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Title Review of *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image*, by Mary Campbell

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Book Reviews

Mary Campbell. *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Leigh Eric Schmidt

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THROUGH THE LENS OF PHOTOGRAPHER Charles Ellis Johnson (1857–1926), Mary Campbell captures the subtleties of Mormon visual culture at the turn of the twentieth century as the Latter-day Saints struggled to jettison plural marriage and adapt themselves to the demands of American citizenship. In Johnson’s vast stereographic archive, Campbell has a treasure trove, which she frequently alchemizes into interpretive gold on everything from Victorian tourism to chorus-girl sexuality to Mormon historical memory to women’s rights activism. Hers is a visually sumptuous book, filled with close and often sparkling explications of particular images. At its center is the enigmatic Charles Ellis Johnson, whose thick photographic dossier is matched with a correspondingly thin textual record. The gap between what Campbell is able to document about Johnson’s life history and how she speculatively extrapolates from that spare evidence creates a number of conundrums—not least a puzzle about how to interpret Johnson’s religious identity, especially during the last third of his life after 1903 when he starts producing “a *fine line of spicy pictures of girls*” (p. 59).

Johnson was, as Campbell observes, “pure LDS aristocracy,” with a familial lineage traceable to Joseph Smith’s earliest converts and with marriage ties into Brigham Young’s household (p. 7). These inheritances and connections provided Johnson with enviable access around Salt

Lake City and helped establish him as the photographer of record for everything from Temple Park to the Saltair resort at the Great Salt Lake to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Even with his thriving photography and stereography business, Johnson was also always a bit of a huckster, a wide-awake businessman ready to make a buck on whatever would sell, including patent medicines and cheap souvenirs. Eager to vend all things Mormon, Johnson had a good feel for the respectable images that the local LDS elite wanted and also for the alluring fare that neck-craning tourists desired. By Campbell's lights, these merchandizing specialties represent two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, Johnson studiously crafted a genteel, refined aesthetic in which Mormons were remade as mainstream Americans—white, middle-class, dignified, cultured, and monogamous; on the other hand, he grandly commodified Mormon Utah—a project that helped knit the LDS world into a nationalizing consumer culture of amusement parks, mass-produced keepsakes, tourist guidebooks, and display-window fantasies. Both endeavors were ways, as Campbell suggests, of making Mormons look familiarly American, far removed from the anti-Mormon horror show that had long dominated popular media representations.

Not that Johnson's photographs and stereographs were necessarily uncomplicated icons of accommodation. Campbell discerns layers of ambivalence and grief in Johnson's imagery, a work of mourning for the "sacred polygamous body" that the American political and religious order compelled Mormons to relinquish (p. 15). His pictures, she suggests, register an abiding fear that Joseph Smith's "original faith" was being transmuted into "the impotent stuff of superficial appearance and easy entertainment" (p. 15). That lament, in many instances, seems to be as much Campbell's as Johnson's, however. With an inadequate textual archive, that anguish is necessarily projected more than demonstrated. A savvy entrepreneur, Johnson had as his first order of business pleasing his customers. If the Saints wanted to conceal the lingering presence of plural wives after 1890 by staging in Johnson's studio the appearance of a simpler family structure, he happily obliged. If gawking tourists sought confirmations of Moorish exoticism, he hustled to provide

images (in bulk) of Brigham Young and his harem. It is not at all clear that Johnson was conflicted about these dual ambitions or that he was consumed by dread at the prospect of a “polygamous Zion” dissolving into “the immaterial, deracinated space of belief” (p. 48). The constrictive norms of monogamous citizenship no doubt came at great cost to the patriarchs of the LDS Church—as the careers of Wilford Woodruff and Joseph F. Smith attest—but it is far less apparent that Johnson, a divorced bachelor with an increasingly irreligious sensibility, brooded over the loss of that materialized Zion.

Perhaps, as Johnson launched into his new venture of erotic photography, he was longing for the “spiritual exaltation” that Joseph Smith found in “the hypersexualized male body” (p. 114). Perhaps he was wistful for his own father’s polygamy, for the apotheosis of male sexuality as a carnal grace—“the origin of sacred creation” (p. 114). Campbell’s interpretive gestures in that direction resonate, but what is clearer from the evidence she gleans is Johnson’s growing alienation from the faith of his youth. Already in 1890 on a pleasure trip to San Francisco, he delighted in the decadent sexuality of the masquerade balls he attended there and talked up his visits to Chinatown’s opium dens. By 1902, his name had dropped from the membership list of his local ward, and the next year he set off with a female companion on a long journey to the Holy Land from whence he wrote home ridiculing the very desire for a “straight way to Heaven” (p. 70). His more pious relatives had, by then, seen enough. As an uncle concluded, his nephew was no longer “at heart a true Latter Day Saint living to the privileges of [his] birth & high calling” (p. 70). It is quite likely that the uncle reached that conclusion without knowing about his nephew’s nascent interest in creating a mail-order business featuring risqué images of traveling actresses and chorus girls. Should those endeavors have become publicly known in Salt Lake City, Johnson’s religious career would almost certainly have ended in decisive excommunication rather than gradual disaffiliation. Instead, for at least a four-year period from 1904 to 1907, Johnson built a lucrative mail-order trade in spicy photographs, while continuing his respectable Mormon enterprises from his studio in Salt Lake City. By

the middle of the next decade, he had sold off his Utah business and had headed to San Jose, California, where he died in 1926, a lone bachelor far removed from the LDS fellowship. Hearing of his death, one Utah family member remarked that Johnson had spent his last years opposed to all “religious flapdoodle” (p. 71).

Johnson’s mail-order business for erotica benefited from being outside the orbit of Anthony Comstock’s anti-obscenity crusades in New York and elsewhere. His wares—high-art nudes, voluptuous models posed bare-shouldered or bare-breasted, and Orientalist images of hip-dancers—were of the sort that routinely caught Comstock’s eye and frequently ended in crushing arrests and fines. While Johnson may have been less risqué than some of his competitors, Comstock and his allied agents would surely have marked him down as a dealer in obscene and indecent materials. That Johnson was a Mormon and also a purveyor of smut would not have surprised Comstock (and not simply because, as an upstanding evangelical, he would have associated Mormons with unbridled lechery). The vice fighter kept a detailed ledger on the offenders that his society arrested, which included a column noting the religious affiliation of each. The vast majority were identifiable to Comstock in religious terms—Roman Catholic, Jewish, Protestant (of multiple varieties), spiritualist, or freethinker. Only a small minority were without a religious marker, those who warranted notice as having no religion in particular or none but to serve the devil. For Comstock, it was all in a day’s work to report on two brothers who were simultaneously Methodists and sellers of obscene books, or to discover an Episcopalian chambermaid who had teamed up with a Congregationalist photographer to produce nude images of herself to peddle on the streets of New York. In other words, Comstock would have been unfazed by the notion that Johnson was both religious and wayward, both connected to a religious community and yet drawn to the sale of illicit images. Sin, he knew from long experience, was everywhere—from the turpitude he witnessed among fellow soldiers in the Union Army to the wickedness he saw infiltrating every corner of the city’s commercial life. Was it any surprise, under such circumstances, to find

a man who attended a mission chapel in the Bowery and who also ran a mail-order contraceptive business? In an everyday world of mixed motivations and fractional allegiances, Johnson could certainly be both a Mormon and a dealer in erotica.

Yet it is also possible that Comstock's ledger overstated the fixedness of religious identity: that is, a denominational marker adheres to an offender even when that label ceases to be particularly constitutive of his or her identity. Johnson, by the time he embarked on his new line of spicy photographs, seemed intent on disentangling himself from the church, one more late Victorian losing and then discarding his faith. His most vital interests were elsewhere—in theater, travel, and art. The seductive sexuality he was exploring through his intimate and sometimes haunting portraits seemed to have far more to do with bohemian yearnings than polygamous nostalgia. As his own church was beginning to fall into line with Comstock's Protestant moralism, Johnson wanted none of it (except perhaps to hold on to his LDS business). He may have looked back to Joseph Smith's fecund sexuality for inspiration, but he was most assuredly looking forward to new sexual arrangements, including romantic companionships entirely outside church-sanctioned marriages as well as an open eroticism that did not require God to bless it. "YOU SEE JOHNSON ALL OVER THE WORLD" was his advertising slogan, and he presented the word *Johnson*, American slang for penis, with an arrow thrusting through it (p. 54). Perhaps the photographer was doubling down on phallic innuendo because he missed the rugged masculinity of Mormon origins, or perhaps Johnson was looking forward to freeing the bawdy and the body from its religious inscriptions. With Campbell's rich and fascinating book as guide, both angles of vision come into revealing focus.

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