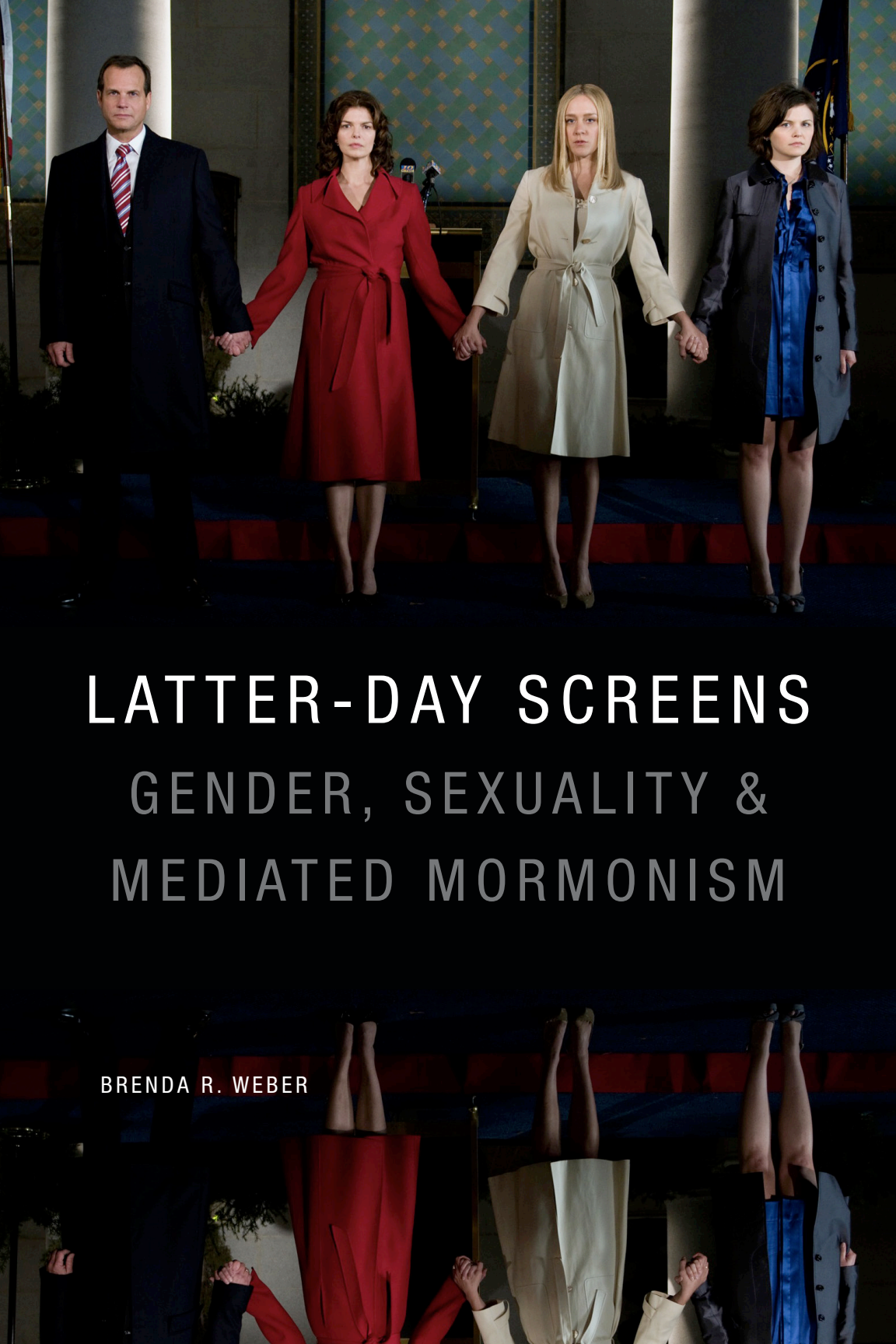

LATTER-DAY SCREENS

GENDER, SEXUALITY & MEDIATED MORMONISM

BRENDA R. WEBER

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For Michael and Stacey,
my North Stars

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is not about Mormon people and history so much as it is about Mormonism as an idea, an image, and a way of thinking. While I have my own experiences with Mormonism that I detail in the epilogue, this book isn't really about me. Yet, it isn't *not* about me, in that growing up non-Mormon in the highly Mormon city of Mesa, Arizona, cultivated in me a certain point of view that, no doubt, led me to a career in gender studies and a commitment to social justice. Even so, this book is not meant as a critique of a religion or its adherents but as an examination of the way Mormonism as a meme functions as a symbolic stand-in, particularly with respect to gender and sexuality. I believe Mormonism serves as a lens through which to see a set of cultural operations and investments otherwise difficult to discern.

I recognize that religion is not, and never can be, only abstraction. And so I offer my thanks to the actual LDS folks who have been my friends over the past forty years, in real life and on social media. While some of those people have already unfriended me for being radically liberal, many others have remained. I hope those Mormon friends who become aware of this book might see it as a tribute to a way of seeing they fostered.

The LDS Church believes in a living doctrine, meaning some of the policies I discuss in this book have changed since 2019. Here's hoping for yet more advances!

I have two non-Mormon friends who have been with me since childhood. I first met Stacey when I was three and she was four, and our mothers were convinced we'd enjoy playing together. Were they ever right! Although we always liked each other, it wasn't until our families moved closer to one another that Stacey and I became inseparable. I loved and continue to love her ready

laugh, her quick wit, her overall good-naturedness, and her capacities to go deep, all qualities that serve her well now as a physician. Stacey, I still owe you a nickel for believing my dog's hernia was a penis but tough crunchies.

Michael and I met in seventh grade, at Kino Junior High School in Mesa. I will never forget my first glimpse of him dashing down the hall in a furtive run-walk as he delivered messages for the nurse. Never was there a more conscientious or fast-moving aide than he—or a more talented scene partner in acting class or a smarter competitor in AP English. I loved and continue to love his intensity, his intelligence, and his loyalty. He is now a highly successful attorney and ever-ready flash mob participant in Los Angeles. Michael, I'm sorry for crushing your cookies.

When I first began to consider writing a book about Mormons, both Stacey and Michael thought I was, to put it mildly, making a big mistake. Why go back and think about those things? Why be immersed in the very culture that we had all worked so hard to flee physically and emotionally? Yet, both told me stories of such intimacy and pain that I was deeply moved and doubly convinced that I wanted to write this book. I won't repeat those stories here, except to say that both Michael and Stacey have been part of a lifelong conversation that has tried to make tangible something ephemeral that had enormous influence over us. Together we have the makings for a classically unfunny joke: A lawyer, a doctor, and a professor walk into a bar and ruminate on the cognitive dissonances of their childhood. We all learned to negotiate a series of invisible codes that we were never taught yet learned so well that we often internalized. Together we cut our teeth on the hegemonic structures of Mormonism, and we all have moments, even now, when feelings of discomfort or confusion emerge mysteriously in our lives—reminding us of those tender days of childhood. For these reasons, I dedicate this book to my two lifelong friends, Stacey Davis and Michael Graham. I'm not sure you even know one another, but together you're fused as the North Star that has guided my writing in this book. While I regret that neither Stacey nor Michael live nearby, I am so grateful that both offer me an immediate intimacy and a lifelong connection.

I also want to thank all of the media producers whose creative and often courageous work fueled this project. While I appreciate and am fully fascinated by big-budget productions like *The Book of Mormon* and *Big Love*, it is the voices of individuals trying to navigate their way to a new truth that affected me most strongly and offered the clearest clarion call for putting my own truth on the page. In particular, I want to thank Terry Tempest Williams, Judith Freeman, Emily Pearson, Cindi Jones, Tara Westover, and Mar-

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Thanks to the international network of scholars working in gender and media, who have very kindly invited me to give talks at their universities or who have attended conference presentations when I have presented this material. I so appreciate the encouragement you have offered. In particular, I thank (the incomparable) Sarah Banet-Weiser, (the brilliant) Helen Wood, (the inimitable) David Gerstner, (the sensational) Haidee Wasson, (the in-

defatigable) Dana Heller, (the indomitable) Misha Kavka, and (the absolutely fabulous and much-beloved) Georges-Claude Guilbert.

During the writing of this book, I had the opportunity to serve as the Muriel Gold Senior Scholar-in-Residence at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at McGill University, Montreal. My thanks to Carrie Rentschler and the institute for this opportunity. I also received funding from the Indiana University College of Arts and Humanities Institute and the IU New Frontiers Initiative, for which I am grateful. In addition, this work was partially funded by the Office of the Vice Provost of Research (OVPR) at Indiana University Bloomington through the Grant-in-Aid program and through OVPR and the IU Libraries. I thank Diane Negra for encouraging me to publish a portion of the book on *Sister Wives* and spiritual neoliberalism in *Television and New Media*.

I thank my broad circle of friends and family who have received this work with boundless interest, particularly Chantal Carleton, Regis Helie, Bill Yarber, Barb Klinger, Kathleen McHugh, Gardner Bovingdon, Charles Aclund, Paul Gutjahr, Katie Lofton, Mara Einstein, Scott Curtis, Kirsten Pike, Jeff Hartenfelt, Jennifer Meta-Robinson, Brynda Forgas, Suzanne Bresina-Hutton, Karen Tice, Jean Ward, Jennifer Westerhaus Adams, Patti Peplow, Judith Wenger, Andrea Waller, Beth Kamhi, Robert Weber, Heather Weber, Becky Weber, John Weber, and, as always, Donna Swaim. Special thanks to my parents, David and Mary Weber, who are more than a little concerned that I might have written a book critical of our good and kind neighbors in Mesa. Mom and Dad, I hope your pride in me outweighs your apprehension, and I'm sorry for all of the swear words in the book!

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I thank my best guys and my closest family, Jake Waller and Greg Waller. Thanks for making the stars shine and the coffee strong and for so much special time.

Finally, no book on Mormonism would be complete without some attention to Mormon foodways. I do not have recipes for Jell-O molds, homemade root beer, or funeral potatoes, but I do have something better . . . our neighbor Mrs. Osbourne's fudge cake. It is not for the weak of heart or the calorie conscious, but it does deliver an almost foolproof dessert for even the most challenged of chefs. My favorite part is that the frosting goes on right when

the cake is out of the oven. I'm sure this is a time- and labor-saving device for busy mothers with lots of children, but it's also a flavor-enhancing breakthrough, since the frosting caramelizes as it cools. I hadn't really planned to include a recipe in this book. But this morning as I prepared to finish the copyedits on the book and to make my son's annual birthday cake—nine years old!—it seemed fitting to include this much-loved recipe that I begged off Mrs. Osbourne when I myself was nine. I offer it to the book and to you, my reader, as a sweet token of thanks and appreciation.

JOSIE OSBOURNE'S FUDGE CAKE

Sift together in a large bowl:

2 cups sugar
2 cups flour

Mix in a saucepan:

2 sticks butter
4 T cocoa
1 cup water

Bring to a boil and pour over flour and sugar. Stir well and then add:

½ cup buttermilk
1 tsp baking soda
2 beaten eggs
1 tsp vanilla

Mix well and pour into a greased and powdered-sugared 11″ × 16″ pan.

Bake at 400 degrees for 20 minutes.

While cake bakes, boil:

1 stick butter
4–6 T buttermilk
3–4 T cocoa

Remove from heat and add:

1 box powdered sugar
1 tsp vanilla
1 cup chopped nuts (optional)

Beat with a spoon and spread over cake while it is still hot.

Mrs. Osbourne's hints: this cake is better just a bit warmed up, and it will feed a family of 12!

PAST AS PROLOGUE

Latter-day Screens and History

This book considers gender and sexuality as examined through a range of screens, each containing a compelling combination of images, narratives, sounds, and discourses that I call mediated Mormonism. Though each of the texts I examine are bounded—in some cases by covers, in others by opening and closing credits—their meanings far exceed the boundaries of before, middle, and end that we have been taught constitute the basic elements of a story. Indeed, this is the very meaning of latter-day screens. It is not a single image or the sound of one bell ringing alone that I try to capture in this book but a palimpsest of images and a cacophony of noises, many bells clanging at once in synchronicity if not unison. While the intermedial discourse about Mormonism is complex, it is also remarkably coherent. Mediated Mormonism reinforces over and over again a story about preparing not for the end of times, the latter days, but for living in modernity itself, in all of its complexity, temporal dislocation, speed, and mediation. Remarkably, doing so requires engaging with and actively contesting conventional meanings of gender and sexuality in all of their complexity and nuance.

My interest in this topic is both personal and intellectual. I grew up as a non-Mormon in a highly Mormon city: Mesa, Arizona. As I detail in the memoir that serves as this book's epilogue, Mormonism taught me everything I ever needed to know about the silent workings of power, desire, and consent that we call hegemony. I also come to this project as a scholar of both gender studies and media studies, interested in how culture simultaneously

serves as a conduit of social instruction and a mirror of social relations. Because of my personal relation to Mormonism, I can't hope to sustain the pretense of the scholar's objective pose; my own dry immersion in Mormonism makes me as far from an impartial witness as one could imagine. Yet I decided to bring my subtle contact and contract with Mormonism to this study because memory, like mediation and narration, functions as an important filtering agent that shapes the power and meaning of ideas. Memory is its own medium and another form of screen on which these stories are projected. It thus seemed not only important but necessary to offer to this study of gender and media my own imperfect, distorting, and unreliable memory, that of a child who came of age in the shadow of Mormonism. If I had not lived a childhood on the fringes of the Saints, who themselves believe they operate on the margins of an American mainstream, I doubt very much that I would have even realized the veins of power and hegemony, alienation and belonging, obedience and independence pumping through the body of mediated Mormonism. And what is perhaps even more striking—the kind of mediated Mormonism I discuss in this book blossomed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, long after my period of growing up in Mesa in the 1970s and '80s. Yet, when I wanted to understand my own experiences more, I didn't go to a historical archive. Instead, I watched a lot of TV and surfed a lot of websites and read a lot of books. We might say, then, just like dusting for fingerprints, mediated Mormonism serves as a clarifying technology that makes the hegemonic markings visible. Latter-day screens require we look at what is projected not just on the screen itself but in the patterns of dust particles that swirl and dance in the light.

The primary source materials I use in this book are readily available and affordable through retail outlets such as Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu. Print materials span the publishing gamut, covering all literary classifications (novel, short story, memoir, biography, poetry, nonfiction) and all segments of the publishing industry, from vanity presses to major publishing houses. These materials are augmented by an increased awareness of Mormonism in journalism and academia, all of which have fueled the surge of interest in, and concern about, Mormonism. Although I did my research in the United States, and most of the materials I consider are produced in English-speaking countries, mediated Mormonism—much like the Mormon missionary—exists in an international polyglossic network, aided and augmented by worldwide media distribution and consumption at both professional and amateur levels. A complex multi-platformed media culture is thus critical to the dissemination of Mormonism as a meme, rich with infor-

mation about social values in the present moment. It is precisely because so much of Mormonism earns its saliency and visibility through both conventional and new media forms that its study has something important to say about the circulation, intelligibility, and appeal of ideas and ideology.

In doing this analysis, I am not so much interested in actual Mormon people or history so much as the fusion of stories and images that blend together to represent these things, what I call in the book Mormonism as meme. I am also interested in how the governing logics of Mormonism as a meme, in turn, provide a mediated pedagogy about power and identity, specifically with relation to gender and sexuality. I call this Mormonism as an analytic. Consequently, this book is not a sociological analysis nor a historical treatment nor a religious discussion nor an ethnography. In fact, during the writing of this book, I had the opportunity to interview a number of notable F/LDS folk, including Kody Brown, Steve Young, Donny Osmond, John Dehlin, Terry Tempest Williams, and Elizabeth Smart. Though fascinated by the possibility of actually talking to people, I chose not to pursue these possibilities because I wanted to engage with the cultural function of mediated Mormonism as both a meme and an analytic. Doing so requires that I engage with impressions as they exist in the public sphere. Yet I am very aware that Mormonism cannot and does not function only as a metaphor, and I want to be very clear that I do not wish to denigrate or disrespect any aspect of the religion or its peoples but, instead, to chart the movement of an idea as it moves across the mediascape.

A History of Sorts

References to Mormon history and beliefs constantly bubble to the surface of contemporary mediation, and so it is important to have some sense of the backdrop for these allusions. As just one example, HBO's *Big Love* frequently cites Mormon history and religious beliefs—in ways both veiled and unveiled—from the schism between mainstream and fundamentalist Latter-day Saints to sacred endowment ceremonies to the wearing of garments to the forging of documents. The television show might still make sense if a viewer does not recognize the ghostly apparition of Emma Smith (church founder Joseph Smith's first and only legal wife, who was adamantly opposed to polygamy), but it certainly helps to know who she is. In this spirit of better understanding contemporary mediated Mormonism, then, I offer an overarching and very brief history.

By most accounts, the church was founded by twenty-five-year-old Joseph Smith Jr. in 1830 in Palmyra, New York. Smith originally called his creation

the Church of Christ and then changed it eight years later to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to emphasize how fully his Saints lay in wait for the end of days. "Mormon" is a colloquial nickname for Latter-day Saints (LDS) folk. The early nineteenth century was a period of great religious revivalism, particularly in the American northeast, when evangelism held sway as a precursor to the perceived end of times. The United States was awash with swashbuckling Methodists and Baptists preaching a fire-and-brimstone theology, and Smith's new church offered a combination of spiritualism and rationality that appealed to a great many would-be saints eager to pledge fealty to a faith that promised salvation both here and throughout all eternity.

Smith founded his church after nearly a decade of religious questioning that began for him as a teenager. Biographical accounts are consistent in suggesting that while praying in the woods, Smith claimed a visitation from an angel—named Moroni—probably in 1821 when he was sixteen years old. At that time, Moroni considered the teenaged Joseph too immature for the weight of the heavenly message yet to be bestowed. So the Angel Moroni commanded Joseph to return again to the forest a few years later (some accounts say four years; others are more vague). In 1827, Moroni came again and revealed to the young Joseph the location of golden plates on which were inscribed what was later to become the Book of Mormon. These tablets, buried in the hills of western New York, were thought to be engraved in an ancient script (reformed Egyptian), and Joseph used seer stones, called in the biblical tradition the Urim and Thummim, set into a pair of his mother's old wire spectacles, to read/interpret/create this new religious tract. Making matters of authenticity murkier, Joseph peered through his homemade spectacles into the deep dark spaces of his stovepipe hat, since the darkness apparently helped the clarity of his vision but also kept other people from seeing what he saw. In the process of translation, only a very select few (all sworn followers of Smith) were able to view the plates. Upon completion of the book, Joseph returned the tablets to Moroni, thus removing the primary evidence on which the religion was founded and making Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon the only version of God's truth available for followers and scholars.

There has been a great deal of controversy about the veracity of Smith's vision and accounts of what really happened. Explanations cover many options from the possibility that Joseph truly was an earthly scribe for an angelic message to the prospect that Joseph was a delusional and deceptive genius, capable of manipulating people through the force of his imagination,

charisma, and colossal ego. My point in venturing into this much-told tale is not to lay out a truth claim of my own or to demean the origination story of the Mormon religion but to try to account for, at some level, the appeal of this new faith in the historical moment in which it was birthed as well as in the almost two centuries it has flourished.

Mormonism, like all religions, requires an extraordinary leap of faith in its followers. In this case, the fact that Joseph Smith quite literally pulled his revelation out of a hat has helped to build Mormonism in the American imagination as an odd religion and Mormons as a peculiar people, easily mocked by similar scenes of visitation, stone-enhanced visions, and testimony in HBO's *Big Love* and the Comedy Channel's *South Park.* It's worth repeating that this moment in nineteenth-century American history was notable not only for the evangelism sweeping through towns and cities but for the fusion of spiritualism and science that manifested in séances, dowsing and divining rods, and displays of clairvoyant behaviors, all predicated on the appeal of a rational holiness galvanized and made concrete by a charismatic personality.

Smith was a magnetic leader and, as appropriate for a man who made a business of finding lost treasure, he himself became a divining rod for religious converts, attracting masses of fans and parishioners even as these "latter-day saints" were persecuted and ostracized within their communities. As a consequence of many factors, including rumors of polygamy, the suspicious disappearance of the golden plates, the Latter-day Saints' charismatic hold on new parishioners, and the Mormons' often aggressive and militarized retaliation to perceived oppression from non-Mormons, LDS people were not much liked in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, Illinois, Missouri, and the entire United States were separately at war, both figuratively and literally, with Joseph and his followers. Due to these many confrontations, Joseph Smith moved the Saints from his home in New York to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831, and he moved them again to Far West, Missouri, in 1838 and then to Commerce, Illinois, in 1839. He renamed Commerce to Nauvoo, a Hebrew term he understood to mean beautiful.

Some fourteen years after his church's founding, the thirty-eight-year-old Smith was killed in a gun battle in which he purportedly did not fight back, a passive victimization reinforced by my junior high school friends and informants but contradicted by historical accounts, which place a pistol in Smith's hands. It is Smith's fabled passivism, after all, that lifted him to Christly martyrdom. What my friends never told me, and what they themselves perhaps didn't know as children, is that Joseph Smith had actively

outfitted a militia called the Armies of Israel and prepared it to fight. Smith was also the self-appointed leader of this army, and most visitors referred to him by the honorific of General Smith. Most accounts also suggest that Smith (and after him, Brigham Young) cultivated the secret vigilante force called the Danites, which governed through intimidation, force, and murder. Whatever the precise historical facts, there is no doubt that Smith was a shrewd leader and a fierce opponent, capable of galvanizing support in followers and controversy in those who did not believe in his revelations.

After Smith's murder in 1844, Brigham Young led the Saints to their American Zion, Salt Lake City. While their journey did not endure for the forty years that Jewish people wandered the desert wilderness, it did create the hard experiences of sacrifice, fortitude, and perseverance that are central to Mormon self-understanding. This peripatetic beginning based on violent social intolerance has led the LDS people to understand themselves as outsiders. It's a critical theme of aliens in America, or belonging-by-not-belonging, that runs through most discussions of Mormonism, even in a contemporary context where mainstream Mormons are arguably model minorities. Indeed, this notion of community and exile manifests across the mediated discourses about Mormons in the contemporary American imagination that I examine here.

Brigham Young governed the growing church for thirty-three years and gave it the foundation that led to its transformation from a home-grown American sect of the nineteenth century to a postmillennial world religion. Young's stamp is fully imprinted in contemporary Mormonism, from the university named in his honor to the machinelike political coordination and economic self-sufficiency that give Mormonism its worldly power and mysterious veiling. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young aren't the only influential figures behind the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, of course, but together they represent the heights of its patrilineal heritage. The Mormon Church has relentlessly been governed by white heterosexual (or at least not publicly gay) men, who claim an exclusive divine access to the Almighty and take for themselves a share of that blessing in the promise that they and other righteous Mormon men within the church can and will inherit a world of their own in a celestial heaven. The role of women and children within this cosmogony is simply to serve, happily and obediently. Mormonism is thus not only saturated with the ideological characteristics of Americanness as a political economy, it also has the gendered and sexed imprint of Americanness within its very DNA. It's not for nothing that Harold Bloom called Mormonism "The American Religion."

Two insistent questions adhere to contemporary members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Are you Christians, and Are you polygamists? The church has answered without hesitation or equivocation: yes to the question of Christianity and no to the question of polygamy. As mediated Mormonism makes evident, however, those answers may not be quite so simple, since the notion that a man might become the God of his own planet troubles the Christian notion of monotheism, and the likelihood of plural marriage in the Mormon afterlife makes polygamy more central to the bedrock tenets of the faith than is typically discussed. Indeed, for our purposes, it's important to have a clearer sense of the relation between polygamy-adherent Mormons (FLDS) and their more modern cousins, polygamy-adverse Mormons (LDS), which I detail in the next section.

The LDS / FLDS Split

The present LDS and Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints (FLDS) grew from the same roots. Both Joseph and other early church fathers practiced plural (or celestial) marriage, though not always openly. *Doctrine and Covenants* 132 (revealed to Smith in 1842 and revered by both the LDS and FLDS) mandates plural marriage as a divine commandment from God. According to this edict, it is essential that men take at least three wives in order to be accepted into the highest level of the Mormon cosmogony, the Celestial Kingdom. Those who fail or refuse to achieve this number are relegated to the lower levels, the Telestial and Terrestrial Kingdoms, where they may only be angel-servants rather than Gods or, if women, the queens of Gods. There is no hell for believers, only this tripartite heavenly arrangement. In both LDS and FLDS contexts, hell, or outer darkness, is reserved for apostates—those who have followed the One True Church and rejected it.

When God spoke in 1890 and then again in 1904 to eradicate plural marriage, true-believing Saints split off into fundamentalist sects, themselves splintering according to various ideological conflicts or differences about which man was the true prophet. Both a specific sect and a generic label, FLDS is meant to indicate a number of fundamentalist groups that hold Joseph Smith's original version of Mormonism as the true iteration of the faith. As a result, the two faith systems share many common features and revere the same holy books and founding fathers, even while they hold each other in distrust and often open scorn. All Latter-day Saints consider themselves God's special people as reinforced by the Book of Mormon, but fundamentalists see themselves as purer and more righteous than the mainstream

church, believing a fundamentalist set of beliefs more faithfully carries forward Joseph Smith's vision. The Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints are certain of their salvation in the imminent latter days—or at least, the most worthy of them will be saved—their fallen mainstream Mormon cousins sinking into oblivion.

It is not only polygamy that defines fundamentalism, but a whole host of doctrinal differences that include the Adam/God theory and blood atonement. The first holds that Adam, the first man of the Judeo-Christian tradition, was actually God, a flesh-and-blood man much like any other human, who came to Earth from another planet.[1] This philosophy sets the groundwork for two beliefs that are central to both LDS and FLDS scriptures and serve as insistent themes in mediated Mormonism: exaltation, or the idea that righteous Mormon men will themselves become Gods of their own planet, and eternal progression, or the idea that families can be sealed and thus stay intact through eternity. The ideas of eternal marriages and forever families are critical to the brand of Mormonism, both mainstream and fundamentalist, and the notion of male Godhead equally blends both faiths. The Adam/God doctrine (where Adam is God), however, has fallen to the domain of the fundamentalists.[2]

Similarly, blood atonement is a principle of salvation practiced in the nineteenth-century church that, in the twentieth-century fracturing, has accrued to fundamentalism. Blood atonement states that some crimes are so horrific that the conventional norm of Christian salvation does not apply. For those not familiar with the Christian tradition, the thinking is that God sent his son Jesus to be martyred and, in so doing, to absolve humans of their sin through his death. Mormon blood atonement takes this idea one step further, suggesting that for those sins not covered by Christly sacrifice (an idea sacrilegious to Protestant and Catholic thinking), the perpetrators of sin should be killed in a way that allows their blood to serve as a cleansing sacrificial offering. Jon Krakauer (2004) begins *Under the Banner of Heaven* with a description of a bloody scene of carnage, a woman and her baby daughter slaughtered at the hands of two fundamentalist men, who have enacted the commandment of ceremonial murder. Other mediated fare such as the feature film *Avenging Angel* (1985) or series of short stories in Shawn Vestal's *Godforsaken Idaho* (2017) show just how fully blood atonement is critical to Mormon history, both LDS and FLDS. Indeed, much of the mediated archive about fundamentalism fuses polygamy and ritual killing, the extreme beliefs of one reinforcing the radical possibilities of the other. In turn, the very real possibility of being blood atoned heightens the courage

necessary to fight the prophet and his followers, who are willing to kill and to die as demanded. There are life-and-death implications for the holy wars being fought on and through these latter-day screens.

It is important to know this background as a way of understanding the fear and apprehension that haunts the memoirs and documentaries about fundamentalism. Danger is not an idle worry in a world where, as Brent Jeffs reports in *Lost Boy*, "Once Warren [Jeffs] was placed on the wanted list and the show [*America's Most Wanted*] aired, I was put under FBI protection. The violent history of Mormon fundamentalism combined with the nature of the charges that I'd made and the link between blood atonement and the building of a temple made them believe that I was at serious risk" (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 222). Flora Jessop echoes these concerns in *Church of Lies*: "Why would Roundy [the Colorado City police chief] want to see me dead? Because I was rescuing his women and threatening his world. Besides, he was convinced I was working for Satan. Warren himself had said so, from the pulpit. I was a prime candidate for blood atonement—holy murder—an ongoing theme in Short Creek" (Jessop and Brown 2010, 256). Jessop places blood atonement at the feet of Joseph Smith, and indeed the concept originated with him. But media culture more fully attributes the violent justice of blood atonement to the dogmatic Brigham Young and, through him, to the branches on the polygamist tree that sprang forth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I should note at the outset that the term "Mormon" is claimed by the dominant sect of the faith, those headquartered in Salt Lake City, as exclusive to them, although in 2018 a new revelation required that Saints call themselves neither LDS nor Mormon but followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The mediascape has yet to follow this edict. Noted historian Jan Shipps calls mainstream followers "the Mountain Saints" (Metcalfe and Shipps 2014). But the nickname Mormon is discursively used to address all of the many sects that make up the LDS movement, both mainstream and extremist, including its splinter organizations. The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the name of an actual group run, at present, by Warren Jeffs (from prison), but FLDS is also a more general descriptor for those organizations that practice the principle of plural marriage and hold other dogmatic beliefs predicated on the early Latter-day Saints church. In this book, I use FLDS in this more generalized way except when specifically discussing Warren Jeffs and his followers.

The mainstream church's resistance has not changed the fact that many FLDS and independent fundamentalists of LDS extraction both self-identify

and are popularly identified by the term "Mormon." Two examples from reality television evidence this point. *I Am Cait* features an episode when Caitlyn Jenner returns to Graceland University, the small Iowa college where she started her athletic and academic career. Caitlyn refers to the school as "very religious, very Mormon." Graceland is run by the Community of Christ, formerly the Reformed Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS), or what Shipps calls "prairie Saints" (Metcalfe and Shipps 2014). Though not mainstream LDS, popular culture referents still position RLDS as Mormon.

In another occurrence, on *Sister Wives*, Kody Brown and his family (who are members of the fundamentalist Apostolic United Brethren, or AUB) go hiking during their vacation in Alaska. In the woods, the family meets a man, Mo, labeled in the diegesis as a "native American" and "an Eskimo." Kody gestures toward his brood, saying, "I have seventeen children; they aren't all here." The man looks both incredulous and impressed, asking Kody, "Are you a Mormon, or what?!" Mo's comments suggest that even in the remote wilds of Alaska, Mormonism and its valences are recognizable. Kody demurs and chuckles a bit: "Well, no, well, ha ha, it's funny. I have seventeen children and I do have multiple wives. They call that a fundamentalist Mormon, not a rank-and-file Mormon." So again, we see that the term "Mormon" is used more broadly than the Salt Lake City church approves to stand for identities and ideas that have relationship to, but may not be, LDS. In similar fashion, I follow this discursive trend, letting Mormon or F/LDS stand as the large umbrella covering the amalgam of LDS and FLDS peoples, practices, and philosophies.

Symbolic Proxies

A final point in this prologue needs to be reserved for the mainstream LDS church's participation in baptizing the dead and the degree of both consternation and panic it creates in nonmembers, angered they have been secretly involved in a process for which they did not give consent. As I've noted, both the LDS and the FLDS look forward to the imminent latter days, when the wicked will perish and the world will be made new for the righteous. The LDS Church teaches that salvation is only possible to those baptized into the One True Church, and so those who did not know or who died prior to the church's founding might be reclaimed through proxy baptisms, where a member in good standing goes through the process of baptism for another. By some accounts, the Mormon religious system also holds that the Kingdom of God cannot arrive until all living souls have been exposed to the faith,

either through active recruitment in life or baptism in death, one reason why F/LDS families have so many children. Mediated Mormonism is rife with accounts of symbolic baptisms, since any Mormon in good standing who is at least twelve and holds a temple recommend is expected to be baptized upwards of thirty to forty times per year. This is the temple work to which many good Mormons allude.

This policy has led to a somewhat frenetic baptismal practice, whereby members have performed ordinances for a series of high-profile people, including the Founding Fathers of the United States, Joan of Arc, and Adolf Hitler (see "Baptism for the Dead" 2018). They have also performed proxy baptisms for many Jewish victims of the Holocaust, both living and dead. Indeed, when Elie Wiesel discovered that, though living, the Mormons had baptized him into their faith, he became livid. "I think it's scandalous," he said in the pages of *USA Today*. "Not only objectionable but scandalous" (Grossman 2012). The church's response has been twofold: (1) it has tried to calm the waters by telling folks that since the newly baptized person might refuse the offer of eternal salvation, it's a no harm, no foul scenario, and (2) the church has restricted its genealogy websites to members, asking Saints to submit proxy baptism names only for relatives. As with the lax policing of antipolygamy doctrine in the 1890s, however, for the most part the practice of random baptizing for the dead still continues, with LDS peoples increasingly looking for more leaves on their family tree that they might baptize into Mormonism.

It is for this reason that genealogy is such a critical linchpin of Mormon domestic labor, an obligation that often falls to women, since it is their job to ferret out lost family members who can be reclaimed through proxy baptism. Increasingly, however, genealogy has become a thriving business concern that has spilled far beyond the LDS confines, with perhaps the best evidence of this claim residing in the corporate juggernaut Ancestry.com, a privately held genealogy company based in Lehi, Utah, and founded by two male BYU graduates. Containing more than seventy million family trees, it is the world's largest for-profit genealogy company and a critical database for ancestry work.[3]

Ancestry.com is also a major corporate sponsor of *Finding Your Roots*, a documentary-style program on PBS, hosted by the esteemed scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., that investigates the ancestry of "dozens of influential people from diverse backgrounds," mostly entertainment or political celebrities (*Finding Your Roots* website). While the program proudly acknowledges that "major funding is provided by" Ancestry.com (along with Johnson &

Johnson and AT&T), it does not explicitly make connections to Mormons or Mormonism. Indeed, Ancestry.com's ties to Mormonism are an open secret—not announced and yet not exactly hidden, given the BYU, Utah, and genealogical connections. Yet it is exactly this kind of archaeological investigation that fuels the historical treasure hunt narrative of the program and, really, of history itself, where over the course of time ideology becomes practice becomes product becomes mediated idea, seemingly absent the founding ideology. In all, we see a deferred and dispersed network of symbolic proxies that become visible when looking through a latter-day lens.

Given the controversies over proxy baptisms performed on Jewish victims of the Holocaust, *Finding Your Roots* offered a supreme irony in late 2017 when it featured the stories of politician Bernie Sanders and comedian Larry David, who brilliantly portrayed Sanders in *Saturday Night Live* skits. Both Jewish, David and Sanders discovered through the program the unspeakable hardships their grandparents and parents had endured in Russia and Poland, ending the segment with a surprise announcement of a biological link between the two men. They are distant cousins—pretty, pretty good! Yet this connection between David and Sanders, mediated through the auspices of *Finding Your Roots*, also lies at the crossroads of an LDS commitment to discovering familial links and to baptizing through proxy, the symbolic meanings of Mormonism engaged in a richly contested historical conversation about meaning, choice, and identity.

While it could well be argued that mediated Mormonism functions as a recruitment and naturalization strategy deployed by the Mormon Church to spread the brand of their faith, this book approaches the meanings of mediated Mormonism as a broader cultural discourse that uses the Saints as a semiotic signifier to work out a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from what it thinks Mormonism is and does, specifically with relation to governing codes about sexuality and gender. *Latter-day Screens* is thus quite literally a book about ideas, about what's being communicated by the kind and degree of Mormon-centric concepts in the contemporary American mediascape. It is about collectivities and large-scale cultural attention in a microcasted world of media where individuals might organize and consume media content per their own design rather than as prescribed through mass media broadcasts. These many narratives offer a lens that allows us to perceive a set of codes and practices that distinctly shape debates about what constitutes (and should constitute) normativity and fairness in the contemporary moment. With this as context, let us begin the examination of mediated Mormonism across our latter-day screens.

INTRODUCTION

"Well, We Are a Curiosity, Ain't We?": Mediated Mormonism

In September 2010, Kody Brown and his wives took a risk of phenomenal proportion. On a reality television show broadcast around the world through TLC/Discovery, the Browns exposed themselves as fundamentalist Mormon polygamists: one man, three women (as of 2010, four), and twelve children (as of 2018, eighteen) who together constitute the family at the heart of the reality show *Sister Wives* (2010–present). At the time of *Sister Wives*' premiere, the Browns lived in Lehi, Utah, a small, largely fundamentalist town in the north-central part of the state, which is itself predominantly Mormon. While marriages between more than two people are illegal in every state in the U.S., in Utah it was also against the law to claim one is married to multiple spouses. In this regard, to speak of multiple wives was a performative act made illegal by the state. The Browns and other families like them lived under an agreement of tolerance between law enforcement and practitioners of polygamy, basically allowing those in plural marriage to be free of prosecution if they lived a quiet life. Airing their twenty-two pairs of dirty underwear on international television was living a bit too large, apparently, and after *Sister Wives* debuted, the state of Utah began gathering evidence for a formal prosecution on grounds of illegal cohabitation through bigamy. Kody Brown argued in court that because he was only legally married to one woman (Meri) and his other unions (with Janelle, Christine, and Robyn) were symbolic-spiritual relationships, he was not in defiance of the law.[1] But the state of Utah viewed his long-term relationship with four women and

their multiple children as evidence of common-law marriages and thus a violation of bigamy laws.[2] As Martha Beck has said about the rule culture of Mormonism more broadly, the eleventh commandment is "Thou Shalt not Commit Publicity" (2006, 207). In going public, the Browns violated this commandment against visibility.

Before the state could move on their findings, however, the Browns took a page from the book of their Mormon forbears, who—in the nineteenth-century context of their own persecution—quickly fled Nauvoo, Illinois, and headed west to the "new promised land" of the American Zion, the Great Salt Lake Basin.[3] The Browns' secret exodus (filmed by TLC's cameras) took them southeast to Las Vegas, where polygamy is illegal but publicity is not.[4] From their new home in the gambling capital of the world, the Browns sued the state of Utah in U.S. District Court in 2011. *Brown v. Buhman* argued that the antibigamy statute was unconstitutional since it prohibited the free exercise of religion and denied due process. In December 2013, U.S. District Court judge Clarke Waddoups agreed, striking down the case against the Browns and with it Utah's sanction on plural families. While bigamy—holding marriage licenses with more than one person—is still against the law, plural marriage of the type the Browns practice became lawful, reality television thus inserting itself as the thin end of the wedge for real-world legislative change as very much influenced by a larger social agenda.[5]

As the public face of modern polygamy, the Browns accepted the ruling with gratitude. Speaking on behalf of his wives and children, Kody reinforced a set of normative structuring codes that he claimed stood at the heart of their will to visibility. Free choice, individual determinism, and an American code of plurality and acceptance all justified their equal treatment under the law. Said Kody in a public statement broadcast across news outlets and internet blogs: "While we know that many people do not approve of plural families, it is our family and based on our beliefs. Just as we respect the personal and religious choices of other families, we hope that in time all of our neighbors and fellow citizens will come to respect our own choices as part of this wonderful country of different faiths and beliefs" ("'Sister Wives' Stars Win Legal Victory" 2013). The Browns' attorney, Jonathan Turley, further opined, "It is a victory not for polygamy but privacy in America" ("Legal Victory for Sister Wives" 2013).

As it was soon revealed, the ruling on bigamy also became a test case for marriage rights, and within one week, Utah—the most consistently conservative state in the nation—began issuing same-sex marriage licenses. Thirteen hundred marriages were performed in roughly three weeks, until the

Utah Supreme Court offered an interim stay that required citizens of Utah to vote on marriage rights through Proposition 3. This shift of marital rights and restrictions from the courts to the voters echoed a similar ruling against same-sex marriage in California in 2008 that was reinforced through the powers of Proposition 8, which prohibited future same-sex marriage rights but could not invalidate marriages that had already taken place ("Prop 8 Documentary" 2014). California's Prop 8 was largely, and at the time surreptitiously, supported by the mainstream Mormon Church in Salt Lake City, which sent its members on a door-to-door crusade across the Golden State to wipe out the right to marital unions between same-sex partners.

While marriage rights for same-sex people in Utah were themselves connected to *United States v. Windsor*, a landmark June 2013 Supreme Court case that invalidated the federal Defense of Marriage Act, the Browns' case inextricably linked Mormonism, polygamy, and same-sex marriage, both judicially and socially. This is fitting given that, as I demonstrate in chapter 3, the Browns and, like them, many other "progressive" polygamous families explicitly take their strategies from what might be thought of as a gay rights handbook for social change, arguing for freedom of choice among consenting adults and obligations for plurality within a democratic republic. In the transmediated archive through which their message of family is communicated—reality show, published memoir, Twitter, Facebook, tabloids, and talk show interviews—the Browns speak of oppression within the mainstream, of living a closeted life, of shouldering shame and retribution due to their beliefs, principles, and manner of loving, of deserving respect and freedom as citizens of the United States.

I use this case as a curtain raiser for a book on gender, sexuality, and mediated Mormonism because it nicely sets the stage for the many themes that come together under the banner of Mormonism. Importantly, in the word "Mormonism" I mean not specific or actual F/LDS people, practices, or histories as much as the multiple stories told and retold about these things. It is thus mediated Mormonism as both an idea (meme) and a way of thinking (analytic) that beats at the heart of my inquiry. I regard Mormonism as a lens for seeing American social investments in the meanings of justice, particularly with respect to identity. I argue in this book that the ideas of what constitute Mormonism—which are distinct from the actual mainstream LDS Church or its many fundamentalist sects' doctrine and social practices—function with rich symbolic meaning. "Mormon" is often used as a code word with respect to gender and sexuality, but the meanings of that code do not always tether to the same concepts. In some cases, "Mormon"

means sexually chaste; in other contexts it denotes sexual lasciviousness; in other uses still, the term means sexually bizarre.[6] Gender functions as a similar sliding hermeneutic, given the contrasting expectation that adherents (across both LDS and FLDS groups) be simultaneously free agents and wholly obedient. In all cases, gender, sex, and sexuality speak very clearly about power, including how it is enforced and how it can be modified. Given that these mandates often find themselves enmeshed in cultural materials—from television to Broadway plays to feature films—to reference "Mormon" is to reinforce its various meanings as a hermeneutic that is ironically separate from yet wholly identified with the church/es and their followers, however broadly identified.

This American-born religion, conceived in the mind of its charismatic prophet, Joseph Smith, and nicknamed Mormon for its holy text the Book of Mormon, believes in love, optimism, meritocracy, family unity, hard work, and the ultimate form of gendered upward aspirationalism, whereby a man might inherit his own world and himself become a God. It is American through and through (even, one might argue, in its provocative polytheism). And yet Mormons have long held a contentious place in the American scene. From the very beginning in 1830, Joseph and his increasing flock of impassioned followers were perceived as threats to the establishment order, even amid a nineteenth-century backdrop of American religiosity, the Second Great Awakening, that fostered a number of new religions, from the Owenites (dedicated to separatist utopian socialism) to the Oneida Perfectionists (dedicated to sexual egalitarianism, or the idea that all men could be married to all women, and thus sex within marriage did not require monogamy). Mormonism struck its own rancorous chords for the way it consolidated the Saints into voting blocs, recruited new members, and formed monopolies in business and real estate. Throughout the early 1830s, there were also reports of "strange marital customs" among the Mormons, rumors of polygamy that threatened the staunch bourgeois sexual sensibilities of the American mainstream. As Nancy Cott's (2002) *Public Vows* illustrates, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America created an ideological template whereby monogamy was linked to civilization and barbary to polygamy. This contract had deep roots in the U.S. political order and fed much of the antipathy toward Mormons. It was not LDS separatism, then, but a refusal to be separate combined with Mormons' popular and political influence and perceived disruption of mainstream moralities and governmental systems that upset the townspeople in Missouri, Ohio, and Illinois. This, in turn,

triggered mutual violence, persecution, and death (including that of Smith in 1844) and ultimately forced the Saints to venture westward to Salt Lake.

In this, sex and gender mores have often marked the battle lines that offer intelligibility to Mormonism, shaping its headlines and branding its identity as played out through America's newly forming mass media, from penny dreadfuls and tabloids to the lecture circuit and the nation's august papers of record. In *Selling God*, R. Laurence Moore's capacious discussion of American religion and the marketplace of culture, he contends, "Mormonism served the 1840s until the end of the nineteenth century as a serialized best-seller for American readers, a story tantalizingly released over several decades in a multiplicity of ephemeral and diverse texts" such as pamphlets, memoirs, and tell-all exposés (1995, 128). For a nineteenth-century culture that often did not directly speak of sexuality but was deeply fascinated by it, the Mormon practice of plural marriage "gave Americans a rare opportunity to talk openly and publicly about sex" (128–29). "What people wanted," Moore claims, "was less the truth about the Mormons and other groups than a way to imagine sexual misconduct without feeling guilty about it" (134). Indeed, nineteenth-century versions of mediated Mormonism allowed just the right combination of religiosity and sexual nonconformity that might provide the "material for 'sensational' discourse" (129). Importantly, notes Moore, "Mormonism was not merely a new religion. It was a new religion that owed its success to cheap newspapers and their aggressive editors who relied upon controversy to stimulate public demand for their product" (128).

While Moore limits the cultural work of mediated Mormonism to the end of the nineteenth century, the dynamic is still going strong. The concept of Mormonism allows people not only to talk about sex, as Moore claims, but also to sort through complicated arguments with respect to gender, race, religion, nationalism, separation, and belonging. As one example, often in contemporary American culture, to speak of Mormons (both fundamentalist and mainstream) is also to invoke anxieties about Muslims, particularly in the fused fascination and fear that attach to religions that ascribe to orthodox practices around community, clothing, sexuality, food consumption, alcohol prohibition, and the possibilities for polygamy. Indeed, the mediascape is fascinated by the fact that both Muslims and Mormons anticipate heavenly rewards for righteous men meted out in the currency of desirable women. As a consequence, more than one mediated text refers to the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints as the American Taliban and to its leader, Warren Jeffs, as the Mormon Osama bin Laden.[7] But the popular culture ties between

Mormons and Muslims are not exclusive to the FLDS. Indeed, in April 2017, a group of seven mainstream Mormon scholars made national news when they filed an amicus brief in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, seeking to strike down Donald Trump's travel ban. Noted Carol Kuruvilla (2017), writing for the *Huffington Post*, "The scholars reached back into history to draw a striking parallel between how the United States government treated Mormons in the past and how Muslims are treated today. . . . Together, they urged the Court to make sure 'history does not repeat itself.'" As moments like these attest, Mormonism functions as a pulse point for the beating heart of America and its complex history with respect to race and religion.

This "peculiar people," as the Saints call themselves due to their separation from mainstream and non-Mormon—or Gentile—ways, continue to occupy a distinct location, particularly with respect to gender and sexuality. As the editors of *Mormon Feminism* write, "From its polygamous nineteenth-century past to its twentieth-century stand against the Equal Rights Amendment and its twenty-first-century fight against same-sex marriage, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has consistently positioned itself on the frontlines of battles over gender-related identities, roles, and rights" (Brooks, Steenblik, and Wheelwright 2015, back cover).[8] Indeed, just as Joseph Smith used magical stones to decipher the meanings of golden tablets and thus to write the Book of Mormon, we might think of Mormonism as an interpretive guide, or even a touchstone, bigger than itself. As with touchstones of old—pieces of flint used to test the purity of gold or silver by the streak left on the stone when rubbed by the metal—Mormonism provides a ready tool through which we might assess the quality of a thing. That thing here is nothing short of cultural mores about the meanings of gender justice.

All of these dynamics, both tacit and overt, require the rich archive of contemporary media for their sustenance and saturation—a transmediated palimpsest of media platforms that I refer to as latter-day screens. Indeed, in this mixture of media forms and types—from big-budget feature films to independent documentaries and reality television, from memoirs and novels distributed by major publishing houses to books made available by vanity presses, from globally distributed television fare to local-access and amateur video production picked up and redistributed through video sharing services such as YouTube and Keek—mediated Mormonism itself provides a unique perspective on the size, shape, and expanse of modern media as well as the implications of gendered selfhood and modern standards of justice.

The vast cultural archive by and about Mormonism serves as a lens through which to perceive a distinctively gendered turn in the semiotics

of value, from those more masculine (emphasizing tropes of rationalism, individualism, domination, authoritarianism, accomplishment, and competition) to those more aligned with queer-positive and feminist-friendly politics (emphasizing collaboration, liberation, and community). In this, I hope my book demonstrates the civil rights adage made resonant through Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that the "arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."[9]

This is quite an audacious claim, I realize, given the conservative constitution of F/LDS peoples. While progressive Mormons do exist, the mainstream LDS Church has consistently proven itself antifeminist and antigay through such edicts as the excommunication of the three greatest threats to the church: LGBT+ peoples, feminists, and intellectuals.[10] Most fundamentalist strains of the church fare no better, with pronouncements against people of color and sexual permissiveness. And though, as I have noted, fundamentalist Mormons do not follow the mandates of the Salt Lake City brethren, the great melting pot of the mediascape cooks LDS and FLDS in the same complicated stew, where one metonymically stands in for all, even while this same mediascape has afforded a degree of specificity and clarity to individual voices that has never before been possible. The attempt among progressive Mormon scholars to undo a Muslim ban notwithstanding, it is perhaps further difficult to believe that a conservative religious group might be the tipping point for dialogues on social justice in a Trumpian world, where forces of xenophobia, racism, sexism, and intolerance have found such a ready toehold in the mainstream operations of governmental and social power.

And truly, the progressive results of mediated Mormonism surprised me. When I first began to analyze the evidence, I was expecting to find something entirely different. But time after time, I encountered the antigay, anti–working woman, and highly conservative tropes that attach to mediated Mormonism, only to see their representation open conversations that advocated more progressive and pluralistic standards for justice. Contesting orthodoxy here produced progressive clarity. I want to be clear that I do not argue that Mormons themselves—as individuals or a group—are necessarily more liberally inclined. Instead, I contend that the amalgamation of materials that turns on Mormonism as a trope—and public conversation about those texts—has had the effect of opening more channels for progressivism, by which I mean a pluralized, diverse, and polylogic regard toward meaning and identity. This consequence is largely due to the social issues that attach to Mormonism—specifically, sexual economies, gender roles, raced and gendered power relations, same-sex attraction, forms of kinship, the meanings

of immigration, and the obligations of families and communities to provide sanctuary—and to the proliferation and spread of media in the last twenty years.

It is my intention that the entirety of this book will illustrate such a hopeful claim about mediated Mormonism as a gauge for and accelerant of social justice, but a more specific example can be seen in the upswell of mediated Mormonism contesting the church's anti-LGBT+ stance. It is no secret that both mainstream and fundamentalist Mormons perceive "traditional" marriage (which is not always to say monogamy) as the cornerstone of their divine architecture as lived on earth. According to Mormon doctrine that I will explain in greater detail through this book, exaltation into the highest of heavens, the Celestial Kingdom, requires many acts of devotion and privation. Chief among these as Joseph Smith first revealed is the mandate that men marry at least three women, so that he and his wives might propagate an eternal world where he rules as God. While the commandment to live plural marriage was revised in 1890 (at least from the point of view of mainstream Saints), the commitment to polygamous marriage carries forward in both the mainstream and fundamentalist understandings of life after death. Those who are not heterosexual refute this design. Or as Emily Pearson more candidly puts it in the documentary *8: The Mormon Proposition* (2010), "Gays upset the Mormon plan for heaven." Pearson's life is intricately interwoven between LDS and LGBT+, a fact I discuss more in chapter 6.

The Mormons are not, of course, the only religious group opposed to gay rights, but their commitments to big families through heterosexual union have translated into larger politically contentious positions—for instance, in 2008 actively funding the drive to strike down California's Proposition 8, which allowed for same-sex marriage, and in 2015 declaring that children raised in LGBT+ homes would be disallowed from church membership until they were eighteen and had left the family home. In turn, teen suicide among LGBT+ youth in Utah has risen precipitously since 2008, a fact that has inspired many progressive Mormons, former Mormons, and non-Mormons to take action through support groups such as Mama Dragons (mothers of LGBT+ youth) and The Progressive Mormons (a website organized around inclusion and diversity) or documentaries such as *8: The Mormon Proposition* and *Believer* (2018). Indeed, both documentaries suggest precisely why political agitation around church doctrine matters—since the church's own history allows for significant, even massive, juridical change, as evidenced, primarily, by the divine revelations in 1890 to cease polygamy and in 1978 to allow black people to become members of the church and black men to

hold priesthood status. Further, good Mormons have been trained by their church to speak out against what they consider unjust. Dan Reynolds, the lead singer of Imagine Dragons and one of the executive producers of *Believer*, reflects after the church's continuance of its anti-LGBT+ positions that he is resolved to out-Mormon the Mormon Church:

> There's one thing my Mormon values have taught me since I was young. It's that no matter what the world says about who you are, what you believe, still do it. A hundred percent. That spirit was the spirit that carried me through my mission. I felt like I was baring my truth regardless what anyone thought about me. That's all because of Mormonism and my parents, they all prepped me for this moment now. A determined Mormon is a scary thing, I will tell you that. Because they don't stop. I knocked a hundred doors to get into one door. I knocked a thousand doors on my mission. If there's one thing I can guarantee it's that I will continue to knock this door until somebody answers. (Argott 2018)

In 2019, LDS leaders announced a new revelation: LGBT+ Saints would no longer be apostates, though they are still considered sinners. The ruling did not sanction same-sex marriage and still bans extramarital sexuality. Media have been a clarion call for gender justice, yet there is more to be done.

The fundamentalist Brown family also offers a ready example of the feminist-friendly and queer-positive consequence of Mormonism as a meme and analytic, since the phenomenon that they represent (an oppressed marginal group forcing themselves into the public sphere to counter damaging stereotypes) has itself become a flashpoint for conversations and legislative advancement that constitutes an agenda for progressive social change. While it is noteworthy that the Browns speak in liberal terms about acceptance of others, it is not necessary that they be so inclined for the public discourse that attaches to them to have this effect. As one case in point, for instance, the putative opposite of Kody Brown is Warren Jeffs, the imprisoned president and prophet of the FLDS, made famous for trafficking in women, raping children, exiling boys and men, and engaging in sex parties (what he called "heavenly sessions") with his underaged brides at his temple in Texas. In 2006, Jeffs gained the notorious distinction of being the number one person on the FBI's ten most-wanted list. He is now serving life plus twenty years in federal prison. By most accounts—including and especially those of the Browns and other modern polygamous families—Jeffs constitutes evil incarnate, the personification of a combined egomania and perversity, fed

by assurances of absolute godlike authority. One couldn't really find a less liberal, fluid, or progressive leader than Warren Jeffs. And yet his place in the mediascape demarcates something that he himself would never endorse, since the public conversation about Jeffs very much works to establish a protocol for social justice that gives women authority over their own bodies and all people the right to self-governance, a point I discuss at greater length in chapter 4.

In terms of mediated stories of this type, I would argue that both as a real person and a mediated figure, the polygamist patriarch steeped in his own perverse privilege and extreme egotism signifies deeply for a culture needing to work through the meanings of justice, religious commitment, fanaticism, intolerance, sexual regulation, and malignant narcissism. And this process works against monologic orthodoxies that allow for only one version of truth. That such a politically liberal and, frankly, optimistic outcome is possible in and through one of the more socially conservative religions, a religion premised on the imminent end of times—the latter days—is precisely what makes this study both fascinating and worth doing.

Mediated Mormonism, in Context

From Victorian pulp serials and early twentieth-century silent films that depicted Mormonism as a dangerous cult to Mormon-produced magazines and documentaries that feature the religion's zeal for international proselytizing and conversion, media have served as the chief tool for spreading the word of and the fear about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both by the Saints themselves and by a broader Gentile culture. This is perhaps fitting given that the prominence of Mormonism now can well be attributed to its birth at the nexus of American nineteenth-century media culture. Smith and his supporters (predominantly Martin Harris) took full advantage of the rise of cheap paper, ready printing presses, and close proximity to the Erie Canal, which was under construction at the moment of the discovery of the holy plates and would soon become the distribution superhighway of the time. Indeed, the banks of the Erie Canal are easily visible from the back door of the Grandin Print Shop in Palmyra, New York, where the Book of Mormon was first published. Fawn M. Brodie, Smith's biographer, astutely notes, "Joseph Smith dared to found a new religion in the age of printing. When he said, 'Thus saith the Lord!' the words were copied down by secretaries and congealed forever into print" (1995, vii). One might argue that media made Mormonism.

It has surely sustained it. As I briefly discuss in the prologue, from its founding to the early part of the twentieth century, Mormons were regarded with a mixture of what Mary Campbell terms "fascination, distaste, and outright horror" (2016, 29), largely due to their separatism and adoption of polygamy. Mormons, and through them the territory of Utah (statehood was conferred in 1896) were referenced in "Orientalizing vocabulary" of the "seraglio," "concubine," "Sultan," "Moslem," "Mohamed," "Turk," and "Arab," invoking racialized fears of a homegrown otherness (Campbell 2016, 31). Countering this notion required recasting the mold of Mormonism, using the powers of media to re-create Mormons as the very epitome of "civilized, cultured, and cosmopolitan" and thus, as the model of an idealized notion of American citizen (Campbell 2016, 23). As a consequence, the twentieth century saw a rise in Mormon-produced films, often called Mollywood, and television, which lead journalist Rollo Romig to quip, "Mormons are the filmmakingest of all faiths" (2012).

Media has also served a proselytizing message. In 1934, for example, Elder Joseph F. Merrill (1934, 568) wrote in the *Millennial Star* that "favourable publicity will open many doors now closed to the Gospel message," a publicity that church leaders cultivated in order to counter the negative stereotypes promulgated about Mormons by "evil people" (Neilson 2011, 2). In *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*, Paul Gutjahr (2012) notes the extraordinary measures that the mainstream Mormon Church has demonstrated in its efforts to disseminate Mormonism throughout the world, both in its relentless production and translation of their primary religious text, the Book of Mormon (presently available in 107 languages), and in the church's worldwide network of 55,000 Mormon missionaries made famous through a host of mediated fare. And lest we argue that Mormonism is anything but capacious in how it understands either media or proselytizing, *The Washington Post* reported a new variant—vending machines paid for by the Mormon Church that allow people to purchase "good things" as donations for various world charities (Iati 2018). After three weeks in operation in December 2018, the "giving machines," as they are called, had generated $1.3 million to be collected and redistributed by the church. These vending machines are not only altruistic; they serve a secondary purpose of evangelizing through image management. The article quotes a Mormon named Anthony: "A lot of times when people think about our faith, they think about the missionaries traipsing door to door and trying to change you in some way." The vending machines, by contrast, "can help non-church members better understand the religion's emphasis on serving others."

The media history of the American regard toward Mormons is vast, yet this present moment is unprecedented in terms of a U.S. fascination with and fear of Mormon people and practices, in some part aided by having in 2012 two Republican Mormon candidates, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman Jr., vying for the presidency of the United States (perhaps mirroring the religion's founder, Joseph Smith, who was a candidate for president in 1844).[11] These developments, joined with the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, the 2002 Elizabeth Smart abduction, the 2008 raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch, the 2012 arrest and conviction of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs, and the 2008 silent effort by the Utah-based Mormon Church to block gay marriage—and the public blowback the church experienced when this political machination was exposed—have all compelled the LDS Church to become more savvy in its public relations efforts. Thus, in 2011, the mainstream LDS Church launched an insistent internet and television PR campaign, "I'm a Mormon," featuring "Mormons with diverse backgrounds" who "share details about their everyday lives and their deep commitment to Jesus Christ," many of whom, conveniently, are beautiful models or successful professional athletes (Mormon Channel 2018). Radio podcasts and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are also becoming increasingly popular new modalities through which to extend the message and image of Mormonism, at the same time as the internet has provoked a crisis of faith amid many LDS adherents (Goodstein 2013).

In this postmillennial moment, Mormonism exerts a strong fascination, as augmented by LDS cultural producers such as science fiction writer Orson Scott Card, fantasy fiction author Stephenie Meyer (writer of the *Twilight* books), or self-help and business management guru Stephen Covey (author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*)—to name just three—whose popular and seemingly religious ideology–neutral books solidly articulate a world of conventional gender patterns and orderly, optimistic ways of being, even for vampires. Brigham Young University Television (BYUTV) and BYU radio are now staples on most expanded cable or satellite packages, offering all subscribers programming such as *The District* (a reality series about missionaries) and *Studio C* (a sketch comedy show). In addition, BYUTV airs feature films such as *The Best Two Years* (2004) or *It's Latter-day Night! Live* (2003), produced by Halestorm Entertainment, which specializes in Mormon-themed media.[12]

In many ways, this insistent strain of Mormon-made cultural production takes very seriously a mandate in 1952 that LDS members actively engage in politics, the arts, and social services, so as to increase the prominence

and visibility of the church more broadly. In this new millennium, being an active and visible thought leader often means running for office and living one's LDS principles publicly. As one example, Arizona senator Jeff Flake earned equal parts praise (from liberals and middle-ground conservatives) and opprobrium (from hard-line conservatives) when in 2017 he excoriated Donald Trump, declaring in a resignation speech from the U.S. Senate that he "would not be complicit" with "the indecency of our discourse," the "coarseness of our leadership," and the "compromise of our moral authority." He continued, "We must never regard as 'normal' the regular and casual undermining of our democratic norms and ideals. We must never meekly accept the daily sundering of our country—the personal attacks, the threats against principles, freedoms, and institutions, the flagrant disregard for truth or decency, the reckless provocations, most often for the pettiest and most personal reasons, reasons having nothing whatsoever to do with the fortunes of the people that we have all been elected to serve." Flake rose again as an independent thought leader when in 2018 he refused to follow his party in the confirmation of Supreme Court justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh until allegations of sexual assault had been more thoroughly investigated. While these stances need not be solely inspired by Flake's identity as a devout Mormon, one might readily discern Mormonism's adherence to a higher, better truth. Indeed, Flake's larger persona, what we might call his star text, is a monumental tribute to Mormonism, and the many forms of mediation that he engages in offer a mighty testimony to the religion—from speeches gone viral (like that cited above) to his memoir (*Conscience of a Conservative*) to radio programs (Zoe Chase's radio features on *This American Life*) to reality television (*Rival Survival*, in which Flake lives out his survivalist skills on a deserted island in a bipartisan effort with Democratic senator Martin Heinrich). Writing for *The Atlantic*, McKay Coppins (2017) describes Flake as "almost suspiciously good-natured" and possessing "preternatural niceness." Similarly, David Brooks (2017) describes Flake as being "sunny and kind," possessing a "serene courage" in a time when "politics has become a blood sport." "Assume the best. Look for the good"—it's a bromide often repeated when talking about Flake. This resolute pleasantness is coupled with a bulldog tenacity and unbending adherence to an ethical code, qualities that resonate with the associations evoked by the Mormon missionary.[13] Describing Flake as having grown up in a "giant Mormon family," Coppins (2017) quotes him in language that combines Flake's Mormon ancestors and the country's founders: "You can always find an excuse to not stand up for your principles. But if you don't risk anything, it doesn't matter

as much." Here Flake's call to principle reinforces the masculinist qualities of resistance, independence, and fortitude that are believed to be the lodestone of American national character and make of Flake, in Brooks's words, the epitome of the "ideal public servant."[14]

There are other, equally gendered, ways for Mormons to live out their ideals in the broad spotlight of the contemporary mediascape. Sustaining a blog post is one of these. In fact, blogging is so common within the fundamentalist and mainstream churches that it constitutes a genre of social media, the Bloggernacle. The website Mormon Archipelago catalogs more than two hundred different blogs that constitute the ever-growing territory of the Mormon blogosphere, from big islands like By Common Consent to atolls like Mormon Life Hacker. By far, the most prominent land masses in the archipelago are linked together under a broader term that we might call lifestyle blogging, which includes mommy blogs and beauty blogs (and, increasingly, vlogs). Indeed, the domination of these sites by Mormons is a bit of an open secret, made visible in places like the mainstream beauty magazine *Allure*, which provides the answer to that age-old question: "Why are so many of your favorite beauty personalities Mormon?" The reason, says author Alice Gregory, is because lifestyle blogging reinforces notions of conventional gender attributes in women, particularly physical beauty, and this, in turn, ties directly to one's heavenly reward, in a logic of spiritual neoliberalism that I discuss in chapter 1. Gregory (2017) quotes Courtney Kendrick: "When you come from a patriarchal religion, your best bet for gaining power is to be appealing to the men in charge. It can be very hard for women who are outside of normative standards of beauty. In my religion you're not just asking about having to look good now. You're also talking about your eternal salvation. Ultimately these beauty standards are connected to what gets us into heaven." Gregory also notes that lifestyle blogging quite literally puts a good face on the religion itself, making "Mormonism look not just normal but enviable." This stance echoes Campbell's comments, through the figure of early twentieth-century LDS photographer Charles Ellis, about the LDS public relations machine historically and the workings of mediated Mormonism more broadly since media of this type cast "the Latter-day Saints as models of high cultural achievement and refinement, icons of modern American citizenship for the larger country to admire and even emulate instead of indict" (2016, 18). In the process, mediation such as this helps to fold "the church itself and its followers in the national body politic" (18), so that to speak of Mormonism is already to work through an idiom of Americanness.

Yet it is not only BYU-based media or independent production houses that have found Mormonism a rich vein for mining. Mainstream feature films such as *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001), produced by 3Mark Entertainment and distributed by Walt Disney Pictures, recounts the coming of age of Mormon boys through the mission process (and stars television actor Christopher Gorham and Academy Award winner Anne Hathaway). Best-sellers from major publishing houses such as Joanna Brooks's *The Book of Mormon Girl* (Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2012), Elna Baker's *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* (Plume, a division of Penguin, 2010), and Nicole Hardy's *Confessions of a Latter-day Virgin* (Hyperion, 2013) offer "wickedly funny" and "homespun" witticisms about growing up Mormon in a non-Mormon society. Mormonism also relies on other major distributors, like Sony Pictures or Penguin, to forward their brand as a repository of family-friendly entertainment and educational media products. Conversely, as the *New York Times* noted, when Hollywood wants "good clean fun," it goes to "Mormon Country" for its writers, producers, and actors (Mooallem 2013). We've clearly come a long way from celebrity Mormons Donny and Marie Osmond and their homespun, toothy television show that ran on ABC from 1976 to 1979, though Donny and Marie continue to be fixtures of contemporary media thanks to YouTube, Las Vegas, and reality television, particularly *Dancing with the Stars*.

It's worth asking if Mormonism is alone in providing this touchstone on the nature of the object. Do other religions offer a similar set of optics or modes of understanding? Not to equivocate, but the answer is yes and no. Certainly, all religions function both as things and as ideas of things, as both signifier and signified. And many other religious traditions, for instance Judaism and Islam, have experienced and continue to experience parallel events—such as persecution, misunderstanding, and outright bigotry—that make their self-definition as marginalized outsiders similar to the F/LDS. Other religions, for instance Catholicism or evangelical Christianity, are also male governed and patriarchal; and other religions contain strong wellsprings for reform, tolerance, and renewal operating within them. Finally, other faith groups are American born and steeped in secrecy, with strong charismatic leaders, stringent rule cultures, and mandatory proselytizing. Some, like Scientology, have also fostered a significant amount of mediation. But no single religion carries all of these markers save the Mormons. And indeed, I would argue that the closest partner in the kind of cultural work the Mormon Church performs is not another religion at all but an entity such as the Boy Scouts of America or the United States Chamber of Commerce,

two ideologically conservative enterprises that fly under the cover of patriotism and free-market principles to become what Alyssa Katz terms "influence machines" (Katz 2015; see also Jordan 2016).[15]

One final note on Mormonism and cultural influence, and this has to do with the regulation of the physical body that is so critical to the Mormon project. As with many faith-based organizations bent on purity, F/LDS Mormons are barred from any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage, its members pledged to virginity before marriage and monogamy after. While not all Mormons marry, marriage is required for heavenly advancement. As I elaborate in my discussion in chapter 6, the LDS Church does not recognize non-normative sexualities, though certainly Mormons possessing these desires and identities exist. Among fundamentalist groups, only heterosexual unions are permitted, and of these, only those that are sanctioned and called into being by the prophet are allowed. Often this might mean one man being joined in union with multiple wives, some of these merely girls. The higher the status of the man, the more wives he receives. Typically, fundamentalist cultures not only disallow but exile Saints who break the rules of the larger sexual economy, though more progressive families work out different accommodations—*Sister Wives*' Mariah Brown's coming out as lesbian at the end of Season 12 in 2017 thus stands as another moment of ground-breaking television with respect to Mormonism and progressive values. Within both mainstream and fundamentalist systems, certain (unwed) Mormons are never allowed officially to be sexual, and all Mormons might experience their sexuality only through church-sanctioned means. These tensions in the context of broader initiatives for gay rights and the purported transgender tipping point allow Mormonism to function as a place of critical mass with regard to sexuality studies in the mediascape.

Making the matters of the relation between religion and justice all the more germane, Mormonism is also a faith, unlike most other major religions, that builds flux and change into its very code of being. There are thirteen Articles of Faith to which LDS adherents subscribe. These are fairly standard declarations, particularly for those sects considering themselves to be Christian, such as "#1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost." But the ninth Article of Faith sets the Mormons apart: "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" ("Articles of Faith" 2018). This ninth article marks the faith as always about potentiality. It is ever possible that the church may change its stance. New revelations may come and

have come to the church's prophets. In a twentieth-century social context, perhaps the most dramatic revelation was heralded in 1978, when the three members of the First Presidency, Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, announced a new revelation on priesthood that allowed male members of black African descent to function as priesthood holders (see chapter 2). It's important to note, here, that these hopes for change as voiced in mediated Mormonism are always for more inclusivity and tolerance, not greater restriction and orthodoxy.

It is this very capacity for not only fluidity but downright reversal that allows outlying Mormons to be ever hopeful that divine revelation might allow for their legitimate inclusion in what they perceive to be the One True Church. As a character in one of Johnny Townsend's short stories on gay themes thinks to himself: "In the past, polygamy was a commandment. In the past, interracial marriage was against church teachings, and Blacks couldn't hold the priesthood. It was *possible* that at some future date, the prophet would have a revelation accepting homosexuality. At every General Conference, Jason waited to hear the announcement. But the words never came" (2009, 31).[16]

In practical terms, Boyd Packer's enemies of the church—"feminists, homosexuals, and intellectuals"—are a particularly literate group to alienate (Packer 1993). Indeed, I'd argue that this outward suppression of a significant group of highly educated and politically active people massively contributes to the aliveness of the Mormon mediascape in the present moment. Contemporary mainstream Mormons joke about those who leave the church but can't leave it alone, meaning the apostates who write memoirs denouncing the church or who build websites intent on incriminating the church. But put simply, there are a lot of people needing to process what they've experienced in relation to the F/LDS experience particularly and about conservative religious culture more broadly.[17] The expanded platforms for publication, internet conversation, and video capture and broadcast make it incredibly easy to put one's voice in the public sphere and to make common cause with others who, in an earlier time, would have been isolated and bereft of community.

How to Date a Mormon: Gender and Sexuality on Latter-day Screens

WikiHow offers a nine-step tutorial on how to date a Mormon, seemingly intended for the white, straight Gentile boy who is interested in the white, pure Mormon girl ("How to Date a Mormon" 2015). Their pointers include

such admonitions as being open to prayer, refraining from consuming alcohol, tobacco, and caffeinated products, behaving modestly and respectfully (particularly to her parents), and remaining open to converting if marriage is a likely outcome of the romance. Point number 7, "Understand the Law of Chastity," offers the most detailed set of injunctions. The broader rule is "no sex before marriage," but just so everyone can be clear, the post details a series of other unacceptable forms of eroticism. Partners may not:

- Participate in passionate kissing.
- Lie on top of the other person.
- Touch private parts of another person's body with or without clothing.
- View pornography, before or after marriage. Viewing pornography is not acceptable, ever.
- Arouse sexual emotions in any way except having relations with their spouse, not even watching movies with nudity.

And while this advice is meant to cover the mainstream church's philosophy of regulation, it very much echoes the FLDS reality television father, Kody Brown, who tells his daughter and her boyfriend, "Kissing can be very dangerous. When you kiss, the person that you kiss, their hormones go into your mouth and it registers certain things that stimulate both the heart and the body for other reasons." While some might credit Brown for being familiar with the oxytocin hypothesis, his statements on the dangers of kissing have been picked up and rebroadcast throughout the world as "bizarre" ("'Kissing Can Be Very Dangerous'" 2014).

Tip number 9 of the WikiHow instruction, showing an attractive man and woman standing in front of the Salt Lake City Temple in silhouette, is illustrated by a wedding photo clearly drawn from teenage vampire juggernaut *Twilight: Breaking Dawn* (2011), here making Mormonism as a meme quite literal (see figures I.1 and I.2). As I have already mentioned, Stephenie Meyer, the author of the *Twilight* books, is a practicing Mormon, who lives in my hometown of Mesa, Arizona, and her best-selling trilogy detailing the star-crossed love between a vampire boy Edward and a human girl Bella has riveted millions. I wouldn't be the first to suggest that the code of chastity between Bella and Edward—a no-sex-before-marriage policy meant to keep him from eviscerating her with his monstrous strength—is a lightly veiled rendition of the Mormon law of chastity, as is their steamy postmarital sexual experience that results in the destruction of their beachside bedroom. Indeed, Edward's superhuman strength, Bella's conversion to vampirism,

their resulting capacity to live as a family in perpetuity, and the fact that Edward is able (even as a member of the undead) to father a child, all evoke the broader codes of mediated Mormonism, which maintain not only that families can be sealed for all eternity, but that righteous fathers will become Gods, and the birthing of children will continue to take place in heaven, though only at the celestial level. The film version of Edward and Bella's honeymoon in *Breaking Dawn* actually features a canopy bed with long diaphanous white netting, thus allowing Bella and Edward in their romantic foreplay to flirt with the idea of going through the veil, an important part of the supersecret Mormon marriage sealing ordinance.[18] Indeed, I would argue that the parallels between the vampire idyll and the Mormon ideal are so strong that instead of being depicted in front of falling white flowers, Bella and Edward's wedding picture would be more appropriate if they too had the Salt Lake City Temple as their backdrop. Given these connections, it is perhaps fitting that this advice—for the Gentile boy and the Mormon girl, for the vampire boy and the human girl—is communicated through WikiHow and illustrated by *Twilight*, thus cementing a code of chastity and Mormonism in the popular culture imagination.

I will return to *Twilight* in chapter 2 on race, but here I want to focus more on the regulation of the body, which is so critical to Mormonism. Through the Word of Wisdom, a law of health revealed to Joseph Smith in 1833, members are expected to uphold a tight regulation of the body's desire. They are restricted from consuming alcohol, tobacco products, tea and coffee, and illegal drugs, though perhaps in reaction to these strict mandates, the strongly Mormon state of Utah leads the nation in prescription drug abuse ("Prevalence of Prescription Drug Abuse" 2012), antidepressant use (Leonard 2010), and candy consumption (Stephenson 2015). At the age of maturity—for boys, typically around eighteen, before the start of a mission, and for girls, typically before marriage—worthy adherents experience a temple endowment ceremony, which obligates Saints to the lifelong and perpetual wearing of garments, or holy Mormon underwear, a constant reminder of the regulated body's role in living a pure life that might qualify one for godly things. Many believe these garments have supernatural capacities to protect the wearer from evil spirits, fires, and even bullets. Garments also work to shield all erogenous zones of the body (and then some), since they cover the body from shoulder to thigh.

Mormons are not the only religion to put a high premium on righteous virginity, of course, and thus many conservative religions have earned a reputation as agents of repression and sexual frustration: think chastity belts,

9 **Realize that some Mormons will only marry in the Temple.** In order to get married in the Temple you and your spouse both need to be Mormon. So if you're dating a Mormon, and they wish to be married in the Temple consider converting to Mormonism if both of you wish to be married.

FIG. I.1 "How to Date a Mormon" (2015, WikiHow).

FIG. I.2 Edward and Bella, *Twilight: Breaking Dawn: Part I.*

vestal virgins, immaculate conceptions, semi-celibate clergy, and dire pronouncements about the sin of spilling one's seed. But even in the age of reality television's fascination with religious extremism, recent Catholic pedophilic sex scandals, or evangelical Christian father-daughter purity balls (where fathers vow to be leaders of integrity by serving as celibate boyfriends, and their teenage daughters wear promise rings and lay white roses on a cross as a silent commitment to their sustained sexual purity), Mormonism's brand correlates with tightly regulated sexuality. Elna Baker writes, for instance, about Mormon dances in New York City that require men and women to retain a distance at least as big as "the standard works" between them. "So when you're dancing, the *Old Testament*, *New Testament*, *The Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price* should be able to fit in the space between you and your dance partner—or you're standing too close" (Baker 2010). In spite of the fact that Baker talks about this imposed distance between young desiring bodies with humor, the message is seriously rendered through her memoir as a whole: Mormonism mandates your absolute allegiance to the governance and suppression of bodily appetites, be that sexuality or cigarettes. Violating the Word of Wisdom is a slippery slope toward disloyalty to the entire faith.

The mandate placed on sexual purity was made all the more poignant when in 2013, ten years after her highly publicized abduction by a fundamentalist Mormon zealot intent on making the teenage girl his second wife, Elizabeth Smart spoke about why she had not tried to flee her kidnapper. She noted that her Mormon upbringing encouraged her to feel worthless due to her sexual experience, even in the case of rape. "Why would it even be worth screaming out?" Smart asked. "Why would it even make a difference if you are rescued? Your life still has no value" (Dominguez 2013). Smart's words raised a furor in the Mormon blogosphere, something I first became aware of when my outraged Mormon friends from high school began posting Facebook updates by the dozens, indignant that Smart would blame the church's stance on sexuality for her victimization. I saw only one blog post that readily acknowledged the emotionally coercive tactics that are often part of a young Mormon girl's religious and social education. Joanna Brooks wrote:

> We celebrate new official LDS Church curriculum for Mormon young women that eradicates the old chastity object lessons, even as we know that clearing them from Mormon culture will take much, much longer. . . . We're still not doing young women in Mormonism many

favors in the way we teach sexuality and particularly in a hyper-emphasis on modesty in dress that has emerged in many Mormon communities.

And then we read Elizabeth Smart, and we find ourselves once again in that place, that place of deadly stillness, that paralysis, that we lived in during those weeks in late spring 2002. When we wondered why she couldn't just run. But inside we already knew. (Brooks 2013)

In the larger mediascape, it is not just female chastity but the insistence that mainstream unmarried Mormon men must be sexually celibate that generates incredulity and also serves as the primary point of tension in any number of the mediated texts I examine here. This fascination with repressed sexuality for men, including the belief that it is not natural for men to thwart their sexuality, exerts itself in a range of materials, from *BuckleRoos Part II* (2004), a gay porn romp where sexually naive Mormon missionaries are coached in the ways of man-man sex, to *Tabloid* (2010), Errol Morris's documentary about the 1970s media circus that surrounded the abduction and rape of a male American Mormon missionary serving in England. In true Morris fashion, the documentary weaves a compelling narrative of confusion, where fiction and reality have an ambivalent relation to one another. But one major theme of the film amplifies the idea that the strict sexual economies of Mormonism preclude the possibility that a missionary might admit his willing participation in a sexual liaison (whether heterosexual or homosexual) for fear that he would be excommunicated for his sinful acts.

Lest we think these are exclusively the devices of fiction or artsy documentary, the notorious Mormon Murder Case (also known as the Jodi Arias trial) put the same ideas front and center as American talking points. In brief, the case centered on the 2008 murder in Mesa, Arizona, of salesman Travis Alexander by his ex-girlfriend Jodi Arias, both of whom were members of the LDS Church, though Alexander converted as a child, and he baptized Arias into the faith in 2007. After changing her story several times, Arias admitted to killing Alexander but said her actions were in self-defense. Arias testified about a complex sex life with Alexander, including oral and anal sex, which Alexander considered to be not real sex and so not against the chastity rules of the church. (Arias and Alexander were not alone in this thinking about forbidden forms of sexuality, as an "oral is moral" refrain from *Big Love* nicely mocked.) The Arias case became a cause célèbre, largely due to the live video feed that ran from the courtroom as well as to the development of a nightly cable show, *HLN after Dark: The Jodi Arias*

Trial, which discussed and dissected each element of the case. An American documentary television series, *48 Hours Mystery*, aired a feature story on the case in 2008, which was then used as evidence in the trial, making the already tenuous line between representation and reality all the more blurry. The *Huffington Post* deemed the case an "over-the-top media-spectacle" (Skoloff and Billeaud 2013) and the *Toronto Star* stated, "With its mix of jealousy, religion, murder, and sex, the Jodi Arias case shows what happens when the justice system becomes entertainment" (Quinn 2013). Postconviction of Arias, the media are still fascinated by the Mormon Murder Case, as evidenced by both a 2013 made-for-TV movie, *Jodi Arias: Dirty Little Secret*, and a 2018 three-part documentary retelling of the story in *Jodi Arias: An American Murder Mystery.*

In the Arias case, both mainstream and new media attention were, and continue to be, galvanized by three things: a woman's violent murder of a man, their steamy nonmarital sex life, and the "confusing conflicts" of a "devout Mormon," as *Radar Online* put it, who led a "secret double life" of rampant non-normative sex and perhaps even pedophilic same-sex attraction (Emery 2013). Tellingly, the devout double-life-living Mormon in question was not the woman, Arias, but the man, Alexander, since somehow his claim to Mormonism was considered more valid than hers. But more specifically, even in the context of Arias's acrobatic accounting of what had happened between herself and Alexander, the scandalous story centered on a grown man, pledged to celibacy before marriage and somehow, the logic went, driven to perverse sexual pleasures in order to claim virgin status. As in the case of Elizabeth Smart, the discursive logic indicated that LDS-induced sexual repression was at the heart of this American crime story.[19]

These sorts of tales about the surreptitious secret (sex) lives led by Mormon men and women make for riveting stories to an America steeped in the histories of Puritan asceticism and masculine heteronormativity. They are one reason why Mormon polygamy stories are so popular in the American mediascape, since polygamy tells the same tale of a regulated sexual economy in reverse. These stories do not ask how a man can stay celibate but how one man can please/service multiple women. The answer on *Big Love* is with Viagra. Indeed, whether the talking points focus on too much sex or too little, these stories allow for a paradigm where sex is central. Temptation stories position Mormons as objective correlatives where Mormon characters work out a nation's preoccupation with indulgence and regulation, with production and consumption, and with the normal and the abnormal, all decipherable through sex acts.

Mediated stories about regulation and repression do not stop with sexuality, of course, but extend to gender. Without apology, Mormonism sustains a politically conservative version of gender relations that idealizes women's nurturing, submissiveness, and other-oriented qualities, in pointed contrast to men's wage-earning potential, familial and church authority, and bravery. There are even nicknames for these idealized positions: Molly Mormon, or MoMo, a woman who is upbeat, church oriented, motherly, and obedient, and Peter Priesthood, a clean-cut man who upholds the stereotypical qualities of Mormon manhood.[20] From Mormon mommy blogs to newspaper feature articles on daring Mormon firefighters, stories abound in the mediascape that reinforce these normative extremes of gender performance as desirable qualities for both women and men.

Perhaps no moment illustrates this idea better than an August 9, 1978, interview Barbara Walters conducted with Donny and Marie Osmond (then twenty and eighteen, respectively; see figure I.3). In what would have aired in primetime to a significant percentage of the media share, Walters reminds her viewers, "To understand the Osmonds is to know that they are Mormons: Honor thy father and thy mother, family first, a strict code of conduct." In her interview, she directs the siblings over the heated terrain of both civil rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, asking about the church's refusal to allow black priests and women's status in the home and church. Donny fields the question on race, saying he is no authority, but he also isn't prejudiced. "They [black men] are not allowed to hold priesthood . . . right now. And I don't know why," says a somber and earnest Osmond. "But that's the way the Lord wants it" (*The Barbara Walters Special* 1978). On June 9, 1978 (after the Walters interview with Donny and Marie but prior to its airing), white male church leaders, particularly President Spencer W. Kimball, declared they had received a revelation from God, instructing them to reverse the racial restriction policy, an outcome that perhaps Barbara Walters and the combined pressures of the civil rights movement helped along.

Immediately following a discussion on whether Donny or Marie would marry a non-Mormon and if both intend to have only one sex partner for their entire lives (they answer no to the first question and yes to the second), Walters turns the topic to women's rights and says to a pixie-haired Marie, "Now, I have noticed here that you have no trouble speaking your mind. And yet, in the church . . . it seems to me that the woman holds a secondary role." Donny and Marie's mirrored stance is striking, their matching beige shirts, broad smiles, full dark hair, and earnest attention a visual

assertion of agreement and harmony, as their right hands both clench in determination to make points about their religious beliefs (see figures I.3 and I.4). Marie responds to Walter's questions with a classic verve but an unfortunate choice of pronouns. "Secondary, no. But you have to remember that you need a patriarch at the head of the home. . . . The woman is equally as important, but as far as speaking her mind, that should be the man's job." While there is much to discuss in this interview, for my purposes the relevant point is that both Donny and Marie project a feminized position in relation to the authority of the church, even while occupying conventional gender roles with respect to one another. Their job is not to question but to believe and to follow. And to smile. And Marie's job is further to tease Donny, even while she upholds his greater authority to speak for her. This reinforces what Matthew Bowman characterizes as the mainstream church's emphasis on living a "tight moral code" rather than encouraging intellectual inquiry, where church governance "is designed not to promote theological reflection but to produce Mormons dedicated to living the tenets of their faith" (Bowman 2012, 206, 197). And while both men and women are implicated in this code of submission and subordination, the hierarchy of power reinforces a gendered power relation that masculinizes those who make the rules and feminizes those who must adhere to the rules.

To see the connection between mediated Mormonism and a fascination with sex, one need only follow the golden thread of the Osmond family through the tapestry of latter-day representation. One prime example occurred during Howard Stern's 1998 interview with Donny Osmond. The conversation ranged, in typical Stern fashion, from whether or not Donny ever sexualized his sister, Marie, to the kind of sex Donny would or wouldn't have with his wife (no anal or oral, no porn). "You are sexually repressed, Donald!" yells Stern. "No, no, no I'm not," says Donny with a smile on his face. "I'm happy." In interview after interview—from Barbara Walters to Larry King to Katie Couric to Oprah Winfrey—the Osmonds are genuine, decent, happy. Even in pain—as, for instance, during Marie's divorces, the death by suicide of her son, Donny's long struggle with depression, their father's death at age ninety—Donny and Marie are public Mormons, eager to speak of their faith, of forever families, of being happy in their ethical commitments. As Donny tells Ellen DeGeneres (2013) about Marie's remarriage to her first husband, "It's a Cinderella story with a lot of bumps in the road but a beautiful, happy ending." And as we shall soon see, this version of happiness is critical to the gender-sex dynamic of mediated Mormonism.

FIGS. 1.3–1.4 The mirrored stances of Donny and Marie Osmond.

Happy Valley and the Kingdom State of Deseret

Happy Valley is the nickname attached to Utah County, an area south of Salt Lake City that includes Provo (home of Brigham Young University) and is ringed by the majestic snow-capped mountains of the Wasatch Front. But Happy Valley is also a state of mind, a metaphoric descriptor of all of Mormonism and most of Utah, a term sometimes used mockingly and other times admiringly. While many Mormons living outside of the mountain West and the United States take issue with what they term Utah Mormons as the template for all of Mormonism, Happy Valley typifies a brand that applies to the idea of the mainstream church more broadly. Latter-day Saints are widely recognized for their upbeat, optimistic, big-smiled, high-energy personalities, affective qualities that link to the broader ideologies of Americanness. Mormons are often credited with being the happiest faith system in the world (or at least the most convincingly upbeat), and the growing number of international converts suggests a gospel of happiness has much appeal. I discuss this idea of happiness as brand more in chapter 1.

Mormonism is not only a religion born on American soil, it gains its sustaining values from the ideographies of space that bind Mormonism to Americanness, particularly to projects of imperialism. Utah became the Mormon heartland in 1847, largely because its emptiness and absence of arable land marked the space as both removed from and undesirable to others. This relative lack of popular and political interest in the vast desert spaces that Wallace Stegner calls "Mormon Country" are also why the literal and figurative fallout of atomic bomb testings figure so prominently in narratives about Mormon people, particularly Brady Udall's (2011) novel *The Lonely Polygamist*, which includes a scene of atomic detonation, and Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* (1991), a moving account of the natural history of the Salt Lake Basin region and her family's struggle with breast cancer.

Yet LDS folk didn't come to Utah with only the humble aspiration of settling exclusively in and near the basin. As historian Walter Nugent notes, "church fathers had in mind an imperialist vision in a kingdom or state of Deseret that would encompass not only Utah but also present-day Nevada, southern California to the Pacific, three-fourths of Arizona, and large chunks of Colorado, Wyoming, and Idaho" (Nugent 2004, 37; see figure I.5).

The Mormons founded many Western cities that otherwise seem now remarkably disconnected from their teetotaling ways (such as Las Vegas), and they laid the groundwork for infrastructure across the broad swath of the Mountain West, moving north into Alberta, Canada, and south into Mexico.

FIG. 1.5 The Kingdom of Deseret.

Indeed, media are at the very heart of the expansionism, since Mormon outposts were established along telegraph lines that the church erected to create a communication network across the West.

Mormonism's holy story draws on the significance of place, and thus the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stands as the only major religion in which the Americas figure prominently. The Book of Mormon recrafts the broader story of Christianity so that the Americas (the United States, Mexico, and perhaps Central America—the specific geography is unclear in church stories) play critical roles in the divine project. Mormonism puts the American continent front and center in its cosmogony, claiming in the Book of Mormon that Christ came to North America after his crucifixion and resurrection, and the end of times, the second coming, will happen in the hallowed grounds of Jackson County, Missouri, not far from Mark Twain's boyhood home. Mormonism also pins its notion of heaven and earth on a philosophy of meritocracy and diligence that fully exemplifies an American ethos of hard work and can-do optimism, cementing all the more an ideology of Americanness to a credo of Mormonism.

In the nineteenth century, the West offered a remote space promising the church's safety where worshippers could follow the edicts of their prophet and live in peace, unmolested by the outside world. On the Mormon Trail as believers laboriously trekked with their loved ones across the Great Plains of the American Midwest—often on foot or pushing unstable handcarts to carry their possessions—Western meadows and grasslands beckoned as a place of rest.[21] On longer sojourns, they offered soils for cultivation of wheat or barley or oats. But meadows were also potentially a place of vulnerability,

where those with harm in their hearts could isolate and wound. These associations are palpable even on contemporary television, as evidenced when an episode of *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993—2001) features a flashback in which its protagonist, Cordell Walker, played by Chuck Norris, saves a vulnerable Mormon party making passage to the West.[22] The narrative of stalwart-but-ultimately-vulnerable Mormons is as well worn as the rutted Mormon Trail itself. Indeed, the great Western director John Ford committed the story of defenseless Mormons in need of saving to film in *Wagon Master* (1950).

The mountains of the West were, of course, about epiphanies and visions, about elevation and transcendence. But they also signified hardships, challenges, the enormous Rocky Mountain ridge, with its unforgiving coldness and unfathomable altitudes. The adversity of the trek westward gave Henry Hathaway (director) and Darryl F. Zanuck (producer) their American Zion, allowing them to create the romanticized *Brigham Young* (1940), in which a persecuted holy people flee injustice, cross a massive body of water (the Mississippi River rather than the Red Sea), and follow their holy leader through adversity—including a plague of crickets rather than locusts—in order to arrive in the promised land. The West called for hardscrabble perseverance and steely determination in the context of catastrophe. In many respects, these images of Western spaces gave the Mormons their backbone and their identity as outsiders and those who endure. For this reason, even contemporary cultural texts that take up Mormonism participate in an elegy to place: Salt Lake's Wasatch mountain range frequently rises majestically behind scenes in *Big Love*, *Sister Wives*, or *Escaping Polygamy*; the brightness of the desert's sunlight functions almost like another character in films such as *The 19th Wife* or *Prophet's Prey*, the striated layers of the Salt Lake basin in *Refuge*, swimming in immense manmade lakes surrounded by submerged canyons in *Dancing with Crazy*, the unforgiving cold of Provo's mornings in *Saving Alex*. As it concerns Mormonism as a meme, then, the American West in all of its many connotations lies at the heart of the cultural and ideological landscape it represents. Much like the Colorado River, which has carved a majestic path through the rock of the Grand Canyon, Mormonism cuts a broad swath through the ideographies of the West.

The Great (Normative) White Way

As anyone who has seen parodies of a milk-guzzling Mitt Romney on *Saturday Night Live* or freakishly loving families during family home evening on *South Park* can attest, mainstream Mormons are often portrayed as

kinder, nicer, and purer than others, but also as both naive and old fashioned. Mainstream Mormons as a group and a social identity have come to take on the very characteristics most exemplified by two famous Mormon families: the Romneys and the Osmonds—attractive, seemingly stable and happy large families, financially prosperous, influential, kind but firm, conservative, with flashing smiles. By contrast, as evidenced by such fare as *Outlaw Prophet: Warren Jeffs* or *Breaking the Faith*, fundamentalist Mormon men are depicted as idealogues and their wives and children as duped, deceived, and desperate to escape. All of these factors are coded through an unrelenting veil of whiteness and Western hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity. While the demographics of the mainstream church's global membership are quite heterogeneous and the church's public relations efforts make a case for Mormonism as pluralized in ethnicities, races, and other social identities, the idea of Mormonism and the way that meme functions in the American imagination largely hews to a hue of whiteness that insists on heterosexual desire and practice as a fundamental ingredient of both priesthood and godhood. Critical to these represented identities are a whole host of messages about marriage and morality, queer identities and politics, and postfeminism and contested/confirmed patriarchies.

In terms of gender progressiveness, women within the mainstream church are still lobbying for priesthood (as well as the right to wear pants to Sunday services), and while there are no longer official test labs at BYU designed to "dehomosexualize" Saints through means of electroshock therapy and other forms of extreme behavior modification, the church takes a hard stance against LGBT+ rights and people. It is for this reason that stories of the clean-cut Mormon man tempted by SSA (same-sex attraction) or even premarital and extramarital sexual desire provide such a titillating consideration in such fare as *The Book of Mormon*, *Angels in America*, *Latter Days*, *Orgazmo*, or even *Big Love* (if a homicidal fundamentalist false prophet can count as clean-cut). Indeed, as I noted, when Jodi Arias murdered her boyfriend in grisly fashion, the press made much of their shared Mormon faith and unmarried eroticisms, putting one more version of LDS sexual repression/perversion into public discourse. So while the representation of actual Mormon people tends to reinforce a whiteness of skin that correlates with heteronormative identity, one outcome we might see in the broader signifying system of mediated Mormonism is that the hegemonic hefts of whiteness and heteronormativity do not always prevail.

Chapter by Chapter: The Mediated Mormon Trail

Before laying out a description of the chapters in this book, I want to address the topic of trigger warnings. I'm of two minds about whether or not an author should warn readers about potentially traumatic materials, particularly those related to sexual violence. Trigger warnings can sometimes serve to create the very thing they seek to suppress: anxiety and trauma. They also make a priori assumptions about what might count as traumatic, often reinforcing feelings of alienation and misunderstanding for those people who have experienced violence outside of the purviews of the warning. Some people also feel that trigger warnings dull the necessary challenges that come with a call to critical thinking. With all of that being said, I feel it ethically important to note that the kind of violation and suffering experienced by children who are sexually abused is different in kind. I thus wish my reader to know that there will be many moments in the ensuing text during which I speak about sexual violence, including rape of children. I admit that this finding surprised me when I began to engage with the broad archive of mediated Mormonism, for it is a sad reality that many of the memoirs about being in and leaving the church (both LDS and FLDS) are also harrowing accounts by survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The patriarchal cultures of LDS and FLDS cultures, combined with the notion that children are innocent until they join the church at age eight, provide the perfect breeding ground for the abuse of young children. Further, patriarchal ethoses that emphasize obedience and sexual purity often reinforce the discursive codes of abuse. As the *Salt Lake Tribune* warns, "Teaching youth that it is permissible and appropriate for authority figures to ask personal, invasive sexual questions grooms them to not recognize abusive situations" (Dodge 2018).[23] This is not to say, by any means, that all or most Mormon children are abused, sexually or otherwise. But it is to say that sexual abuse is a major motif of mediated Mormonism and is addressed, sometimes in painful detail, in this book.

Chapter 1, "Mormonism as Meme and Analytic," demonstrates how the idea of Mormonism as a faith fixes the meanings of what I call spiritual neoliberalism, a gendered aspirational target that is marked by the imperative to make good choices and improve the self as fused with marketplace goals of financial success that have long been the hallmark of neoliberalism. The chapter examines how Mormonism is variously used by those within and outside the church and by both amateur media producers and professionals to reinforce and renegotiate codes that align with a democratic norm of the

citizen-self, who believes in (and thrives due to) egalitarianism, meritocracy, self-actualization, self-determination, and seeming free choice. These investments manifest through an orientation toward screens, self-reflexivity, and the monetization of identity or self-branding. In fact, I argue that the politics of representation at play in larger popular narratives about Mormonism perfectly combine a cultural logic about neoliberalism and globalization that meshes well with the mainstream LDS Church's own logic of neoimperialism and new technologies of communication. The amalgam marks a period that mobilizes media savvy and manipulation of the image but that also requires the machinelike routinization that serves as the hallmark of industrialism, elements we see perfectly manifest in the worldwide missionary program that so emblematizes the LDS Church. Work ethos and business savvy are also critical to an F/LDS notion of financial and faith-based rewards. In this respect, Mormonism epitomizes the theoretical ground staked out in a post-Enlightenment democratic temporality, where concepts of rational individualism and meritorious labor, rather than aristocratic lineage, cohere over time to earn one success in its own version of the prosperity gospel. That this model of rational advance adheres to a religion and thus secures one a place in the ephemeral domain of a celestial paradise is only one of Mormonism's more brilliant contradictions—or contributions, depending on your point of view.

Crucially, these values are also augmented and authorized by an ideology of whiteness deeply imbricated in the F/LDS DNA. Chapter 2, "The Mormon Glow," takes up the idea of an epistemology of light—to borrow Richard Dyer's phrase—that reinforces goodness as the path to godliness. In this chapter, I consider the church's long-standing position on race, including the lived prophecy that stands as a founding principle of the religion. Because the basic articles of faith, specifically Article 9, allow for prophetic revelation not just in the past but in the future, the church's policies are amenable to change over time, thus leading to the hope and the distinct possibility that God will change his mind about same-sex marriage or women holding the priesthood. This chapter takes up these notions of good works, the Mark of Cain, and what is colloquially referred to as the Mormon Glow, or an embodied goodness in Mormons intelligible to others, arguing for the Mormon Glow as both phenotype and media spectacle.

Chapter 3, "The Epistemology of the (Televised, Polygamous) Closet," turns to a discussion on modern polygamy, including issues of privacy and publicity. If one of the undergirding modes of Mormon self-understanding is the church's separation from mainstream society, mediation and celebrity

complicate the edict of separatism that has functioned as the backbone of the church's regard toward its own identity since its inception. Mainstream postmillennial Mormon polygamy stories have been largely grounded in HBO's critically acclaimed drama *Big Love* (2006–11). And while *Big Love* has arguably been the most respected and expensive venue for the portrayal of what one way of doing modern polygamy looks like, it has hardly been the only site for such depictions. Since 2010, reality television has offered its own point of view on anomalous family arrangements. *Sister Wives*, on TLC, presents a fringe group of Mormons—in this case the polygamous Brown family—as a composite family that neutralizes the extremes of FLDS. This depiction conflates mainstream Mormon and Fundamentalist Mormon alike under the big, if controversial, tent of polygamy. Both *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* have, in turn, created a market for other mediated fare that has linked itself to this new public fascination with modern polygamy. Rather than seeing these linked media/consumer networks as capitalism run amuck, I'm much more interested in the way these narratives position the modern polygamous family as the quintessence of contemporary American individualism, steeped as it is in entrepreneurial spirit, aspirational ambition, management efficiency, and image savvy.

Chapter 4, "Polygamy USA," considers orthodox forms of plural marriage that modern polygamists contest, as made visible in such sites as the reality shows *Escaping the Prophet* (2015) and *Escaping Polygamy* (2015–present), the 2005 raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch, and the 2011 conviction of its leader, Warren Jeffs. That Jeffs is both separate from and elided with the original Mormon polygamists, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, is also critical to the mediated discourses clustering around this topic. Through these accounts that range from Jeffs to Joseph—from dusty compounds to lushly appointed mansions, from sister wives to spurned male children—this chapter analyzes stories about fundamentalist polygamy that position it as retrograde, anachronistic, and evil. Yet narratives about the perversions of polygamy offer their own rendering of modern progressivism, particularly since they depend on a culture of celebrity to make their warnings intelligible. Indeed, if chapter 3 considers polygamy, or at least modern polygamy, as a savvy resource for modern living, chapter 4 provides a different point of access on voice, agency, and political action. These orthodox polygamy stories tell a consistent story about the worst abuses of patriarchy and male privilege, only to make the primary villain so uniform and one dimensional that he is pushed to the edges. It is those who have suffered and survived, escaped and evaded, the sons of perdition and the apostate sister wives, whose

stories emerge as vibrant, complex, and compelling. Taken together, chapters 3 and 4 offer commentary on how gender and sexuality norms are established and contested within narratives about fundamentalist beliefs, even those stories that vary in terms of their relation to modern values and lives.

While the entire book engages with sexuality and gender as critical throughlines to understanding Mormonism, media, and identity in the modern moment, chapters 5 and 6 serve as capstone discussions. Chapter 5, "Gender Trouble in Happy Valley," looks very specifically at the role of women in both fundamentalist and mainstream contexts. This examination includes the affective imperative that women be happy as well as the feminist resistance long part of Mormonism. This chapter also considers the case of Elizabeth Smart, whose story captivated the nation, largely because it involved a kidnapping with a happy ending in that it did not end in her death. Smart's kidnapping allowed for another public and newsworthy display of the underbelly of American culture, articulated through the tale of a pretty, affluent blonde girl being stolen away from the upscale home of her parents by a polygamous homeless zealot bent on making her his second wife. This chapter thinks about women in both the mainstream and fundamentalist churches—about the affective demands that they be smiling, nurturing, and obedient and about their own needs for liberation and individuation within this extremely patriarchal system.

Chapter 6, "'Pray (and Obey) the Gay Away'" turns more specifically to a consideration of mediation about Mormons and not only LGBT+ lives but queer sexuality and desire more broadly. Both fundamentalist and mainstream Mormonism maintains that heterosexuality (though not always heteronormativity, as we see in the case of polygamy) is God's plan. But given how important personal truth—or testimony—is to the perceived validity of Mormonism, LGBT+ F/LDS peoples experience an excruciating tension between adherence to self or system. The examples that fill this chapter speak to a finely titrated formula of conscience in relation to culture, as filtered through needs for self-expression and amplified by social media and publicity. In turn, this exquisite tension between self and system reveals much about identity, orientation, desire, and conscience. When LGBT+ stories about identity and desire are mediated, packaged as consumer products, spread through social media as memes, and turned into complex semiotic codes of their own, they make visible the hegemonic workings of power in relation to norms of the self.

I close the book with a conclusion that summarizes the intellectual points and follow this with an epilogue that is a personal essay in which I detail my

own vexed relationship to Mormonism, steeped as it is in the ambivalent teas of both admiration and anxiety that were so fully a part of my growing up in Mesa, Arizona. The state of Arizona is itself a place of social, geological, and climatic extremes, from the red and purple canyon lands and whispering pines and white-barked aspens of the north to the saguaro fields with their pink-tipped arms open to the sun of the Sonoran Desert to the south. The landscapes of the West are godscapes. On seriously weather-rich days, when luminous clouds slink low around the crags of mountains, the light is dramatic and spectacular. A natural chiaroscuro. Shafts of light beaming through the sunset are like incandescent slides. A darkened mound backlit with gold becomes the hiding place for a light-filled and playful God. *Tricks of sun and shadow*. The landscape is entirely surreal and otherworldly, too unlike the prosaic to be anything but lumen filled.

Arizona contains every stereotype imaginable about the Wild West, from gun-slinging cowboys to miners whose lungs have grown black with coal dust. Phoenix and Tucson even sport the occasional yuppie and hipster. And yet the Mesa of my childhood was remarkable largely for its blandness. While a large city, Mesa sits inconspicuously at Phoenix's elbow. In a former day, irrigated fields of alfalfa and cotton stretched for mile after mile, and just outside the city limits, orange groves perfumed the winter air with their sweet delicate aroma. But that sweet scent is now mostly a thing of memory, since most of those groves have been cut down to accommodate the population boom that struck the Sun Belt in the 1990s. Mesa is a city founded and largely run by Mormon people, and while the city also houses a diverse population of Latinos and Indigenous peoples, the tastes and temperaments of Mormonism rule the culture of the city. What this means in practical terms is that the Mesa of my childhood offered very few of the amenities and cultural stimuli that a comparable city of its size might support, since Mormon families spend so much time with themselves and each other, at family home evening, at church, at Sunday school, or in activities planned through their ward and stake centers. For the non-Mormon, Mesa was thus a city where one's presence felt attenuated, a vacuous place of absence belied by the flesh-and-blood reality of being. In offering this memoir of my coming of age in Mesa, I introduce yet one more version of mediated Mormonism as remembered through the lens of my own feelings of marginalization and judgment. I bring my voice here in memoir form to suggest that experience taught me something quite subtle and yet palpable about hegemony. I never needed to be instructed in these codes about morality and gendered behavior, and yet I knew them so well that I internalized them.

Overall, I'm intrigued by the tangle of ideas that wrap themselves around the meme of Mormonism. They weave a complex tapestry about lives in the present moment that are fractured, contingent, and even precarious in every way possible—by demands on personal time and energy, by imperatives to be competitive in a global marketplace, by moral and ethical concerns about the state of the family, by worried judgments about racial and ethnic plurality and multiculturalism, by injunctions that limit the body's desires and hungers, by an intense awareness of stigma and stereotype, and by the use of media to measure, counter, and circulate so-called misperceptions. In this, the latter-day screens of mediated Mormonism reveal much about the shifting meanings of contemporary U.S. gender politics and social justice.

NOTES

PAST AS PROLOGUE

1. In 1852, Brigham Young spoke to the meaning of the Adam/God theory: "When our father Adam came into the garden of Eden, he came into it with a celestial body, and brought Eve, one of his wives, with him. He helped to make and organize this world. He is MICHAEL, the Archangel, the ANCIENT OF DAYS! about whom holy men have written and spoken—He is our FATHER and our GOD, and the only God with whom WE have to do. Every man upon the earth, professing Christians or non-professing, must hear it, and will know it sooner or later" (Young, "Mysteries," April 9, 1852).

2. Throughout this book, I discuss the notion of forever families, or the idea that spouses and family members might be sealed to one another for all eternity. Indeed, "forever family" could well be a trademarked brand of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the concept is often used as one of the primary draws for investigators who are considering conversion. Yet mediated Mormonism plays fast and loose with just what is involved in the forever family, particularly its ties to polygamy. For instance, *Charly* (Weyland 1980) is a hugely famous young adult novel that was made into an equally popular film, *Jack Weyland's Charly* (2002). Both narratives feature a love story between a non-LDS woman with a sexual past, Charly, and a devout, virginal LDS man, Sam. She converts, they marry, and after the birth of their son, she develops cancer and dies. Both novel and film are sad, but both play on the idea of forever families as a salve against the pain of Charly's death. Yet because eternal sealings require temple recommends and these, in turn, require that both partners be "pure," it would not be possible for this particular couple to be married in the temple and thus be sealed into a forever family. They could, however, marry legally, wait a year, and then be sealed, but this interrupts the temporal alacrity of her cancerous end. The movie makes much of the never-ending monogamous love story between Charly and Sam, even ending with words on the screen, "This is NOT the end." In the book, eternal marriage is also critical. However, Charly encourages her husband, Sam,

to find another wife, being sure to pick someone she will like since they will all live together in the afterlife.

3. Ancestry's brands include Ancestry, AncestryDNA, AncestryHealth, AncestryProGenealogists, Archives.com, Family Tree Maker, Find a Grave, Fold3, Newspapers.com, Rootsweb, AncestryAcademy, and AncestryInstitution. Under its subsidiaries, Ancestry.com operates foreign sites that provide access to services and records specific to other countries in the languages of those countries. These include Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Brazil, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and several other countries in Europe and Asia (covered by Ancestry Information Operations Company). See Ancestry.com on Wikiwand (http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ancestry.com). As one case in point, my university library just bought an institutional subscription to Ancestry.com for research use.

INTRODUCTION

The quote in the title of this chapter is by Brigham Young, in J. Turner (2012, 301).

1. Kody and Meri Brown legally divorced in 2015, so that Kody might legally marry his fourth wife, Robyn, and thus be eligible to adopt her children from another husband.

2. Utah lost another reality polygamist family in 2018, when the Alldredge family of *Seeking Sister Wife* left for South Dakota, thus increasing the theme of persecuted non-normative families on the run to more welcoming places.

3. In the feature film *Brigham Young* (1940), one of Hollywood's retellings of this exodus, Mormons vacate Nauvoo—much like the Browns—under cover of a single night.

4. Las Vegas—famous as sin city for its legalized prostitution and gambling—is a present-day Mormon stronghold highly populated with both mainstream and fundamentalist peoples. Las Vegas is also a ready symbol for the early church's colonizing fervor. Under Brigham Young's direction, a team of fifty-five missionaries built and occupied a fort in Las Vegas in 1855, becoming the first occupants of European descent to live in the area. Although they abandoned the fort due to the Utah War (1857–58), in which the U.S. government engaged in armed conflict with the settlers of Utah Territory (largely over public polygamy), the National Park Service still calls the Old Mormon Fort "the birthplace of Las Vegas," reinforcing the settler colonialism and white supremacy that effaces the complex history of indigenous peoples such as the Paiutes, who had been living in and near Las Vegas for nearly 1,200 years ("The Old Mormon Fort" 2017). In Season 9, which began airing in January 2019, the Brown family moves to Flagstaff, Arizona. In contrast to the move from Utah to Nevada, this move is depicted not so much as a response to persecution but as a test of Kody's patriarchal authority.

5. In 2016, a three-judge panel of the Tenth Circuit effectively reversed the 2011 ruling, arguing that it was very unlikely the Brown family would have been prosecuted for bigamy absent other charges such as child bigamy, fraud, or abuse.

6. One good place to see such a sliding hermeneutic about Mormons and sexuality is in the 1969 feature-film musical *Paint Your Wagon*. Based on a Broadway musical of the same name, the film took off in a new direction from the Broadway original to offer a more detailed picture of life in a California mining town called No Name City, where bourgeois conventions do not exist. When a polygamist Mormon comes through town with two wives, the miners persuade him to sell one. Elizabeth agrees to be sold, reasoning it can't be worse than her present living experience. She is sold to and then marries Ben, and this relation sets up the possibility that the film might introduce an intriguing subplot, whereby the former Mormon wife might fall in love with yet another man, Pardner, while still wishing to be married to Ben. The reasoning here: she had been a sister wife, why couldn't they be brother husbands? Ben and Pardner think it over and can come up with no reason to decline. For most of the film, Elizabeth, Ben, and Pardner create a home and family together. And though, by the film's end, the polygamous threesome becomes a monogamous twosome, this deviation (and perhaps deviance) allows for a delicious recasting of sexual economies courtesy of the Mormons.

7. A few examples from mediated Mormonism: The Lifetime movie *Outlaw Prophet: Warren Jeffs* contains a scene of Jeffs smiling as he looks into a mirror. "I'm more famous than bin Laden," he intones with satisfaction when they both are on the FBI's ten most-wanted list, a historical truth that occurred in 2006. In the memoir *Breaking Free*, Rachel Jeffs (daughter of Warren) notes the isolation she and others experienced on the FLDS compound, reflecting on the 9/11 terrorist attack: "Years later, when I saw documentaries about bin Laden, the man's ability to brainwash his people to do his bidding reminded me very much of Father" (Jeffs 2017, 167). And scores of media use bin Laden as a reference point for Jeffs, each standing in as a symbol of evil and depravity. Writes the *Los Angeles Times* about the documentary *Prophet's Prey*: "At one point, we see the FBI most-wanted poster that first included Jeffs, his gaunt, deceptively meek-looking mug at No. 2 next to Osama bin Laden. *Prophet's Prey* is a sobering reminder that tyrannical monsters who hide behind religion can be homegrown too" (Abele 2015). More general comparisons between Mormons and Muslims can be found in many media forms, including Scott Carrier's (2011) *Prisoner of Zion: Muslims, Mormons, and Other Misadventures*; Dennis Kirkland's (2008) *Mormons and Muslims: A Case of Matching Fingerprints*; Avraham Azrieli's (2012) *The Mormon Candidate*; and Robert Robinson's (2017) *Muslim Mormon Koran*.

8. For a fictional accounting of Mormons on the front lines of gender-related matters, see Mette Ivie Harrison's (2014, 2016, 2017) Linda Walheim mysteries—*The Bishop's Wife*, *His Right Hand*, *For Time and All Eternities*—a series of murder novels that also consider Mormonism's precarious relation to domestic abuse, homosexuality, transgender identity, female authority, and polygamy.

9. Dr. King used this statement about the nature of justice in a baccalaureate sermon given during the commencement exercises at Wesleyan University in 1964. His printed version of the sermon puts the sentence in quotation marks, indicating that he attributed provenance to an earlier source. Its actual first use is not fully known, but

most scholars believe the statement initially appeared in a sermon given by Theodore Parker (1853).

10. "The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new), and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals" (Packer 1993). In this book, I use LGBT+ to indicate the broadest extension of identity amassed under the gay pride rainbow: LGBTTQQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transitioning, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally).

11. Romney's political career and two runs at the U.S. presidency have created their own niche of mediated Mormonism, including a memoir, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (2010), and *Mitt* (Whitely 2014), a feature-length documentary. Mitt Romney's wife, Ann Romney, has also authored *The Romney Family Table: Sharing Home-Cooked Recipes and Favorite Traditions* (2013), the memoir *In This Together: My Story* (2015), and an inspirational self-help book: *Whatever You Choose to Be: 8 Tips for the Road Ahead* (2015).

12. The website Famous Mormons makes this case empirically with respect to the mainstream LDS Church, offering a comprehensive list of famous Mormons (like Mitt Romney) and recognizable Mormon cultural producers (like Stephenie Meyer) that numbers in the thousands and ranges from government to entertainment to sports to business professionals. While the website is a good resource for determining which reality TV participant is LDS, it pointedly does not include Mormon-themed media that are either controversial (such as the many Jodi Arias exposés) or fundamentalist (such as *Sister Wives* or *Big Love*).

13. Indeed, as described by Zoe Chase (2018) in her *This American Life* feature, Flake could well be one of the plucky missionary characters designed by Matt Stone and Trey Parker and starring in *The Book of Mormon* musical: "How do I describe Jeff Flake?" she asks. "Suit and tie, clasped hands, earnestly looking at me on his office couch. I mean, he's a senator. He's deeply earnest to the point where he's kind of dorky. He's a Mormon. He's super disciplined. He often goes to the gym twice a day. He has this way of being more hopeful than it seems like he should."

14. In a similar vein, Jeff Benedict's (2007) *The Mormon Way of Doing Business* argues both tacitly and overtly that the religious and cultural principles of Mormons directly aid their success in the business world. In a survey of nine LDS men who are also CEOs or the founders of major companies like JetBlue or American Express, Benedict contends that the work ethic, devotion to righteousness, discipline, and commitment to equality led these men to "naturally" flourish. Not incidental, according to Benedict, is the fact that each of the men had ancestors who survived the crossing of the American plains in the mid-nineteenth century. Benedict does not include women in his survey, underscoring the hegemonic gender roles that are so much a part of the ethos and mythos of Mormonism.

15. The mainstream LDS Church partnered with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) in 1903, believing that their common ideals of God, country, and masculinity were in tandem. In 2018, the church formally severed that partnership, after the BSA became instead Scouts BSA (meaning girls and transgender scouts were welcome). The Scouts

also welcomed those who were lesbian and gay, which further led to the church's move for separation.

16. In the mystery novel *The Mormon Candidate*, Avraham Azrieli (2012, 288) puts this same sentiment about the potentiality for change in Mormon doctrine in different words: "We know our fellow Mormons. . . . All they need is a spark to ignite their righteousness, to set free their suppressed recognition that the Church must change. They will fight to end racism, to end women's abuse and subjugation, to end homophobia, to end the dictatorship from the top, and to end the shameful suppression of the Church's true history. . . . A revolution! Just like the Arab Spring. . . . We will instigate a Mormon Spring!"

17. One of the more nuanced academic considerations of this phenomenon is E. Marshall Brooks's *Disenchanted Lives* (2018). Brooks rightly notes that neither belief nor church membership is an on/off switch. He writes, "I quickly found that intellectually renouncing the church's teaching did not mean that they [former Mormons] had successfully rid themselves of the feeling of *being Mormon*. Ex-Mormons continued to inadvertently remember what they longed to forget" (122). As my own memoir in this book attests, this ambivalent relation between knowing and forgetting is also true for non-Mormons raised in Mormon communities.

18. As a point of comparison, there is much similarity between the secret temple ceremonies, or ordinances, of the LDS Church and the equally secret ceremonial rites of the Freemasons. Joseph Smith was himself a member of the Masons, as were four other founding members of the church. And there is great flow between the two secret societies in terms of their iconography, ideology, and structure. I do not, however, devote a good deal of space to investigating these links, since the larger archive of mediated Mormonism seems largely uninterested in these connections. While several books do lay out the relation between Mormons and Masons, that connection and/or influence has not found its way into the active concerns of twenty-first-century discussants, as, for instance, polygamy has.

19. Another lurid Mormon sex/murder scandal played out in November 2013, when Martin MacNeill was convicted for the 2007 death of his wife, Michele. A *New York Daily News* headline offered the best synopsis of events: "Utah Doctor Martin MacNeill Found Guilty of Murdering His Wife after Coercing Her into Plastic Surgery, Drugging Her and Leaving Her to Die in Tub." Not included in this overview was the role played by his long-term mistress, the fact that his daughters pushed for his conviction, and other mysterious deaths now tracked back to "the Mormon Doctor" ("Utah Doctor Found Guilty" 2013).

20. See William Shunn's (2015) glossary for Mormonism.

21. The adversity experienced by the early settlers—starvation, illness, animal attacks, freezing, death—in turn have created one of the largest truth narratives in the F/LDS self-mythology: our ancestors endured great suffering and were able to survive only through sheer determination and divine intervention. For a direct rendering of the struggles and salvific message of the settlers, see the feature film *17 Miracles* (Christensen 2011).

22. Many serialized television Westerns contain an episode with Mormon themes, including *Wagon Train* (1959–65), *Zane Grey Theater* (1956–61), *Death Valley Days* (1952–70), *The Big Valley* (1965–69), *How the West Was Won* (1976–79), and *Bonanza* (1959–73). Interestingly, when *Bonanza* was rebroadcast in syndication in the 1990s, the rights were owned by Pat Robertson's cable Family Channel, which refused to air two episodes, called "The Pursued," about Mormon polygamists. Not all episodes are fixated on the sexual economies of plural marriage. Most histories of the West contain stories of outlaws, and Mormonism has one of the most notorious: Robert LeRoy Parker, also known as Butch Cassidy, who was raised in a strict Mormon family and struck out on his own to look for fame and adventure, as depicted in the "Drop Out" episode of *Death Valley Days*.

23. In 2017 active LDS member and former bishop Sam Young started a website and petition called Protect LDS Children. Included on the website are several hundred stories detailing the "shame and abuse" and "suicidal thoughts" experienced by LDS children and teens around the topic of sex. The website archives both written and video testimonials of Mormons of all ages, who have been asked explicit, specific, and "vile" questions about the nature of their sexual experience, knowledge, and experimentation, including masturbation. Writes #165, a thirty-year-old woman, after an experience of drinking and having sex at age seventeen: "I've done everything from counseling and therapy to studying shame and shame resilience, [but] I still can hardly bring myself to think it or speak it out loud: I was raped. . . . The bishop—this shy, mousy accountant—took me in to our home office and asked me if I had been drinking. . . . He asked probing questions like how many times we had sex, what I meant by sex ('oral on you, or on him, or actual sex.'). . . . Shame suffocated me. I wanted to disappear" ("See the Stories" 2015). Similarly, former missionary and now ex-Mormon John O'Connor created a parodic Twitter account, @LostMormon, through which he creates highly sexualized commentary about the church's president, Russell M. Nelson, as a form of social protest. Writes reporter Tarpley Hitt (2019), "The LDS Church has been sharply criticized in past years for its practice of 'bishop interviews,' where teenagers are required to be interviewed in detail by adult male faith leaders about their sexual experiences. 'It's OK to acknowledge the extreme sexual abuse by making fun of it,' O'Connor said. 'The church itself is a very sexual church. It's repressive. It creates a lot of pedophiles. It creates a lot of abusive men.'"

1. MORMONISM AS MEME AND ANALYTIC

1. There is a much smaller subset of representation that engages the female Mormon missionary. While more news accounts exist, fictional representation seems to be limited to the Mormon-produced film *The Errand of Angels* (2008) and the erotic novel *Sisters in Sin: A Forbidden Mormon Romance* (Abney 2017).

2. In April 2017, news accounts ran rampant with the tragedy of retired NFL tight end and practicing Mormon Todd Heap, who accidently killed his three-year-old daughter when he hit her with his truck. Similarly, in January 2017 one of my LDS friends from childhood lost his wife and youngest son in a house fire. Although I'm