplifies Mormonism’s mother cult and what Christopher Lasch identifies in *World of Nations* as its ancestor worship. “Trying on Charlotte Brontë’s Dress” is a nice counterpoint to “Taking Off Emily Dickinson’s Clothes” by Billy Collins, and the Catherine Dickens monologue is brilliant womanly rebuke. “Blessing the Baby” is sure to be an instant Mormon classic. And, finally, should any influencer find herself reading this essay by accident, “My True Country” deserves to be carved in stone across Howe’s home state.

Next are four books by high school teacher and Gulf War vet Justin Evans. First, *Hobble Creek Almanac* is a slim biography-in-verse of the poet’s hometown. Evans, like Howe or the late John Sterling Harris, cultivates a supple local style, complemented in this book by lines from the unpublished poems of Achilles Blanchard, Springville’s forgotten bard. The book is an effective homage, and it exemplifies the kind of memorializing art that more towns should incentivize citizens to create. Second, *Lake of Fire* depicts the landscapes of Evans’s current home in the Great Basin deserts of Nevada. Unlike *Hobble Creek Almanac*, which narrates characters and events, *Lake of Fire* holds up a mirror to the natural environment and the four seasons. Like *Hobble Creek Almanac*, however, the poems in *Lake of Fire* are modest, rustic things. Third, *Sailing This Nameless Ship* leaves town and valley to navigate oceans of the self. With one eye to Homer and the other on Joseph Campbell, this epyllion follows heroic convention by probing irreducible tensions between the personal and political. As the narrator seeks mythic points of origin throughout the book, he questions whether

It might be time to reconsider  
this modern age when everything  
is possible, re-think our desire  
to rebuild everything once lost. (38)

Here Evans erases the lust for utopias—a radical move within the context of restorationism. And the politics continue in Evans’s latest book, *All the Brilliant Ideas I’ve Ever Had*. Alongside more formally oriented poems addressing poetics, aesthetics, mimesis, and defamiliarization, Evans includes several pieces on ideology and idealism. We read for instance what the poet-soldier remembers about Desert Storm (14), in lines where disgust, instinct, and fantasy alchemize to rewrite assumptions about patriotism and autoeroticism, recalling Tony Harrison’s “A Cold Coming.”

The next two poets are adherents of what has been referred to as Ancient Mormonism, a now unpopular gnostic form of the religion.<sup>4</sup> The first is Sicilian convert Alex Caldiero, with three books to consider, each exemplifying his ideology of sonosophy. Sonosophy is a worldview that claims, among other things, that there is a fundamental identification of being and sound. Hence the title of the first book: *sonosuono*. *Suono* is Italian for “sound,” and *sono* is a conjugated form of “to be” that requires some explication. Meaning both “I am” and “they are,” *sono* contains within itself Whitmanian multitudes. It is simultaneously singular and plural, the self and the other, a microcosm of the contradictory variety and unity of existence. Even as *sono* represents continuity with difference, so do *sono* and *suono* when placed together. The two words not only sound similar, they appear on the cover without a space or capitals. Thus with great economy “sonosuono” captures in brief a basic assumption of Caldiero’s work: there is in sound an unsettled seamlessness through all things. This continuity also accounts for the autobiographical elements in Caldiero’s poetry, as there exists no clear distinction between his life and his work (117–18). The narrative of *sonosuono*, for example, is a twofold personal odyssey: on one hand is the transition between life and death (30), and on the other are migrations between Sicily and America

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4. See <https://themormonworker.wordpress.com/2012/09/02/the-new-mormonism/>. See also Paul Toscano, *Mormonism in Crisis: A Critique and A Defense* (self-published, 2017).

(113). There is some commentary on religious differences between Catholicism and Mormonism, but not much. (See pp. 46–48 for the role polygamy played in Caldiero’s conversion.) The volume concludes with a “Conference of the Birds,” where Caldiero recounts efforts to preserve Sicilian culture. Overall, this strange little book testifies to the presence of a daemon in Utah Valley. It signals that Caldiero is a force of nature whom it would be at our peril to ignore.

The next book, *Some Love*, is a catalogue of romantic and erotic musings. It often skews toward cute philosophy but nonetheless manages with its epigrams to glide past layers of readerly cynicism. Charming gnomai like this fill the pages:

Between wishful thinking and clear perception  
                   there is a gulf  
 that resembles the mouth of all the women  
 you will never kiss. (5)

*Some Love*’s most impressive feature however is not the writing but rather the design by Jason Francis. Its red-white-and-blue palette invokes 3-D glasses and American patriotism: the glasses attribute to love a potential for adding another dimension to the flatland world of printed words, while the patriotic association investigates the uneasy question of how love fits into contemporary politics. Signature Books should be commended for publishing such a beautiful, pointless book in a neoliberal age. Finally, there is *Who is the Dancer, What is the Dance: Six Days on the Colorado River Thru Cataract Canyon*. This book combines Lascaux-style line drawings, grade-school spelling, and scrawled verse to narrate Caldiero’s animistic communion with the Colorado and its environs. The title alludes to Yeats, “How can we know the dancer from the dance,” implying that Caldiero’s escape into primeval nature is also an escape into poetry. More than any other Mormon poet, Caldiero conjures forth what is oldest and most primitive in poetry and thus in ourselves.

The other Ancient Mormon is Colin B. Douglas, a Native-American convert, veteran, journalist, and retired Church curriculum editor,

also with three books: *First Light, First Water*; *Glyphs*; and *Division by Zero*. Of these, *First Light, First Water* is the most satisfying read. It uses simple diction—always “yellow,” never “chartreuse,” “tawny,” or “saffron”—to progress through three stages, with the whole design set between a preface and an epilogue. Written in the idiom of David and Solomon, stage one presents semi-chiastic hymns that glorify Creation, the Creator, and heterosexual love. Stage two moves inward toward contemplation, marked by increased repetition. And stage three changes form altogether, from the short lyrics of the first two parts to oneiric prose poems. Thus, the book follows a katabatic movement from the superconscious, through the self-conscious, to the subconscious mind. The central images for these stages are, respectively, the deer, the mirror, and the corridor, each present at the book’s anti-climax, “There Were Several Reasons Why This Wouldn’t Work.” *First Light, First Water* concludes in a Borgesian word-labyrinth, where Douglas continues to reside throughout *Glyphs* and *Division by Zero*. *Glyphs* uses the same preface and epilogue as its predecessor, presenting in total ninety-five compositions: the thirty-nine from *First Light, First Water* in about the same order with some revisions, plus fifty-six new pieces. The new material fleshes out the contours of Douglas’s neo-romantic surrealism, with an uptick in Amerindian imagery (e.g. “Outside the Longhouse”) and eroticism (e.g. “More Wedding Songs”). Occasionally something truly bizarre stands out, like the blood, ivy, and three mallet raps from “A Tale of Detection.” But overall, the poems do not assemble into an imaginative edifice. Rather, they represent the unconstructed dream space of raw, infinite subconscious, to paraphrase Christopher Nolan. *Division by Zero*, as its title would suggest (37), goes even further in this direction. Except now, Douglas enters full-blown Dada:

Trees, when they make love,  
Conjugate the orbit of the square root of a thigh. (40)

A farrago of seer stones and female breasts, the book remains a masculinist *selva oscura* (but see p. 76 for an instance of queer subversion). It is a collection where the greatest illumination comes from poems with titles like “The Sewing Machine Needle of Truth Floats Free.” And yet, certain combinations stick, such as “the mirror-walled labyrinth called history” (43) and “God cares nothing for precedent” (83).

Timothy Liu, a Chinese-American professor of English whose most recent books include *Don't Go Back to Sleep* and *Kingdom Come: A Fantasia*, likewise communicates through nightmares and dreams. *Don't Go Back to Sleep* opens with the phantasmagoric Nanking Massacre (following which his parents fled China for California, where he was born and converted). Facts concerning the massacre are controversial, but the poet writes,

Photos exist:

... some were forced to dig ditches, forced again  
to lie down in them while the next group shoveled dirt  
on top of them, muffling their screams,  
others buried up to their necks  
only to be beheaded, bayoneted, flattened by the treads of a tank. (4)

He presents these lurid details not to shock the reader with horrors that are *out there* or *back then*. His primary aim is instead to awaken us, as the title indicates, to a more complete sense of possible selves already *in here* and *at hand*. Even the Chinese

found themselves  
beyond what they thought they were  
capable of . . .  
impaled [heads] on long bamboo poles. (16)

Neither are Americans exculpated, for

what will American textbooks say about Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo,  
water boarding and extraordinary rendition fifty years from now? (3)

Liu recognizes that such large-scale disasters occur only through the combined actions of wounded individuals. So it is with private vulnerabilities that he is most preoccupied throughout the rest of the book. For instance, what principle of intimacy was violated when a close friend cut him off after learning he was gay, claiming that everything they had experienced together was a lie (34–35)? Or how is it that Mormons, who believe mortality is for acquiring bodily experience, often lead conservative and risk-averse lives? “Either eat the thing,” Liu agitates,

or don't. Either unhinge  
your jaw and take in  
this world or leave it  
alone. (73)

These lines recall the Eden story, specifically what Eve says in *Moses* 5:11–12: “Were it not for our transgression . . .” The salvation of transgression is what Liu sings. Indeed, transgression is also a key theme in the sex-opera apocalypse *Kingdom Come*, but that staggering book requires separate consideration.

Another Chinese American, Neil Aitken is the Canadian-born computer programmer, translator of poets Ming Di (*River Merchant's Wife*) and Zang Di (*The Book of Cranes*), and author of *Leviathan* and *Babbage's Dream*. It is the last of these that concerns us, since it includes all the poems of its predecessor plus thirty additional compositions. Four kinds of poem populate the collection, two categorizable under “Babbage” and two under “Dream.” The Babbage poems either recount times from the life of English polymath and inventor of the first computer, Charles Babbage (1791–1871), or expand key terms of computational discourse such as *array*, *float*, *short*, *variable*, *list*, etc. The Dream poems appear as dramatic monologues or faux-code. (They are “dreams” because they exist outside the historic bounds of Babbage’s waking life, while imaginatively fulfilling or responding to his vision of digital programming.) The monologues represent soliloquies by AI machines, which should excite the transhumanist crowd: Frankenstein’s monster, Alpha

60 from *Alphaville*, HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, chess-players like Deep Blue or the false Mechanical Turk, and Babbage's own "Leviathan." The code poems ("Binary," "Recursion," "Comment," "Void," and "Conditional") are the collection's most creative, translating between poetic English and C++ or binary:

0000 :Absence stretched to extremity, nothingness in all quarters  
 0001 :At the far stretches of the void, a glimmer.

...

1100 :Two trees at the edge of a wide plain  
 1101 :From here, we watch someone crossing over the fields. (35)

Lisa Bickmore, who won the €10,000 Ballymaloe Poetry Prize for her poem "Eidolon" and the Antivenom award for her book *flicker*, is a professor at Salt Lake Community College. The book breaks into four untitled sections, plus a verse postscript, which do not exhibit a progression in theme or imagery. Rather, each poem represents its own spark in the night sky; hence, the cover displaying Jim Campbell's "Scattered Light." So, while constellations could be drawn between the pages, there is a stubborn lack of architecture indicative of a totalizing design. Contra sublime theophany, Bickmore prefers to kindle the reader's vision using stopped yet fleeting moments. In every poem, she manages to stretch a second into something permanent, whether it is with the verb-less garden in "Concord" or the erotic nightmares "Tell Me Why" and "The Blade." To help with this effect, she uses sentences that are long or incomplete, ends on a colon or dash, privileges non-finite verb forms, and narrates impossible simultaneity of action. Bickmore, who has respectfully referred to Joseph Smith as a sower of chaos (note the pun), does not shy from naked allusions to Mormonism. These include bloodless angels without wings, temple clothing, something older than memory, late night Saturday shopping, and this candid admission:

Because it's Sunday, I'm thinking about  
 how happiness can be wrung from suffering. (31)

These allusions stretch common usage, expanding familiar orbits of the Mormon imaginary. They also generate context for other, less clearly “Mormon” lines to resonate within the discourse. “Envoi,” for example, ends with “tastes of coffee, semen, ash.” Mormons experience these substances differently than most, given taboos in the culture against hot drinks, fellatio, and cremation. So although there is nothing explicitly religious about the poem, it appears in a context which would allow for specifically Mormon contemplation of death and the fall.

The most important collection to explore the early church is *Glossolalia* by non-Mormon Canadian academic Marita Dachsel. Inspired by Todd Compton’s magisterial *In Sacred Loneliness*, Dachsel weaves occasionally altered historical statements in italics with original verse in roman type to showcase the individual voices of Smith’s plural wives. These *Spoon River*-esque monologues appear in four sections, each of which includes narrative lyrics, a passage from the revelation on plural marriage, and a reflection by Emma. This fearful symmetry would suggest an overwhelming design, but closer inspection abolishes any straightforward pattern—a fitting allegory perhaps for the impetus and aims of Nauvoo polygamy. The wives do not proceed chronologically, as in Compton, nor is their arrangement either fixed or arbitrary. It matters that Emma is first and Eliza last, displacing the Fannys as usual bookends, but the exact placement of Flora, Rhoda, and Delcena seems less vital. This middle way between rigid and disordered embodies well the organic dynamism of Smith’s romantic vision, likely shared by these women. After all, the protagonist of *Glossolalia* is not any one person but the relationality of polygamy itself. Rather than serving historical accuracy, each successive monologue uses a varied poetic form to throw the character of plural marriage into further relief. For a panoply of attitudes ranging from pragmatic (Elizabeth Durfee), to wrenching (Patty Sessions), to simple (Hannah Ells), to regal (Eliza Snow), *Glossolalia* is an effective distillation of early Mormon plural marriage.

Three other books focus on Joseph Smith Mormonism. Daymon Smith, foremost scholar of LDS correlation and author of the essential *Book of Mammon*, wrote *City of Saints: An Opera in Five Acts*. Around six thousand lines of jagged meter, *City of Saints* could create a nice stage spectacle if an abridged version were possible. The aforementioned Colin Douglas arranged into verse *Six Poems by Joseph Smith*, supplemented with commentary. These discussions will help Sunday school teachers and LDS historians better appreciate D&C poetics. Lastly, Hal Robert Boyd and Susan Easton Black edited *Psalms of Nauvoo: Early Mormon Poetry*, a handsomely published volume tracking in verse the move from Boggs in Missouri to bogs in Illinois. *Psalms of Nauvoo* reminds today's students of Mormonism that without exception pre-Utah periodicals included poetry, including the *Nauvoo Expositor*, which Boyd and Black gloss over. However, all three of these books err in their aesthetic appraisals by misunderstanding what Harold Bloom meant when he called early Mormonism *materia poetica* (see *Psalms of Nauvoo*, xxvii). To correct this misunderstanding would require a separate essay, so for now I only acknowledge the problem with the aim of addressing it more completely in a future publication.

So far, I have summarized and commented briefly upon what I consider to be the most significant contributions to Mormon poetry over the last few years, offering where possible modicums of literary, cultural, and academic context. Several items remain that deserve mention, and these must be surveyed quicker than I would otherwise like. First, there are the books. Western Michigan University awarded its New Issues Poetry Prize to Weber State professor Laura Stott's *In the Museum of Coming and Going*. Stott manages to infuse her writing with a mixture of moonlight and mist, since the idiom is ethereal but the imagery concrete—a difficult effect to produce. The University of Wisconsin gave Christina Stoddard the Brittingham prize for *Hive*, whose title poem combines honeybees, priesthood blessings, temple baptisms, singing, and being buried alive. Dave Nielsen's *Unfinished Figures* may be the first award-

winning book to feature the word “freaking,” and biologist Steven Peck’s *Incorrect Astronomy* follows the long tradition of poetry perpetuating bad science, including steampunk and scrying. *Forsythia* by Mark D. Bennion eulogizes the death of his baby brother Brian (1975–78) while dispatching the titular resurrection flower as a means of celebrating his continued existence beyond the veil. Ashely Mae Hoiland’s *One Hundred Birds Taught Me to Fly: The Art of Seeking God* successfully narrates Wordsworthian spots of time (cf. *The Prelude* 12.208–18), responding to Mormonism’s current wounds as it undergoes profound revision at the level of metaphor and myth. Finally, James Goldberg, author of the near-perfect *Five Books of Jesus*, electronically released *Let Me Drown with Moses*, which presents four dozen compositions of sobriety and delight that ought to be recalled during the hymnal’s next overhaul (see esp. “Prayer on the Red Sea Shore”).

Next, there are four chapbooks, all of which happen to emphasize travel. First, *Points of Reference* by Matthew James Babcock is from a technical standpoint the most accomplished. Consider for instance the couplets of “Running in Madison County”:

“Free Kittens” on a chipboard sign spray paints hope in black.  
Roadside ruts unearth a rusted hubcap zodiac.

...

Badgerweed buffs hillsides with a floss of sulfur glare.  
Yellow gusts of tanagers trade blades of dusty air. (15)

Or the half-ironic notes of gratitude in “Thanks, Henry Ford”:

[Thanks] Mohammed and Moses and Jesus and Buddha . . . for stitching the hides of holy books into boxing gloves so we can pound each other to bloody ash (22)

Second, *Yours*, by Kristen Eliason is the epistolary forerunner to *Picture Dictionary*, where the latter’s humor, hesitancy, and disorientation can be observed in embryo. Third, Elizabeth C. Garcia’s *Stunt Double* manages in thirty pages to touch on material as disparate as

*Bulfinch's Mythology*, virginity checks, Wonder Woman's male stunt double, the Elephant Man, and God-as-intern before the foundation of the world. This she does in a variety of forms, including the demanding villanelle. Fourth is *Memories as Contraband* by Simon Peter Eggersten. Much good could be said of it, but I will close with mere appreciation through quotation:

When I die, God, let me live on in color and spice.  
 . . .  
 Make my nerves blue ribbons, my bones pale  
 porcelain dust stirred up by the hooves of mustangs.  
 Flick the green light out of the corner of my eye,  
     send it swift to the cemeteries in Yemen.  
 Use some of my ash to pollinate Zanzibari spice—  
     cinnamon, cloves, or ylang ylang.  
 Set me to sliding among red cherries and Julie  
 mangos, danced by an Argentine tango, the voice  
     of Carlos Gardel. (25)

After months of reading, I have concluded that despite being fairly ignored by scholars of Mormonism in general, the poets covered in this essay contribute in significant ways to the pulsing vivarium otherwise known as Mormon studies. Not only that, but the rate is accelerating at which relevant and worthwhile poetry is appearing. So it would seem to me to be an unnecessary oversight if these books went unnoticed or unread.<sup>5</sup> I recognize that most of us received poor poetry educations and that the thought of integrating poetry (*contemporary* poetry of all things) into our reading habits in the twenty-first century is more easily repressed than entertained. But ignorance in these matters is an invitation, not an excuse, to resist whatever metrophobia was planted in us as teenagers. Not a poet myself, I have aimed to persuade readers that

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5. The essay on literature in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* by Michael Austin, who does excellent work, mentions poetry only once in a passing reference to Orson F. Whitney's *Elias*.

the potent variety of this material will be sufficient to generate critical conversations, however modest at first. It is my belief that when poet, critic, student, and scholar undertake together the cultivation of verbal artistry as an end in itself, language is enriched, thought is clarified, and visions for the future dilate. For these reasons, I recommend the work of these understudied writers and encourage attentiveness toward what should appear in the months and years ahead.