

**MORMON MARRIAGE
IS ALSO TERRESTRIAL:
A STUDY OF GENDER
IN PHYLLIS BARBER'S
*RAW EDGES: A MEMOIR*¹**

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Contemporary criticism encourages readers to perceive how certain cultural standards are promoted through literature. Historically, feminism has proposed a re-orientation of literary analysis to consider how certain gender roles have been both promoted and criticized in fiction. A wide variety of writers, whether in search of universal principles or dealing with specific cultures and ethnicities, have addressed the cultural and social implications of marriage in their books. In this article I aim to analyze the representation of marriage, as institution, that Phyllis Barber describes in her latest autobiography *Raw Edges: A Memoir* (2009). Specifically, how the institutionalization of marriage favours the generation of roles. To give a wider frame to my analysis, I will also make reference to some of her fiction. Many of her short stories and her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom* (1991) serve to analyze how Barber approaches marriage in her writing. Barber is also the author of *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir* (1994), a first autobiography which covers her growing up in Las Vegas and Boulder City. There are potential connections between this autobiography and the most recent one, but *Raw Edges* deals specifically with Barber's own personal experience of marriage, whereas *How I Got Cultured* focuses on a coming-of-age story that moves away from the object of my analysis.

Barber was raised as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, better known as the Mormon Church. Thus her fiction and her autobiographies reveal an approach to certain cultural issues that will be unfamiliar to non-

Mormons. The experience of failure to meet the high standards required by the Mormon vision of what marriage entails and symbolizes, being particular and personal, may be used to draw further connections and conclusions. Obviously, my intention is to position my analysis within the context of this specific culture, the one into which this book is inserted, so that I can offer specific and appropriate conclusions which go beyond an individual book.

In any case, before I start analyzing *Raw Edges*, I think that it is mandatory to provide a context to frame my analysis. To show how, in her literature, Barber approaches questions about the production of roles within a specific culture and how this produces certain imbalances for individuals, it is necessary to know a little more about that specific culture and its long tradition of gender concern.

Maxine Hanks explains how Mormonism enjoys a long tradition of feminist studies: “Feminism has always existed in Mormonism. It makes sense that Mormon women would be feminists: within male-centered religion and discourse, feminism and feminist theology are necessary” (Hanks 1992: xi). Traditionally, Mormon feminist discourse is mainly twofold. On the one hand, Mormon feminism fights to denounce the imbalance of authority within the Church, mainly focusing on the hierarchies of priesthood but also on theological matters. On the other hand, Mormon feminist scholars and writers denounce the promotion of gender roles that help to perpetuate those imbalances. The restriction of women to nurturing and mothering roles is basic to the understanding of Mormon society as patriarchal. Many women are satisfied with what many others qualify as unequal circumstances, due perhaps to the strong spiritual bonds that the Church has articulated in connection to their roles as mothers and wives. The Mormon notion of gender, from a social perspective, is rooted in the theological philosophy created by Joseph Smith. His ideas about progress and exaltation became operative through projects called the “Plan of Progression”, “Great Plan of Happiness” and “Celestial Marriage” that had as their objectives the exaltation that elevates a man from manhood to godhood:

Eventually, however, it was systematized as the “Plan of Salvation”, “Plan of Progression”, or “Great Plan of Happiness”. This plan holds that every human being existed prior to birth as a spirit child of God the Father and a Heavenly Mother. These spirit children are sent into mortality in order to acquire the physical body needed for further progression. Faithful Saints were therefore urged to bear as many children as possible, in order to provide these waiting spirits with both bodies and righteous homes that put them on the path to achieving their own exaltation. (Miles 2007: 5)

One of the key points that must be considered when talking about gender roles in a Mormon context, therefore, is the fact that they are more than mere cultural

constructs. As Thomas O’Dea wrote in 1957, “women are dependent upon men and upon marriage for exaltation in the afterlife and are subordinate to men on this earth within the family” (222). This establishes a pattern in which not only does women’s status depend on men for the social or economic aspects of earthly life, but their salvation and promotion in the hereafter, as understood within their religion, are also determined by their relationships to men. Motherhood as a role is sustained by an ideological discourse that promotes a certain division of duties and authority within Mormon culture:

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, equal citizenship for women was replaced by glorification of motherhood, ignoring both single or childless women and fatherhood as the equivalent of motherhood. Limiting the definition of priesthood to chiefly ecclesiastical and administrative functions has tended to limit the roles of both sexes. Anything traditionally considered “male” has come to be attached exclusively to priesthood, and this emphasis stresses —even magnifies— the differences between the sexes rather than expanding the roles of both. (Newell 1992: 42)

Those roles, apart from determining a set of activities and responsibilities for a group of people, also determine those they cannot aspire to. In consequence, as Margaret Toscano puts it, they “create different concepts of self-worth for men and women” (2007: 24). In Mormonism, those roles circle around the idea of motherhood and wifehood, as can be easily seen by taking a look at the proclamation that the Church published in 1995:

Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.²

This is not a sudden apparition. These ideas have been present in the Church since Parley P. Pratt published his “Duties of Women” in the *Latter-day Saints Millennial Star* in 1840. In the second half of the century, authorities such as Harold B. Lee, Hugh B. Brown or Joseph Fielding Smith wrote essays and delivered speeches defending similar ideas (Arrington 1979: 16). Toscano expresses the view that these positions help to clarify role marking: “If one partner always presides, even in love and righteousness, the other is still subordinate, at least in rule, if not also in rank” (2007: 21). This idea is based on a distinction between two different sets of responsibilities for women and men so characteristic in Mormon culture: women taking the role of motherhood, and men, the role of priesthood. An apparently equal balance based on gender essentials that do not take into account the personal agency to choose. Motherhood aids women to exercise their instrumental agency within the Church because it is perceived as prompting the same grade of

responsibility that priesthood bestows upon men. This division helps to define spaces, reproducing the distinction between the private and the public sphere.

In debating the origins of the historical social division of labor, Carrie Miles says that Mormons before the Industrial Revolution, whose economy was based on agrarian resources, “were subject to the same forces shaping the family as their more conventional neighbors” (2007: 2). Miles states that “in retrospect it is clear that in the latter half of the twentieth century, marriage, family, and gender relations underwent their most significant changes in human history, causing problems not just for the LDS Church but for the entire developed world” (1-2). Consequently, in the twentieth century, Church authorities reinforced the idea that motherhood was holy and it was equal to men’s priesthood in that it was the path to exaltation laid down for women. Linda P. Wilcox gives a precise date for this development in doctrine: “In the 1920s and 1930s there seemed to be an emphasis on the idea of ‘eternal’ or ‘everlasting’ motherhood. It seemed important to emphasize that motherhood was as ongoing and eternal as godhood” (1992: 9). If motherhood is “eternal” and “everlasting” then, as Aaltje Baumgart summarizes, the roles that the Church promotes when it limits women’s spheres to the home and the family are “eternal patterns and not secularly influenced” (2003: 2). As a consequence, for Mormons, the idea that motherhood is a woman’s only task belongs to the theological realm. Motherhood becomes thus mandatory to attain membership: “to join the Church today, the potential member, especially a woman, has to obtain not just a testimony of the truthfulness of the Church, she must also develop a testimony of the eternal and earthly importance of motherhood” (Miles 2007: 36-37).

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In any case, both the Mormon man and the Mormon woman seem bound to get married. As Howard W. Hunter says, “it is not good for man nor for woman to be alone” (1994: 49). Marriage is understood as the basis of family and families are central to the Church: “Mormon history suggests that the combination of the doctrine of eternal marriage and the law of eternal progression requires equal emphasis on the development of the individual and on the strength of the family and community”, says Arrington (1979: 17). The Mormon concept of family and marriage must be viewed from this perspective: it ought to be valued in accordance with its signification within Mormon culture. In consequence, family, as a whole, becomes an important tenet in Mormon culture. Wallace Stegner states that “the family is so important in the Mormon religion that without it, the religion would hardly exist” (in Stegner and Etulain 1996: 112). And Claudia L. Bushman confirms this notion when she states that, in the Mormon Church, “the basic unit [is] the family rather than the individual” (2008: 176). The link that binds family and Church is not a literary device.

Mormon scholar Bruce W. Jorgensen, in fact, proposes an analysis of marriage as a method of applying literary criticism to Mormon fiction from a different perspective. In his study, Jorgensen examines a number of short stories by Mormons in which marriage plays an important role. But before doing so, he attempts to define Mormon marriage:

There is no ideal or archetype or model of a modern Mormon marriage, even if all or most of them might share certain minimal traits or conditions. We can suppose that they will all be (as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” describes or prescribes) heterosexual and monogamous; yet we can’t suppose that all will be temple marriage (though clearly the Proclamation would prefer that). And however “eternal” they may be in wish, or sanction, the ones we can watch and write about, here and now, will be temporal, however long they last. (2004: 36-37)

In conclusion, the role that family and marriage play in Mormon culture is visibly fundamental. And Mormon feminism reveals a long tradition of continuous debate about the role played by women within the instrumental capacity that these institutions display in Mormon community and culture. As Glen Lambert states, Mormon “theology emphasizes free choice, direct inspiration, choosing our path” (2004: 26), but Mormon society is, in truth, highly hierarchical. Barber’s personal approach is mainly focused on the second historical concern of Mormon feminism, that of gender roles. Roles are understood as the historical products that encapsulate the expectations and demands placed upon women in a male-centred community. Barber explains the matter of personal responsibility while at the same time admitting that responsibility may be reduced by the exercise of cultural and group pressure. This discussion of the roles of gender and the institution of marriage is always present in her work, in the autobiographies as well as in her fiction, because it is rooted in her involvement in the act of writing.

Before turning an analysis of her second autobiography, it is necessary to show how these topics are explored by Barber when writing fiction. In her fiction, as it happens in Mormon faith, family and the Church are closely connected: “for a Mormon, the distinction between family and church is one of scale” (Clark 1986: 22). In her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*, Esther Jensen, the main character, turns to the Church to look for “comfort”, but she knows that she is expected to fulfil certain conditions. This concern is enlarged by her own conception of virtue framed by Mormon ideals on family, an example of the stereotyped virtuous Mormon household; conforming at least, to the way Wallace Stegner conceives the essential virtues of a Mormon family: “hospitality”, “familial warmth” and “a degree of community responsibility” (in Stegner and Etulain 1996: 102). Not fulfilling those conditions leads to a sense of “estrangement” (Lambert 2004: 25), a sense of losing one’s identity that comes with the feeling that one does

not fit into an established category. Mormon emphasis on family threatens with that *estrangement* even if one sets out to reinforce faith in times of failure. Linda Sillitoe's main character in *Sideways to the Sun* (1987) shares with Esther in *And the Desert Shall Blossom* those same feelings about finding a proper niche in the Church when her marriage fails. The Church is not a welcoming place for "halves, quarters, and shared bits of families" (Barber 1991: 145). Besides, while Esther suffers from her own failure to fulfil the basic requirements of her marriage, Barber finds fault with the marital standards of her 'other half', her husband Alf Jensen. The main intention of the writer is to portray how those ideals provoke tension when they need to be fulfilled or how they are the source of conflict when both members in the marriage try to reject them. At the end of the novel, when they try to play their respective roles again, the situation is described with irony:

The model mother. The model wife. Alf was also a model husband, home on time, attentive to the children, mild mannered. They almost convinced each other that theirs was a settled, genteel home life, except at night Esther tossed and pulled the covers and tried not to scream and Alf curled into a solitary ball of himself, and they both mentioned how their jaws hurt when they woke in the morning. (1991: 208)

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In his survey of marriage in Mormon fiction, Bruce W. Jorgensen names Barber among those Mormon writers with increasing concern about marriage in Mormon culture. He refers to two stories from Barber's collections of short stories: "Ida's Sabbath" from *Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination* (1999) and "Almost Magnificent" from *The School of Love* (1990). Jorgensen proposes Barber as an example of "afters", those stories that show how "an ended marriage still intrudes its ghostly presence, welcome or not" (2004: 39). Barber, and Jorgensen is right, focuses on conflict and on the consequences of that conflict. She elaborates on topics depicting the thin line between success and failure. In Barber's fiction, female characters are the victims of their own expectations —the hope that they pinned on their marriages. Barber suggests that the explanation to this fiasco is sometimes found in the sexual and social training of these women. Especially, if self-awareness activates the clash between the expectations of the individual and those of society. Many of these female characters facing challenge in her books reach that situation after feeling that their marriages have failed. Reading Barber's fiction, one comes to the conclusion that marriage is not ill-designed but it needs solid bedrock to endure. Barber does not assign guilt or responsibilities but portrays the circumstances a failed marriage leads to.

Those references in her fiction anticipate Barber's subsequent treatment of marriage in her autobiographical pieces. In *How I Got Cultured* marriage is only touched upon when she recollects her parents at home. Barber's family figures as the main site of conflict in a consideration of submissiveness and pride, both

of which are tested and measured from a Mormon perspective. In *Raw Edges*, in contrast, Barber explores sexual and marital tensions as fundamental elements of her own intricate and compound identity. Here, she herself is the mother and the one expressing the role of motherhood, but she does so with references to her mother as a connection to the past that leads to the delineation of a timeline. In her fiction, her reflections on the role of women are open to discussion since the disguise of fiction invites potential readers to understand those fictional portrayals as general statements going beyond a singular reference. In Barber's latest autobiography, the context and the circumstances seem to determine that her perspective is personal and singular. Her references to Mormonism open up the possibility of a straightforward, broad analysis but the intersection with her candid and intimate voice sets up a complex and enigmatic scenario. Her experiences are personal but they help the reader towards a general interpretation of those issues mentioned above as contextualizing the specific culture in which she was raised.

The consequences of the genre change, from novel to autobiography, are notable. Autobiography helps the first person narrator to take a clear stand in the text, more committed than in fiction. Especially, when, in this case, Barber herself reveals that she is about to approach inner places that so far have remained untouched by confession:

It's probably a darker book from anything I've written before. I am dealing with the shadowed side of my usually upbeat personality and with some very real pain. It's also a no-holds-barred book in which I tried not to shy away from the aspects of the story that wouldn't present me in the most favorable light. (In Masters 2008)

The recent upsurge of autobiography has opened up a different perspective on the nature and possibilities of the genre. Valerie Holladay has registered these changes in a Mormon context, and finds that there is a considerable critical effort on the part of authors who depart from the conventional nature and structure of autobiography to develop this genre into an exercise of self-analysis that involves a conscious exploration of the social context: "the goal of autobiographical writing becomes 'truth-seeking', rather than 'truth-telling'" (Holladay 1999: 89).

The traditional view of the genre poses an approach which takes a retrospective and evocative stance in order to state or revisit a specific life experience. George Gusdorf, who had a very conventional concept of autobiography, defines it as "a second reading of experience" (1980: 38). He explained that writing autobiographical acts requires a distancing from oneself in order to focus on a "special unity and identity across time" (35). This theory envisions identity as a given, a starting point rather than an object. In Barber, that unity of time and identity is broken into a meaningful complexity in which the signification is derived from a complex double figure in between the writer and the author. James Olney says that "in

effect, the narrative is never finished, nor even can be, within the covers of a book” (1980: 25). This comment fits Barber to an extent that Olney himself probably did not envision; Barber’s self is represented in her autobiographies as unfinished and in process, coming to terms with Olney’s theory that “by its very nature, the self is (like the autobiography that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete; it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process” (25).

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The search for identity through the recapitulation of the individual experience offers different tones, making it necessary to revise the genre in a variety of approximations, enriching its prospects and expertise. In Barber, the influence of new literary movements and the assumption of postmodernist traits transform the genre into an undefined and ductile exercise. Barber’s approach to the genre is unconventional and bountiful, complex and multilayered. The use of different perspectives and voices, the participation of secondary characters, the fragmentation of the recollection or the undefined progression of time are only some of the devices that seem to belong to fictional resources and not to the traditional approach to autobiography. Barber faces the autobiographical act by committing herself to frankness and openness. She is aware of the limitations of telling the truth. In fact, she confesses to an awareness of her perspective and relies on experiences which she approaches in a hesitant and revisionist spirit. Barber’s own comments on the writing of autobiography make it clear that she favours a “candid” or “confessional” stance (Barber 2012: 141). The performance of her identity relies on an invitation to share her inner turmoil and participate in her redeeming articulation of the creative act of confession. She proposes candour as an ethical base from which to launch her elaborated attempt to balance personal experiences that run the whole gamut from failure to achievement: “though there is an element of personal revelation in both words —‘confessional’ and ‘candid’— the word ‘confession’ more fully implies one’s wish to be forgiven or to make amends” (2012: 142).

In *Raw Edges*, Barber revisits the years after, before and during her first marriage. She frames this journey back to her marital experience through the recollection of her trip on bicycle across the United States. Even before publishing *Raw Edges*, Barber published “Body Blue: Excerpts from a Novoir” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* in 2003. “Body Blue” is a small sample of what was to come in *Raw Edges*. In a footnote reference in this short story, Barber tells about her marriage to David Barber which will be fictionalized in her autobiography and it is slightly fictionalized in this text:

David and Phyllis Barber, married for 33 years and divorced for six, are devoted friends. This is not a ‘kiss and tell’ or ‘here comes the judge’ account, but rather a recognition that there are many whose idealism gets caught beneath the intersecting

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wheels of Mormonism and of contemporary life. It is also a willingness to share this struggle to pull free again with others who may have been in a similar place. (Barber 2003: 68)

This will be later expanded in *Raw Edges*, where Barber talks honestly about her marriage. As Elizabeth Breau summarizes in her review of *Raw Edges*, Barber recollects her experience of this long relationship in relation to her faith: “Barber’s earnest efforts to accept the beliefs of the original tenets of Mormonism is testament to her belief in her marriage vows” (Breau 2010). As I have emphasized above, marriage is central to family and family, and as Howard W. Hunter states, is “the most important unit in time and in eternity” (1994: 51). If Boyd K. Packer said that “the family is safe within the Church” (1994: 22), it would follow that people are in danger without the family. That is the main explanation of Barber’s revelation, at the beginning of the book, that she is embarking on the telling of her “seven lean years of being lost” (2009: 3) and her need for understanding, “if not by no one else but myself” (2). In the blurb to the first edition, there is a sentence that attracts attention: “she had to redefine herself as a woman, mother and artist” (2009).

Barber’s literary production in general could be summarized as a literary search for identity. In Barber’s autobiographies, identity is not a given to be reassembled. Just the opposite, it is an on-going process, an attempt to construct and discover some degree of certainty around the concepts of self. Her identity will be revealed as a composite of different elements, tensions and conflicts which need to achieve a very complex balance. She does not really claim multiple identities but a holistic identity that is made up of multiple parts. The poles, the dichotomies, the duality are confronted and challenged to reveal the construction of an identity. This is complicated by the fact that Barber allows not only for disruption and heterogeneous contexts but also for a psychologically, physically and socially complex process of search. Barber’s autobiographical effort condenses a representation of identity that relies on these complexities, on a self which is refined by different representations and performances in progress, under construction; an identity which is never achieved as a complete whole.

In this autobiography, Barber explores her identity. She gives an unconcealed and personal chronicle of her own marriage’s failure. The generation of gendered roles within the Mormon community, especially when promoting the roles of mother and wife for women, is perfectly illustrated in her two autobiographies but, in *Raw Edges*, her role as mother and wife is specifically approached through a tangled chronology that takes the reader back and forth. Sources and consequences are exposed in a sequence that illustrates the complexity, derivations and problematic of motherhood and wifeness. Being a mother for Barber in *Raw Edges* is linked

to a part of her life in which her identity was shaped by her marriage. It was an easy, secure, understandable role that she is forced to abandon when her marriage collapses. She finds herself trying to adapt to a new situation in which she feels basically lost and fearful. *Raw Edges* maps the geography of both Barber's ordeals and good experiences when she rides her bike on a personal quest for self-definition. This journey will be sought as a potential source of reconciliation and negotiation. Her laborious attempt at defining her identity as woman and wife encompasses many different perspectives and topics. However, in this article, I have chosen two specific aspects to show how Barber expounds and examines her marriage. Both these aspects are key to an understanding of her autobiography, but they are also important topics for a study of gender issues within Mormon society. These two aspects that I will contemplate here are the body and sex.

Previously in her fiction, Barber uses body as a metaphor, with specific references to wombs to illustrate the repressive consequences of certain cultural standards. The body is central to an understanding of the conflict between spirituality and materialism. *Raw Edges* offers several demonstrations of Barber's spiritual necessity, in different churches and through different approximations to the experience of the divine or the supernatural, helping the reader to understand her strong need for that dimension, and her latent rejection of limitations. Especially illustrative is her account of a powerful experience in an African-American church where she is recognized and welcomed as a visitor and she meets an extraordinary old woman who sings a long prayer of blessings and she thanks God for earthly things such as "the lying down at night" (Barber 2009: 57). Barber relates this experience to her constant longing for abstract but compelling totality and she amplifies this spiritual, strong connection, when she is physically close to the old woman called mama. It is symbolic because this spiritual devotion is balanced at the same time by a stress on the physical:

I stood next to Mama and felt the delicate bones of her hand, a hand that had done much, that had been witness to much. Delicate, yet firm. Strong. Resolute. Unafraid. This was the hand of a redeemer, a healer, one who had seen it all and could still forgive, one who could open her arms and receive the least of her sisters. I felt her power through my fingertips. I felt electricity coursing through my hands and arms to the woman on my right. A circle. An unbroken circle. (2009: 58-59)

Moreover, in chapter six, titled "The Unpredictable Body", Barber exemplifies the spiritual importance of body when she says that "my flesh remembered" (83), establishing the importance of body in both spiritual and earthly experiences, as if both were connected. It is significant that Barber highlights the relevance that physicality has within her spiritual experiences. This seems to contradict Terry Tempest Williams' statement that in religion "it isn't your body that is valued; it is

your soul” (Austin 2006: 37). Probably, this conscious association of the physical and the spiritual operates as a model for Barber’s approach to the consequences of her failed marriage. The sexual issues unleashing the failure were defined by her faith and her spiritual education within the Church. In any case, it also works to symbolize the constant tension between different extremes that characterizes the whole autobiography. The body and the spirit are approached in an attempt to marry both dimensions. This impulse provides rich undertones for the potential meanings that the narrative triggers.

In fact, the book is backboned upon the story of a trip on a bicycle; for her, experiencing the pain of riding a bicycle across the country is the best way of going deep into her own fears, of understanding not only her physical dimension but her ethereal nature. This is illustrated in her final conversation with C.J. in the aftermath of their cycling experience, when Barber is heading back home and C.J. forces her to discuss their recent experience. They finally agree that they have been “using the physical to bust the mental” (Barber 2009: 236); and they infer that they came to the conclusion that “imperfection is perfect” (2009: 236), which is a statement that can be given as an axiom to undermine her sufferings. Thus Barber establishes a sense of completeness that encompasses both the body and the spirit.

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In the same line, she tells the story of her life, physical and spiritual, through a series of very physical events. Barber writes like she dances. For Barber, dancing constitutes something more than just the skill to keep balance and the sense of movement. Dancing is “about the joy of your body, which is a temple” (2009: 139). When she talks about the period of her life when she learned and then taught belly dancing, she feels confident and happy, relieved, because “I swirled in the twist of my veil, openly enjoying the art of the earthy feminine and the loosening of my boundaries. I loved the feel of undulation and swaying. I loved moving from the inside, feeling what it was to be a woman with a pelvis, breasts, a stomach, and a womb” (138).

All this confidence is lost when she performs in front of a group of men and she has to stop because they perceived a certain notion of danger on her dancing. They do not feel “the joy and playful innocence” (139) but the disruption and lust. This sudden disappointment contrasts with the positive connotations that dancing offers whenever Barber relates any of these experiences. Almost always, discovering her body with harmony and pleasure is connected to dancing and music, as if the body and its discovery meant electricity, spiritual energy trying to escape from being tamed:

I slipped the dress over my body. I touched my right breast. How incredibly soft a woman could be. I’d almost forgotten. I loved this softness. This was me, the woman who hadn’t cared about anything except getting out of town when she left

Fort Collins. Behind the dressing room curtain, I struck a flamenco pose, smiled a mischievous smile, snapped my fingers and stamped rhythms quietly against the floor. (Barber 2009: 229)

This last example illustrates how sexuality is confronted in the plots of Barber's stories. Barber details the repression of sex (and the sexual tension avoided) as an inescapable condition in the life of her female characters (and her own).³ Whenever they act freely or they avoid their inhibitions, they experience some sense of failure or despair; mainly because they have been deprived of a series of features that would have made them able to handle sex in those circumstances. In her stories, sex is often disturbing. The women in many of these short stories have been trained to take care of their bodies like a temple to be offered to a man in the future. This idealism hinders their discovery of sex. As Wayne Schow comments "social groups have long understood that, in order to promote stability, peace, safety, and justice, certain natural impulses need to be restrained" (2004: 117-118). Among those natural impulses, sex is a source of potential danger and disruption, thus, it needs to be controlled and harnessed for the benefit of society or community.

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Sex is thus a prime site for examining feelings of guilt and failure when womanhood is approached from a sociological point of view. Guilt is also a feature that needs to be considered when talking about marriage in *Raw Edges*. Barber has to struggle with her vows and her beliefs to handle a situation that causes her own identity to deteriorate:

I was definitely disenchanted with infinity at this point. Thirty years of marriage had been burned to a crisp despite David's and my non-blinking vow of "forever". We'd promised in the Mormon temple that our marriage would last for time and all eternity, not just "til death do we part". (2009: 19-20)

Her husband is trying to cope with an intimate tension, a sexual tension that puts their marriage in a risky situation, a tension that threatens to pull down all her beliefs: "Mormonism had always been like my shoes and socks, my hat and gloves, the warp and weft of my being" (47). Mormonism determined her marriage and partially her relationship towards her husband, in consequence, after hearing that confession, and experiencing the failure of her marriage, her life was in a certain disarray:

I listened intently. I'd lost the most valuable thing a wife could have —the honor of a faithful husband. In my thinking, I was no longer a treasured woman, a valued partner, a respected member of any community, let alone the Mormon one. I needed to make the world fit together again. (119)

The failure of her marriage, as described in her memoir, implicates a redefinition. The code of interpretation that she had used to design her life and define herself

within a community is no longer of any use. In that redefinition, her involvement with Mormonism seems to be in danger. The Mormon Church is made for families:

Sunday mornings when I hauled the children to church by myself, sat on the long bench without a husband, and watched other women and their husbands and their children. Church became a lonely place where I sat and stared at what I thought I didn't have. (261)

In that trip to darkness or experience to which she was led after the failure of her marriage, that sexual tension turns into an experience of adultery that is wrapped in words such as “falling”, “betraying”, “dark hole”, “initiation”, “darkness”, “shattering” and “sacrifice” (144-147). But there, we see the birth of consciousness. This experience sparks off the relative problem in her head. The conflict between what she was and what she wanted to be is poetically but painfully summarized as a call to reinvent herself: “the shattering of my vows, my promises, my ethics, my loyalty” (147). She is no stranger to the powerful awareness of a possibility of rebirth, an initiation in a world that, while desperate and dark, keeps a light burning steadily, a world where the church bells summon not only to duty but to experience-based dreams, still under lock and key: “*But maybe, just maybe, you are someone who is incredibly brave to break yourself to put yourself back together again*” (174). The prospect of freedom does not only resound with positive promises but Barber seems to have embraced the potency of risk as a nurturing balance to reconstitute her own identity.

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The avoidance of happy endings is a constant in Barber's literary production. In fact, Barber naturally rejects dichotomies, extremes and conclusive epilogues. In consequence, the ending of *Raw Edges* does not help the reader to derive any rigorous conclusions from her portrayal of marriage. Barber's portrayal of marital failure belongs to (but goes beyond) the long tradition of Mormon feminist writing. Glen Lambert states that “women seem to feel more deeply, particularly in Mormon culture, because marriage is so emphasized as a solution to life's problems” (2004: 23). Mormon orthodoxy still encourages a tendency to promote stereotypes that prioritize women's role in society as begetters of children and home-makers. As Linda Sillitoe puts it: “motherhood is the most valued status women attain in our society” (1980: 50).

Barber's testimony is personal and committed but unfinished and flexible. Barber closes the book with the same pain and longings but with a determination to survive. She is convinced of her unconscious strength, even though she cannot avoid the realization that life is pain just as it is relief. Probably, a definition that can also be applied to marriage. The imposition of standards and roles attempts to allay that uncertainty about the institution of marriage but the consequences are perfectly described in Barber's book. In conclusion, Barber develops these gender

issues from a very personal bias and through a candid but insightful perspective, always managing to address a wider spectrum of readers. Approaching Mormonism and Mormon literature from a feminist viewpoint helps to reveal a penetrating but faithful dimension of Mormon culture. Mormon culture and literature seem to stand at a far remove from mainstream academia, but critical attention may offer different angles and perceptions of interest to gender issues.

Notes

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2. President Gordon B. Hinckley read this proclamation as part of his message to the General Relief Society Meeting held in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1995. As Miles states, the proclamation, even if it has not been officially canonized and has not the weight of scripture, "appeared as a new and unique form of communicating God's will to church members" (2007: 33). The present quotation

has been taken from the text published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in their official website.

3. Laura L. Bush places this tension in the clash between Mormon training and western cultural training: "the strained position twentieth-century Mormon women find themselves in with regard to their sexuality, alternately working to achieve the Victorian-Mormon ideal of women's chastity, while also shaping themselves to become the object of men's desire and, at times, the survivors of men's sexual exploitation" (2004: 28).

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