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Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image

by **Mary Campbell**

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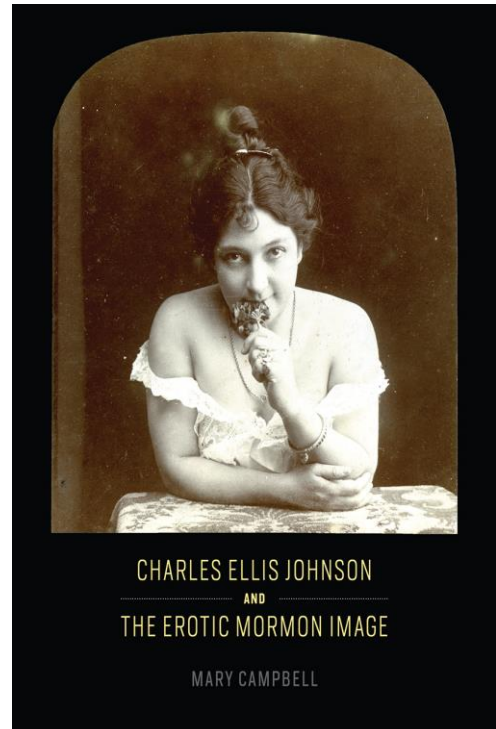
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In *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image*, Mary Campbell, a lawyer-turned-art historian, examines the expansive, yet virtually unknown, lens-based oeuvre of the American commercial photographer Charles Ellis Johnson (1857–1926).¹

Johnson's business endeavors, based out of Salt Lake City, Utah, were not restricted to the studio and darkroom; at various times, he concocted and marketed patent medicines, distributed bicycles, ran a printing press, wrote theater reviews, and fulfilled mail orders for his prints. As Campbell spells out, Johnson occupied a subject position at a very

particular discursive nexus involving (but certainly not limited to) the gaze, exoticism, gender, sexuality, propaganda, nationalism, religious practice, and federal law.² How he navigated these complex issues to (re)inscribe the Mormons into the larger body politic of the United States is the subject of her book-length study.

In the first chapter, Campbell provides a necessary and succinct biographical overview, as the volume will most likely be the first introduction of Johnson to most readers.³ Johnson grew up in a polygamous Mormon household, the first son of Eliza Saunders, who was the third wife of his father, Joseph Ellis Johnson. The extended family enjoyed a privileged status within the Mormon social hierarchy. Charles Ellis Johnson's paternal grandmother and her sixteen offspring were among the original converts to the new belief system that Joseph Smith established in 1830. The founder and leader of what eventually became known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), Smith expressed his appreciation for the Johnsons' early adherence by dubbing them the "Royal Family." Furthermore, Smith later took one of Charles's aunts as his twenty-second plural wife. In 1878, Charles married Ruth Young, a daughter of the sect's second president, Brigham Young. Although Charles eventually divorced Ruth (for desertion) in 1887, he remained a



member in good standing of the community—that is, until he drifted away from LDS teachings at the very end of his life, closing his studio in 1917 and relocating to San Jose, California. Yet, for most of his professional career, the LDS Church community provided important financial and professional support in the form of official photographic commissions. Consequently, Charles Ellis Johnson not only helped determine how the Mormon community pictured itself to itself and—perhaps more importantly—to others, but he did so, as Campbell makes clear, during a particularly fraught moment in the collective history of the group on the national stage.

Chapter two introduces the historical sociopolitical conflict that is at the heart of the narrative established by Campbell. Driven westward by religious persecution, the Mormons made their way to the Rocky Mountains, settling a separatist colony in the Salt Lake Valley during the summer of 1847. Five years later, the LDS Church publicly announced its formal adoption of polygamy, officially known as “the Principle.” Plural marriage became, over the next four decades, the lightning-rod issue at the center of an antagonistic quarrel between the occupants of this political and religious “safe space” and the United States government. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Congress turned its attention to the country’s remaining “relic of barbarism”—polygamy—and passed a series of acts that increasingly disadvantaged Mormons, whether they practiced plural marriage or not.⁴ Many Latter-day Saints went into hiding. Despite continued persecution, officials in the Utah territory petitioned repeatedly for statehood. Embroiled in a war of attrition with no end in sight, the fourth president of the Mormon Church, Wilford Woodruff, prayerfully weighed the benefits of plural marriage against the costs of property loss, dwindling membership, and discontinued evangelism. In 1890, he received a revelation, known as the “First Manifesto,” that the LDS Church subsequently endorsed: polygamy must end.



Figs. 1, 2. Charles Ellis Johnson, A maid taking off her shoe, showing some skin, c. 1903 (left); A woman sleeping on a couch, before 1917 (right). Wikimedia Commons

Ever the entrepreneur, Charles Ellis Johnson developed three new product lines—softcore erotic photographs (fig. 1), staged Orientalist harem fantasies (fig. 2), and formal portraits of highly accomplished Mormon women (and men)—after the acceptance of the First Manifesto of the LDS Church. Campbell treats each series individually as the focus of a

subsequent chapter, carefully marshaling representative examples from the corresponding subset of Johnson's oeuvre. The photographer's widely circulated prints, Campbell contends, eased the assimilation of the Mormon community into the broader culture of the United States. The third series in particular also provided a kind of (unofficial) promotional campaign that helped deflect obsessive Gentile (non-Mormon) attention away from the polygamist past of the LDS Church.

Campbell brings renewed attention to Johnson's quasi-pornographic images in chapter three.⁵ Catering to prurient curiosity about Mormon sexual practices, Johnson sold the bulk of these risqué pictures to individuals and vendors out of state. The photographer found willing (Gentile) models among the chorus girls, actresses, and dancers who traveled through Salt Lake City on tour. Because vaudeville shows, burlesque acts, and the like traveled nationally during the fin de siècle and early twentieth century, Johnson's suggestive female subjects appeared familiar to customers east of the Rockies. By matter-of-factly stamping "Utah" on the mounts of his pictures, Johnson tapped into the "Mormon mystique" market niche while simultaneously advocating—through images—for the inclusion of his home territory within the American republic and its culture. "Johnson's provocative views slotted their [place of production] into the framework of the larger country," Campbell explains. Gazing at Johnson's photographs of women in racy scenarios, "viewers encountered an insistent visual argument for Utah's—and by extension, the Latter-day Saints'—American identity" (89).

In the fourth chapter, however, Campbell demonstrates how Johnson was playing both sides of the issue. Though Mormons may have formally abandoned polygamy in 1890, the salacious Gentile fascination with plural wives, born of both desire and anxiety, took longer to overcome. In fact, a montage of twenty-one of Young's fifty-six spouses was consistently one of Johnson's best sellers (92). Seeing the potential for greater financial gains, Johnson created a series of stereoviews that traded on the power dynamics of global colonialism and the pictorial language of Orientalist harems—both the multi-room architectural structures and their occupants. For this titillating body of material, Campbell posits at least two groups of eager consumers: Gentile men struggling with the post-Civil War crisis of masculinity who could exploit these images to shore up their self-worth and bolster their social status, and post-Principle Mormon men who could look yearningly on these pictures as reminders of a longed-for past and confirmation of a hoped-for future in the afterlife.

Campbell further asserts that the "fundamental appeal" of stereographs "lies in the way they seem to reincarnate the viewer in a second body, a body produced solely by the eyes" (103). To back up her claim, she cites the canonical essay by Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," which appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859. The article describes Holmes's individual subjective Victorian experience in employing what the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as an "optical instrument with two eyepieces used to impart a three-dimensional effect to two photographs of the same scene taken at slightly different angles." Following the nineteenth-century writer's first-person account of his stereograph consumption, Campbell switches to the "inclusive we," writing: "Sliding an image like *The Sultan's Favorite* into the stereoscope, we experience a similar rebirth. Pressing the mask to our face, we seem to step through the door of Johnson's Salt Lake serail and into both a scene of delicious Oriental indulgence and a body with which to consume it" (103). Further down the page, she continues: "Confining our gaze within the stereoscope's mask, we seem to assume the position of [Mark] Twain's ideal Utah sightseer, that grasping Gentile excursionist finally empowered to take 'a good satisfying look at' the

most intimate regions of a Mormon home” (103). Given current understandings of the complex intersectionality of subject positions, the impossibility of objective anthropological fieldwork, and the implausibility of equivalent trans-temporal experiences, some readers may have trouble suspending their disbelief and following Campbell as she insists on the universality of the psychological impulses and phenomenological results of stereographic practice.⁶

Campbell probes another smaller group of images of women in chapter five: pictures of prominent “plural wives and widows” for whom Johnson helped “to visualize a new identity,” and in so doing, gave them “a visual voice that reinforced the independent social, political, and even religious positions they sought to stake for themselves,” including universal suffrage (117). In considering such photographs, the author exposes a lacuna in both the Mormon and larger national imaginaries. During the period when LDS Church members practiced polygamy, most husbands who commissioned family portraits did so with only one wife at a time. To act otherwise would provide concrete evidence of a crime (18). These aspects of nineteenth-century misogyny only reinforced the reality that Mormon women (probably not surprisingly) occupied the lowest rung of the LDS Church hierarchy. On top of that, quotidian life for many—though not all—plural wives was miserable, especially within families of lower social status. Furthermore, many ex-husbands post-Principle terribly neglected or completely abandoned their former “secondary” wives. These newfound “fallen women” or single mothers suffered the most from the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882, the federal law that declared polygamy a felony.

In spite of these conditions—or indeed perhaps because of them—Utah produced numerous advocates for women’s rights during the First-wave feminist movement, and Johnson photographed many of these activists, most of whom hailed from the upper echelons of Mormon social strata. These pictures and others—such as Johnson’s group portrait of the accomplished and sophisticated Mormon New Women suffragists who hosted Susan B. Anthony and the Reverend Anna Howard Shaw in Salt Lake City in 1889—helped imbricate the privileged sitters represented into a larger, even international, conversation. In “repeatedly stitching these Mormon matriarchs and daughters into a cosmopolitan community of women’s rights advocates” Johnson’s images, which necessarily participated in the Mormon cultural refusal to picture everyday plural wives together, “simultaneously commemorated and obscured the Principle’s female participants,” thereby “sanitiz[ing] the Latter-day Saints for American consumption” (117, 144).

Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image concludes with an extended meditation on time and vision, memory and loss. Campbell observes that the culmination of Johnson’s career and the photographer’s own physical death roughly coincided with the demise of those Mormons who had practiced and then renounced the Principle. This generational turnover prompted Johnson and other LDS photographers to create images that expressed remembrance (for example, at the passing of Brigham Young’s few remaining spouses) or communicated mourning (for the relinquishment of a theological doctrine). In an inspired conceptual move, Campbell suggests that Joseph Smith’s establishment of the LDS Church was a stereographic enterprise all along. That is, the author draws a compelling analogy between Smith’s translation of the sect’s foundational Golden Plates, wherein the prophet placed his face inside a hat to see beyond his everyday experience into enlightenment, and a nineteenth-century user’s employment of a stereographic apparatus, which offered a similar physical yet out-of-body understanding of pictorial material to be “read.” The distribution of photographs such as Johnson’s visualized

and marketed the LDS's Church's later paradigm shift from religious radicals to average Americans, thereby helping Mormons knit themselves more completely into the fabric of the United States; in fact, Utah finally achieved statehood in 1896. Wilford Woodruff's doctrinal reversal, however, was not without dubious consequences for Joseph Smith's original dual vision.

The book concludes with the parsing of a strange, almost accidental, self-portrait that Charles Ellis Johnson created at the very end of his life, around 1926, after he had left Utah (literally) and the LDS Church (figuratively) behind. This stereoview depicts the photographer's living space, empty but for a modicum of humble furnishings and personal effects: a table, comb and brush, two chairs, a mirror, a sink, a rug, a clothes tree, and a towel. Campbell focuses her analysis on the mirror, which in only one print of the pair captures half of the photographer's head and torso, with only his proper right eye staring back at the beholder. The author describes how, "Peering first through the stereoscope and then at the vanity, we discover an image of Johnson and, at the same time, the suggestion that we might be able to see our own stereoscopic reflection in the view's conjoined mirrors" (152–153). In so doing, Campbell leaves the reader with charged metaphors derived from the photographer's evocative living space cum likeness: the conspicuous absence of a reflected *mise en abîme* (plural wifery) and the insistent gaze of the photographer's monocular (not stereographic) sight signal Johnson's abandonment of Mormon ideology and his assimilation into mainstream American culture.

Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image is a solid and significant effort to recuperate an understudied commercial photographer who had a thriving practice in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The author's thesis is clear and, although she readily demonstrates her understanding of critical theorists such as Roland Barthes and Laura Mulvey, there is little jargon. In fact, some readers may find the author's argument—its formal structure and arid analysis—as straightforward and logical as a legal brief, an expository writing style likely indebted to Campbell's previous training as a lawyer.

One quibble is with the misleading title of the publication, as only two of the six chapters provide extended analyses of Johnson's blue imagery. One wonders about the power imbalance of the author-publisher relationship and the ultimate decision to go with what feels like a bait-and-switch marketing strategy. Furthermore, although the phrase "the Mormon erotic image" tantalizingly suggests that readers may find a more comprehensive treatment of the subject among the pages of the volume, the author declines—even in an afterword—to consider Johnson and his work—or the implications of her own research—in relation to modern-day issues. Topics that remain unaddressed include: the Church's persistent "image problem" and its fervent efforts to contravene stereotypes; the dynamics of secret consumption (behind the lens, on the World Wide Web) with which proscriptive, moralizing belief systems are often fraught; the epidemic of queer Mormons who take their own lives; the work of present-day artists, such as [Angela Ellsworth](#), who outspokenly (and beautifully) interrogate the problematics of nineteenth-century sister wifery; or the findings—made famous by a 2009 article published in the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*—that Utah leads the country in online pornography subscriptions.⁷ An interesting tension exists between these omissions and the author's calling out of Johnson for the way his own pictures "ultimately enacted their own type of photographic and historical erasures" (117).

Despite these shortcomings—the dry delivery and problematic title of the book as well as the author’s irritating insistence on the rhetorical “we,” and her silence on contemporary concerns—it is hard to argue with Sally Promey, Alexander Nemerov, and Margaretta Lovell, the heavy hitting Americanist reviewers who proclaim their enthusiastic approbation on the back of the dustjacket. Certainly, Mary Campbell’s book is relevant and timely. Indeed, on August 16, 2018, the current president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russell M. Nelson, issued a style guide strongly discouraging the use of the terms “LDS,” “Mormon,” and “Mormonism.”⁸ This decree underscores the longstanding and ongoing challenges that the restored Church of Jesus Christ has endured in controlling its image (as well as its name). *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image* makes noteworthy contributions to the fields of religious studies; gender, women, and sexuality studies; American studies; and the history of lens-based imagery. As the first book-length exploration of Charles Ellis Johnson’s enormous and wide-ranging archive, it promises to serve as the standard reference on the photographer for years to come.

Notes

¹ There are currently only two public repositories that house portions of Charles Ellis Johnson’s extant output: Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University (USU), Logan; and the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University (BYU), Salt Lake City. Online records state that the bulk of the USU material (the C.E. Johnson Photograph Collection, 1860–1920, P0011)—over 1,000 images—was acquired by donation in the 1980s; a total of eight pictures were later purchased at two different junctures, 2003 and 2009. The finding aid indicates that this corpus contains risqué stereoviews. As for the BYU material, the Charles Ellis Johnson Collection (MSS P 6) of 3,000 images forms the bulk of the institutional holdings of Charles Ellis Johnson’s work; they were accessioned at an unknown date, the same as twenty-four photographs of models (MSS 3735). Two pictures were purchased on separate occasions: MSS 3766 in 1994 and MSS 8409 in 1996. Sixty-five assorted Utah-related scenes (MSS 3306), of which several are from the hand of Johnson, were gifted in 2001.

² Indeed, it is the author’s expertise in jurisprudence and visual studies that piqued her interest in Johnson’s surviving oeuvre: “[In the book] I argue that the church turned to images to achieve a type of national reconciliation that more overtly political and legal strategies just couldn’t produce. In that respect, I needed both the art-historical training and the legal background to really dig into the world that surrounded Johnson’s photographs and stereoviews.” See Stuart N. Brotman, “Q&A: Mary Campbell, Author of ‘Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image,’” *Knoxville Mercury*, December 7, 2016. <http://www.knoxmercury.com/2016/12/07/qa-mary-campbell-author-charles-ellis-johnson-erotic-mormon-image>.

³ At present, the monographic secondary literature about Charles Ellis Johnson and his work is scant, and Mary Campbell currently reigns as the primary interpreter of this material; see Campbell, “Exalted Bodies: Charles Ellis Johnson and the Practice of Mormon Photography” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2010), and Campbell, “Praying for Grace: Charles Ellis Johnson’s Synesthetic Skin” in Sally M. Promey, ed. *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). See also: Daniel Davis, “‘Appreciating a Pretty Shoulder’: The Risqué Photographs of Charles Ellis Johnson,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2006): 131–46. Campbell’s useful bibliography provides additional published sources on the history of the Latter-day Saints, Mormon visual culture (particularly photography), the experience of nineteenth-century LDS women, and turn-of-the-century pornography, among other relevant topics.

⁴ One of the planks of the 1856 Republican Party Platform read as follows: “Resolved: That the Constitution confers upon Congress sovereign powers over the Territories of the United States for their government; and that in the exercise of this power, it is both the right and the imperative duty of

Congress to prohibit in the Territories those twin relics of barbarism—Polygamy, and Slavery.” See Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1856 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29619>.

⁵ See n3; the article by Daniel Davis was the first to do so, but its publication in a scholarly journal means that its distribution was much more limited.

⁶ In her blog post “Rhetorical Pronouns & Naming,” Anne-Marie Womack, Professor of Practice and Director of Writing at Tulane University, cogently explicates some of the dynamics of ethos, agency, and power associated with the usage of the “inclusive we”: “Pronouns are keys to ethos. . . . Anytime an author uses a first-person pronoun (I, we, etc.) they draw attention to their position and persona. Using ‘I,’ a person claims an individual stance, while ‘we’ groups together others. This inclusive gesture can form community, as in the common example ‘We the people.’ It can also make dissenters resistant, as when women and people of color have suggested that ‘we the people’ has historically applied only to white men. Consider common responses such as ‘What we?’ or ‘Who do you mean we?’ These replies suggest that the speaker has overstepped their bounds in describing the views of others.” Further down the page, Womack continues: “Getting to choose which pronouns to use is itself a powerful position. Diann Baecker [in her article “Uncovering the Rhetoric of the Syllabus: The Case of the Missing I” (*College Teaching* 46.2 (1998): 58–62)] analyzes the pronouns used in university syllabi, for example. She finds that ‘you’ is the most prominent, but she also suggests instructors tend to mask power by using ‘we.’ She cites research by Mühlhäusler and Harré [Peter Mühlhäusler and Rom Harré, *Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990)] that states, ‘We spreads the responsibility. . . . We is a rhetorical device that allows the speaker(s) to distance themselves from whatever is being said, thus making it appear more palatable because it appears to come from the group as a whole rather than a particular individual.’” {Baecker} continues: “The pronoun *we* is an example of an ambiguous marker of power, which can be used both to indicate solidarity or community and as *a means to coerce the audience into behavior that benefits the speaker*. . . . There are specific rules for determining who can use the royal *we* and who must remain with the solitary *I*.” Emphasis mine. See Anne-Marie Womack, “Rhetorical Pronouns & Naming” on *Writing Rhetoric: A Pedagogical Blog*, <http://www.writingrhetorics.com/2015/02/rhetorical-pronouns-naming.html?m=1>.

⁷ See Benjamin Edelman, “Red Light States: Who Buys Online Adult Entertainment?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 209–20. <http://people.hbs.edu/bedelman/papers/redlightstates.pdf>.

⁸ See Julia Jacobs, “Stop Saying ‘Mormon,’ Church Leader Says. But Is the Real Name Too Long?” *New York Times*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/us/mormon-latter-day-saints-name.html>.