Faithful Transgressions In The American West

Bush, Laura

Published by Utah State University Press

Bush, Laura. 
Faithful Transgressions In The American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women's Autobiographical Acts. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9304.

For additional information about this book 
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9304

For content related to this chapter 
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=201848
Introduction

**Autobiographical Constructions of the Mormon Self(s)**

Autobiography is creation myth written in the first person.

—Daniel B. Shea, Spiritual Autobiography in Early America

Mention the word “autobiography” to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the “Mormons,” and they will invariably offer you any number of unpublished autobiographical texts, many of which lie, mostly idle, in family members’ drawers, closets, attics, cedar chests, and safety deposit boxes. Other families, such as my own, self-publish books of life histories or diaries that include elaborate genealogies and photographs to accompany the narrative.¹ Soon after Mormonism’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith, officially established the church on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York, church members began producing a sizable number of daily journals, life histories, and family genealogies. In fact, the expanse of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latter-day Saint (LDS) life writing seems endless.

Early Latter-day Saints frequently wrote letters, diaries, journals, “personal histories,” and other autobiographical forms about their conversion to Mormonism, describing how God intervened in their lives as they struggled to build up His kingdom amid public derision, physical abuse, murders, and martyrdoms that would precipitate Mormons’ forced migration west. These early-nineteenth-century Mormon autobiographers conceived of their individual life stories as part of a larger history that would chronicle the establishment and development of their church from its beginnings in the East to its eventual expansion across the western American frontier—and beyond. Even today, Latter-day Saints generally relate the stories of their lives within a context of communal religious experience that situates Mormons’ autobiographical acts² squarely within a tradition of American spiritual autobiography inherited from the Puritans and Quakers.
Eugene England, a prominent Latter-day Saint author, literary critic, and promoter of Mormon literature, long recognized the value of Mormon self-narratives and personal essay writing. In the 1960s, for example, England founded Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, which has always relied heavily on the personal essay and its autobiographical elements. Other unofficial Mormon periodicals, such as Sunstone: Mormon Experience Scholarship, Issues and Art, Irreantum, or Exponent II (formerly The Women's Exponent) founded by Mormon women during the late 1800s, have also depended on Mormon life writing and personal essay for their content. A current stated objective of Exponent II, for instance, is “to promote sisterhood by providing a forum for Mormon women to share their life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and commitment.” Even The Ensign, the LDS Church’s official periodical for adult church members, uses personal narratives written by leaders and members to teach gospel principles.

In 1997, England published an important introduction to Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories, in which he traced the relatively brief history of Mormon short stories and literature (xi–xx). However, neither the overview he offers nor the collection itself distinguishes excerpts of Virginia Sorensen’s or Phyllis Barber’s autobiographical writing from any of the other Mormon “stories” that England’s edited collection makes available. While I agree with the implied point that Mormon autobiography fictionalizes an autobiographer’s life and that the writer thus makes her or his life into a “story,” I would resist subsuming Mormon life writing into the general category of Mormon fiction. Instead, my critical project seeks to encourage readers to explore, examine, and complicate Mormon autobiography as a distinct literary genre that has grown directly out of the history and doctrine of a very American religion. In fact, autobiographical writing has been the literary genre most often undertaken by Latter-day Saint writers of all persuasions. Furthermore, while professional writers Juanita Brooks, Terry Tempest Williams, and Phyllis Barber have all produced purposely crafted, engaging, and rhetorically astute Mormon women’s life narratives, not until now has a literary scholar inside or outside of Mormonism produced any sustained discussion that distinguishes the purposes and conventions of Mormon autobiography in general or of Mormon women’s autobiography in particular. My purpose here, then, is to encourage such a discussion, drawing on significant developments in subjectivity and inscription of life story published in recent decades.
Establishing the Tradition of Mormon Life Writing

Since he was fourteen years old, Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founding leader, claimed, both orally and in writing, to have experienced a series of events in which he was either visited by God or by God’s angels. In 1838, at thirty-three, Smith published his official autobiographical account of the very first of these heavenly visitations, explaining that the incident occurred in a secluded, wooded area near the family home in Palmyra, New York, in 1820. Latter-day Saints refer to this account as the story of the First Vision. It is based on one crucial, life-changing spiritual event that has informed the doctrine, rituals, faith, hope, belief, and dogma of every Latter-day Saint who was ever born into or converted to Mormonism. All Latter-day Saints have read, considered, or been highly influenced by this autobiographical fragment, usually from childhood, or, if converted, from the moment she or he was introduced to the church.\(^5\)

In his essay, “The Ineffable Made Effable: Rendering Joseph Smith’s First Vision as Literature,” LDS literary critic Richard H. Cracroft demonstrates how Smith’s personal narrative informs much Mormon fiction, poetry, and drama: “The First Vision, as Joseph dictated it in 1838 for The History of the Church and as canonized in 1880 as part of the Pearl of Great Price, is the mucilage of Mormonism, the unifying dynamic common to every Latter-day Saint” (96). While Cracroft’s essay establishes the importance of the story for LDS fiction, poetry, and drama writers, it overlooks the significance of the narrative’s influence on LDS autobiographers. I would add, then, that as a personal life narrative, the First Vision’s “unifying dynamic” applies with equal or even more force to subsequent Mormon life writing. I also argue that more can and should be done to distinguish the conventions of this genre, as well as to explore the Latter-day Saint ideology that encourages such distinct and prolific autobiographical acts.

Because Mormon doctrine has always strongly encouraged maintaining ties between ancestors and descendants through what it commonly refers to as “personal” or “family” histories, autobiographical writing produced by Latter-day Saints has continued to increase with church growth. The official membership of six in 1830 has grown to more than ten million\(^6\) and, along with it, the number of life narratives. Yet despite these burgeoning numbers, or perhaps because of their mass, the bulk of Mormon life writing remains mostly unpublished and unknown. Davis Bitton’s
1977 *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies* became the first annotated bibliographic record of thousands of published and unpublished life writings preserved up to 1973 in numerous libraries across the United States. More than twenty-five years later, however, the “Bitton Guide” (as it is known among LDS scholars) has not been updated and can serve only as a partial index to Mormons’ well-established autobiographical writing tradition. Furthermore, LDS historian Maureen Ursenbach Beecher points out, “It should not surprise us . . . that in Davis Bitton’s *Guide to Mormon Diaries*, a listing of over three thousand diaries and autobiographies of the American West, the ratio of women’s to men’s life writings in Utah repositories is about one in ten.” Beecher speculates that this “discrepancy” between the number of women’s and men’s texts is “created as much by our failure to value and preserve women’s life writings as by their failure to write” (*The Personal Writings* xv).

Within the patriarchal organization of the LDS Church, life writing has always been an ecclesiastically authorized venue for men as well as women to express their views on numerous topics, including the controversial issue of nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy.

Juanita Brooks, a historian of the western frontier and a Mormon autobiographer herself, spent much of her life searching for and preserving Mormon diaries and personal histories: “More and more I am surprised at the amount there is,” she writes in a 1936 letter to her colleague, Nels Anderson. “It seems that every person who joined the Mormons felt it his duty to keep a record. And some of them tell things which I am sure some of our good Leaders would prefer remain untold” (Peterson 104–5). As a self-proclaimed and lifelong “faithful Mormon” who always sought to tell the full story of her Mormon heritage, Brooks felt driven to stay ahead of church authorities who might try to keep certain details about church history hidden from public scrutiny. As she gathered diaries, Brooks admits that she “purposely avoided contacting any of the general church authorities because I was afraid they would try to get all the personal stuff I knew about into the church Historian’s Office before I could get to it” (Peterson 105). Once the church Historian’s Office had possession, Brooks knew any material that might be perceived damaging to the church’s image could be censored, or worse, kept from public view.

Despite the remarkable number of Mormon life narratives, a few “classic” male autobiographies, such as Smith’s First Vision, dominate. Another example, *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, first published in
1874 and written by an early male church leader, is well known and widely circulated among Latter-day Saints. Pratt’s conversion and the miracles that he recounts having occurred during his service as an early church authority have inspired Latter-day Saint readers for years, teaching them about Pratt’s challenges as the first Mormon missionary among Native Americans and about the physical persecution and imprisonments that an early church apostle overcame as he and other leaders exercised faith in God. In the preface to Pratt’s autobiography, Pratt’s son writes that his father’s life story “was so interwoven with that of the church, that many of the most interesting sketches of church history will be found therein” (3). In 1857, at fifty years old, Pratt was assassinated by antagonists of the church, similar to the 1844 martyrdom of its thirty-nine-year-old founder, Joseph Smith.

Although male texts such as Pratt’s and Smith’s dominate the canon of Mormon autobiography, a few female narratives have gained some fame. For example, LDS scholars have long admired A Mormon Mother by Annie Clark Tanner (1864–1940), first published in 1941 and written by a Latter-day Saint woman who practiced late-nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy. Although less well known inside and outside of Mormonism, Tanner’s text is notable for its lucid, carefully crafted prose and forthright treatment of Mormon polygamy from a woman’s point of view. Although other individually published autobiographies exist, much of early life writing by Mormon women has been published together in various compilations such as Edward Tullidge’s early 1877 history The Women of Mormondom or, more recently, two brief volumes compiled by Ogden Kraut, entitled Autobiographies of Mormon Pioneer Women. Each volume contains what Kraut refers to as “faith-promoting” stories of nineteenth-century pioneers. “In their own words,” he writes, “they vividly describe their extreme suffering, sorrow, sickness and sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But they also experienced amazing healings and gained strong testimonies of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Gospel he restored.” For Kraut, at least, the utilitarian religious purpose of these autobiographies is clear: “It is sincerely hoped that those who read about the lives of these noble women will acquire a greater faith in God and a deeper appreciation for their many temporal and spiritual blessings, as well as a more fervent desire for valiancy in living and defending the fullness of the Gospel” (3).

In the past, historians and sociologists have, to some extent, studied seriously the early life narratives of such writers. Literary critics in the
field of life writing, however, have barely noticed them. In fact, no sustained critical literary attention applied to the tradition of Mormon autobiography exists, although miscellaneous treatments of a few Mormon women’s autobiographies have appeared in recent years. An unpublished thesis at Arizona State University by Johanna Mary Wagner illustrates three different waves of Mormon feminism reflected in the autobiographies of Sarah Studevant Leavitt, Mary Ann Hafen, and Juanita Brooks. Wagner’s thesis provides a useful preliminary, but simplified view of Mormon women’s autobiographical writing as it reflects their “waxing and waning” authority within the LDS Church (6). One published article of literary criticism by a non-Mormon critic, Lynn Z. Bloom, analyzes Tanner’s autobiography from an outsider’s perspective, arguing that her writing exhibits a “double voice” quality: one, an “overt voice,” which is “integrative, reinforcing the values and behavior of her husband and of the frontier culture”; and two, a “covert voice,” which is “contradictory, subversive—and necessary to maintain her dignity, sanity, and sense of self” (138). A second published essay by Mormon insider Paula Kelly Harline argues similarly. According to Harline, Mormon women’s autobiographies and diaries reveal a desire to reinforce their religious beliefs, but in their “private writings,” she observes, “we find evidence of struggle beneath the surface” (126).

Both Bloom and Harline have identified important underlying conflicts that emerge when examining the autobiographical writing of many Mormon women. These two critics’ relatively brief essays, however, focus on frontier writing and only scratch the surface of what can and should be said about the diverse inscription strategies twentieth-century Mormon women have employed to construct their experiences in the American West. In addition, Bloom examines the autobiographies from an outsider’s perspective. My own perspective as a scholar from within the Mormon Church gives me a unique position from which to approach my subject as one who is equipped to understand the writing that results from women who seem, to a feminist critic like Bloom, “paradoxically devoted” to their religion (138). As a Mormon feminist scholar, my position balances understanding for these women’s faith with critical awareness of the ways each Mormon woman shapes her life experiences within particular historical, social, theological, and literary contexts.

The minimal literary attention to Mormon women’s autobiographies that Harline, Bloom, and Wagner offer should come as no surprise.
Marked by Georges Gusdorf’s seminal essay in 1956, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” and Estelle Jelinek’s 1980 book entitled Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism, the advent of literary studies in autobiography as a genre is relatively recent. While Gusdorf’s early essay focuses attention on “great” men’s autobiographies, Jelinek’s later work argues that critical attention should be paid to women’s autobiography as well. Only since the 1970s have literary theorists in autobiography and related critical literary movements—feminist, multiculturalist, modernist, and postmodernist—begun to make space for including life writing in the American literary canon alongside American novels, short stories, dramas, and poetry. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiographies written by Mormon men and women constitute a subgenre of personal narrative that captures one significant American experience: Mormons’ participation in the colonization of the American West. Like many other previously overlooked works of autobiography, life writing by Mormons deserves much more critical literary attention. My analysis initiates what I expect will invite a wider discussion on the topic.

To begin such a study, I map the broad terrain of Mormon autobiographical writing—its establishment and major conventions. By offering an abbreviated discussion about Mormon autobiography in general, I work to provide a framework for understanding the context within which these six twentieth-century Mormon women autobiographers write. The rhetorical and literary analysis that I develop in subsequent chapters describes how Mary Ann Hafen (Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860: A Woman’s Life on the Mormon Frontier, 1938), Annie Clark Tanner (A Mormon Mother, 1941), Juanita Brooks (Quicksand and Cactus: A Memoir of the Southern Mormon Frontier, 1982), Wynetta Willis Martin (Black Mormon Tells Her Story, 1972), Terry Tempest Williams (Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, 1991), and Phyllis Barber (How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir, 1992) repeat, revise, and amplify, to varying degrees, the Mormon autobiographical writing tradition within local and national contexts.

Five Conventions of Mormon Autobiography

Like other autobiographical writing traditions in the Americas—the slave narrative, captivity narrative, or testimonial, for example—a traditional Latter-day Saint autobiography follows particular patterns in purpose, form, and content. In Reading Autobiography: A Guide for
Interpreting Life Narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson demonstrate that storytelling is the means by which “we retrospectively make experience and convey a sense of it to others.” They and others in the field of autobiography demonstrate that “as we tell our stories discursive patterns guide, or compel, us to tell stories about ourselves in particular ways” (26). After she taught a course in autobiography at BYU, Linda Rugg, visiting professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University in 1996, offered a preliminary sketch of the particular ways that traditional Mormon life narratives are developed. As a nonmember professor, she was surprised to discover “striking similarities” and a kind of formulaic pattern among her LDS students’ life writing. Rugg observes,

Almost all of the writers focused on their religious experience as the central motif in their lives. Further, that religious experience was defined in much the same terms from student to student: childhood instruction in religion from parents and family, missionary experience (which often denoted a kind of conversion to true, personally held faith), and the foundation (or the planned foundation) of a family within the church. (15)

Although teaching at a private religious institution, Rugg had still been surprised to learn that her students were accustomed to journal writing and to bearing witness—that they wrote more in the tradition of St. Augustine than Nietzsche. She admits, “I did not know that they were in the habit of making confessions” (16). In Bitton’s Guide, he, too, recognizes patterns in Mormon life writing, describing the standard Mormon “missionary diary,” the largest single category of Mormon diaries his research team indexed. According to Bitton, the following characteristics are common in such diaries: mission call, preparation, and farewells; trip; companions; proselytizing members; contact with home; sightseeing; release; and return trip (viii–ix).

From my own reading and study of life writing by Latter-day Saints, five writing conventions have become apparent. First, Mormon autobiographers witness and testify of God and the “truth” of their personal and historical experience as Latter-day Saints. Second, they frequently explain various Mormon doctrines and establish their authority to do so. Third, they work to document Mormons’ collective history and cultural heritage. Fourth, to one degree or another, they often feel compelled to defend their religion or membership in the church. And fifth, they frequently write their life stories for both member and nonmember readers, anticipating the possibility of reaching a broad audience inside and outside their Mormon community.
To begin, the purpose, content, and style of conventional Latter-day Saint life writing fits well within a long tradition of spiritual autobiography begun during the fourth century with *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, in which St. Augustine relates how he was constantly searching for God and truth. Traditional Mormon life narratives are also written as a witness of God's existence and as a testimony of His working directly in an individual life through what believing Mormon autobiographers refer to as “the hand of the Lord,” “spiritual experiences,” “personal revelations,” or “small miracles.” Latter-day Saints’ emphasis on making personal record of their spiritual experiences echoes aspects of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Quaker diary writing and Puritan spiritual narratives, which Daniel Shea describes in his book, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. Despite the complex nature of Puritan and Quaker writing, Shea grants that the “explicit arguments of early spiritual narratives” are “highly conventional.” He adds, “A Puritan sought to assemble the evidence for divine favoritism toward him, and many Quaker journals recount the protracted search of the narrator for Truth, which he inevitably finds in the doctrines of the Society of Friends” (xxv). Such standard conventions, in which an autobiographer’s text demonstrates the discovery or establishment of truth and God’s favored blessings in her or his life, clearly reappear in the tradition of Mormon personal histories. The foremost example of Mormon life writing, Smith’s First Vision, perfectly illustrates an instance of a man writing about how God intervened in and blessed his life after he sought divine help through fervent prayer.

The gravity of witnessing in writing to such interactions with God means that traditionally, Mormon autobiographers pay close attention to “truth” and to “accurate” history. They often begin their narratives with recitals of their precise ancestry and exact place of birth, carefully researching and marking the progression of the story of their lives until ending the story with a formal testament of faith in God and the restoration of the gospel through Smith. Mormon autobiographers’ meticulous attention to testifying of God and to producing accurate historical details—exact places and dates of births, marriages, missions, deaths, or other life-changing events—follows biblical and Book of Mormon writing traditions. Scriptural texts are a written record of people’s interactions with God and long passages of scripture may be devoted to a character’s lineage. For Hebrews and Latter-day Saints, where people come from, when they lived, and who their ancestors or descendants were matter. Understanding Mormon theology such as this is key to understanding
the focus and language of Mormon life writing. For Mormons, lineage is connected to the belief in a pre- and a postmortal life, in which extended family members are “sealed” to one another through priesthood ordinances performed in temples, which include a marriage ceremony between a woman and man “for time and all eternity.” When reading their autobiographies, the marriage ceremony itself should be understood as only one aspect of a temple “sealing.” Church members making written records of that sealing participate in a ritual act that is nearly as vital as the sealing itself.

Besides witnessing and testifying of God at work in their life, Mormon autobiographers use a mixture of religious and plain language to offer various explanations about basic gospel principles, especially as the person reflects on how she or he has learned, understood, lived, and practiced, or not practiced them in life. To illustrate, three foundational doctrines set forth in Smith’s First Vision narrative include first, a belief in an embodied God, the Father, who is separate from an equally embodied God, the Son, or Jesus Christ; second, an insistence on the existence of ultimate “truths” that were “restored” to the earth through modern-day prophecy; and third, a claim to singular “authority” from God to act or speak in His name because of the otherworldly events Smith experienced in Palmyra, New York.

Issues of authority pervade Mormon autobiography and become especially challenging for Mormon women writers. Because Latter-day Saints insist on a “restoration” of Christ’s primitive doctrines—as opposed to Protestants’ belief in a “reformation” of doctrines and practice or Catholics’ belief in a never ending link to the original source—a frequent purpose of Mormon history writing, even in autobiographies, is to argue for this “restoration” through Smith. In general, the LDS Church itself works through institutional record keeping and history writing to verify its authority to act in God’s name. Historians James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard explain that, unlike their neighbors in New England who believed in a “revivalistic pluralism” where people could achieve salvation as long as they joined any church, Latter-day Saints preached that saving ordinances must be performed with authority given by Jesus Christ Himself and that theirs was “the only church with direct authority to baptize and administer other ordinances in the name of Christ” (55). Like the church itself, individual members write in ways that are intended to validate their personal authority. Nearly all male members of the church are ordained “deacons” in the priesthood at
twelve years old, an important rite of passage that occurs for adult male converts after they are baptized. A young man progressively attains more authority and status as he moves up from “deacon” to “teacher” to “priest” to “elder” (usually when he begins serving a mission at twenty-one) and finally to “high priest.” A male member of the church often keeps a written record of his priesthood line of authority, tracing his ordination through the priesthood holder who ordained him and back through each successive man’s ordination until he reaches Jesus Christ Himself. This record and any spiritual experiences he may have as he exercises that priesthood authority may be further developed in the personal stories he recounts about his life.

Not until a revelation received by then church president Spencer W. Kimball in 1978, however, were all LDS men even able to be ordained to the priesthood. Until 1978, men of African descent could be baptized members but could not hold a priesthood office. All women in the LDS Church continue to be excluded from such privileged authority. Until the late twentieth century, the highest ecclesiastical officers of the church (referred to by twentieth-century church members as “general authorities”) were mostly white American males. These men’s control of general policy making continues today, although an expanding male leadership in the growing population of the LDS Church outside the United States, especially in Latin America and Asia, has begun to exert modest influence on church policies and practice. Such a single-minded, authority-based doctrine has always influenced the purpose and shape of Latter-day Saints’ life writing.

It should not be surprising that issues of authority become paramount to Mormon women writers, including the six autobiographers in this study. When inscribing particular aspects of their lives and personal views, all six authors anticipate that their authority will be challenged. Because they are unordained women, they can only hope (perhaps futilely) to establish their elusive right to explain, defend, and critique Mormon doctrines or practices, including, for example, those on the Godhead, polygamy, patriarchy, priesthood, and sexual expression. They must establish themselves not only as credible authors but even, sometimes, as credible Mormons. Credibility as an author and as a “faithful” Mormon becomes most significant, of course, when these women writers’ views differ from those expressed by the official male leaders of the church.

In addition to testifying of God’s active presence in their lives, laying out potentially controversial Mormon doctrine, and working to establish
their authority to speak, a third convention of Mormon autobiography is its collective cultural nature, which also clearly parallels the Puritans and Quakers. “[I]t is well to be reminded by recent psychological-historical studies of the Puritans,” says Shea, “how thoroughly communal was the autobiographical act among them. And the thesis must apply as well to the Quakers, for whom the condition either of silence or of speech, referred to the authority of the Inner Light, was in an important sense authorized by the communal Meeting” (xiv). In reality, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, “any acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective” because “[m]emory is a means of ‘passing on,’ of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, in order to activate its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects” (Reading 20–21). Mormons’ particular tradition of written personal histories, however, takes communal living, authorship, and remembering into the afterlife, a realm beyond that of their religious American forebears. Personal histories written by Mormons demonstrate that for the here and hereafter each life within a congregation is intertwined with other members’ lives.

As an expression of their communal commitments, Mormons have theologically and culturally focused on building “Zion,” a term that signifies their intent to create a community of people who exist in harmony with each other because the members are “of one heart and one mind,” working toward common religious goals. Historically, Mormon autobiographers have written to record their own supposedly individual experience but also to make a record of their life within a distinct cultural experience in the United States. They assume that their individual narratives will reflect on their family and religious community for generations to come. This focus on unity explains how and why Mormon personal histories are tied to Latter-day Saints’ fundamental commitment to genealogy and temple work, two religious obligations that they believe bring themselves and their family members salvation or “exaltation” with God after mortality—the ultimate communal experience. According to Latter-day Saints’ interpretation of the Bible and other LDS scripture (the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price), LDS members believe that God requires them to identify and document their ancestors so that family members can be united eternally after death. Not only do Mormons write in their autobiographies about anticipated reunions in heaven, but they also frequently write about angels in heaven keeping record of their
lives and the temple ordinances they perform on their own or their ancestors’ behalf. Modern-day Mormons trace their family ancestry back at least four generations and more, if possible.

The communal nature of Mormon autobiography also explains why nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Mormon autobiographers viewed their writing as documenting the injustices that the original Latter-day Saints suffered because of their unusual religious beliefs and practices. By documenting their life experience through written accounts that give witness to their suffering and triumph, early Mormon autobiography parallels the slave narrative and testimonial writing traditions in the Americas. In all three genres, writers recount how they have overcome mental suffering, physical abuse, displacement, and even threat of death, inflicted by those who persecute them. One key difference between the abuse early Mormons documented and those documented in slave narratives or testimonials, however, is that much of the suffering that Mormon autobiographers have reported resulted not from their racial identity, which is beyond anyone’s ability to choose, but from the conscious choice they made to join a religion that provoked other Americans’ religious intolerance.

Many LDS autobiographers demonstrate a keen awareness of outsiders’ critical gaze toward them as individuals and as a group. Since the LDS Church’s distressed beginnings, Latter-day Saints have always been taught to be “good examples” so that they could presumably disprove negative stereotypes and “represent” the church well or, at least, protect themselves from ridicule and harm. This imperative to demonstrate mostly the good about their lives and to correct outsiders’ misperceptions about them and their religious community leads to the fourth convention in Mormon autobiography: their need to defend the church and present themselves and their community members in a positive manner.

Like the Puritans who fled to the American continent for religious freedom and like other forced migrations of demeaned groups within the United States or surrounding territories, nineteenth-century Mormons were pushed from New York into Ohio, Illinois, then Missouri, and finally, all the way to the Rocky Mountains of the Great Basin Valley before they discovered their own place of refuge from physical assaults and direct scorn. During these forced “removals,” Latter-day Saints were constantly explaining and defending their practice of polygamy, their publication and distribution of the Book of Mormon, and their modern-day prophets, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, both of whom married mul-
tiple women and claimed to have experienced heavenly visitations. In order to protect themselves from innumerable antagonists, Latter-day Saints became what has often been viewed as a clannish, defensive group of people, who threatened other citizens with their close-knit religious communities and their attendant power to vote. Such a controversial and volatile history informs the shape and content of Mormons’ autobiographical acts, even today.

Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Mormon women autobiographers, such as Hafen and Tanner, provide detailed explanations about the doctrine and history of polygamy, as well as their reasons for entering into such marriages, knowing the stereotypical beliefs outsiders generally held about plural wives. They use personal experience, Mormon or non-Mormon histories, scripture, and appeals to male authority figures to defend their positions or to critique those who oppose them, while also constructing their personal and religious history in the most positive manner possible. These implicit or explicit defenses of their faith are usually aimed at critics of Mormonism and originate from Mormons’ troubled past of being viewed as “peculiar” people who lived outside the larger community’s social or religious norms.

Traditionally, the purpose of Mormon life writing has been to demonstrate God’s dealings in their lives, to document the trials and persecution they have experienced, and to defend their Mormon faith with truth telling, working to inspire their family, Mormon community, and outsiders to seek God in ways similar to their own.

A final convention that grows out of Mormon doctrine and history is these autobiographers’ frequent efforts to write the story of their lives for both member and nonmember audiences. Latter-day Saints of all ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds have frequently fashioned their life stories with three distinct audiences in mind: the autobiographer’s posterity, the larger Mormon community (insiders), and finally, the often critical—or at least curious—non-Mormon, reading public (outsiders). To illustrate, from the preface of Pratt’s autobiography, his son writes, “It affords me great pleasure to present the Autobiography of the late Author to his relatives, his numerous friends, and to the general reader.” A combination of formal and familiar language in his autobiography gives further evidence of the audiences that Pratt and his family anticipate. Latter-day Saint autobiographers have generally written with all three audiences in mind in order to promote their faith, proselyte new members, document a personal history that will testify to
the truth (veracity and credibility) of the autobiographer’s experience, and even sometimes talk back to critics through the story of their lives.

Faithfully Transgressing Conventions

In the title of my work, I use the oxymoron “faithful transgressions” to characterize a quality manifested in these six twentieth-century Mormon women writers’ life narratives. As an adjective, “faithful” means “strict allegiance to some idea, cause, duty, or set of beliefs.” As a noun, “the faithful” refers to “loyal followers, believers, or church members in good standing.” I use the term “faithful” in both ways and for two reasons. First, “faithful” reflects these women writers’ continuing connection, to one degree or another, to their Mormon religious beliefs or to their Mormon family history and culture. None of these six authors wrote her life story intending to vilify or ridicule the Mormon Church, although such Mormon women’s autobiographies have existed in the past and to the present: Fanny Stenhouse’s Tell It All (1874), Ann Eliza Young’s Wife Number 19; Or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism (1875), and Deborah Laake’s Secret Ceremonies: A Mormon Woman’s Intimate Diary of Marriage and Beyond (1993). Rather than analyze the life stories and rhetoric of authors who no longer consider themselves Mormons and whose writing is generally marked by disdain for their former religious community, I have chosen, instead, to focus my work on the life writing of Mormon women writers whose continued affiliation with the LDS Church requires them to negotiate many personal, intellectual, religious, and writing challenges that thoroughly disenchanted members like Stenhouse, Young, and Laake generally abandon. As narratives about Mormon experience, the life writing by self-proclaimed rebels (considered “apostates” by the church) should well be considered part of the tradition of Mormon autobiography; however, because this writing tends to be narrowly focused on exposing, undermining, and even ridiculing the church and its leaders, its purpose and goals differ markedly from the purpose and goals of most Mormon women’s life narratives. Therefore, I have chosen to engage such texts only tangentially.

A second reason that I use the term “faithful” to describe the six life narratives examined in this study is to describe as a literary critic how the form and content of the six books, also to varying degrees, adhere to the writing conventions of Mormon life narratives. In other words, I
demonstrate how the six texts remain “faithful” or “true to an original or a standard,” which I posit is the original Mormon autobiography—Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Now canonized in Latter-day Saint scripture, Smith’s influential first-person narration about his initial encounter with God has set a significant standard for many “faithful” Mormon autobiographies. In fact, his brief personal narrative has become Latter-day Saints’ model of a quest for and subsequent discovery of God, who, Smith wrote, could forgive sin and provide confused mortal beings access to the “true” gospel of Jesus Christ.16

In addition to these women writers’ faithfulness to their Mormon cultural heritage and its autobiographical writing conventions, however, are their revisions to that tradition—what I call their “transgressions” in content or form. Derived from the Latin trans, meaning “across,” and gradi, meaning “to step,” the term transgression describes an act that goes “beyond a limit or boundary.” Transgression may also be defined as “a sin” or an act that “violates some law.” Within the context of my analysis, I use the term transgression more to mean “boundary crossing” than “sin.” From an orthodox perspective, however, many of these writers’ “transgressions” could be viewed as sinful or potentially damaging acts, both to themselves and to their Mormon community. What I identify as a “faithful transgression” in these women’s life narratives occurs when a writer’s text demonstrates direct or indirect violation of a law or doctrine, either through the action of a particular story that the autobiographer recounts or through the tenor and substance of the narrative itself. I focus on the traditional and the transgressive moments because they best reveal the balancing act these women writers must perform in order to simultaneously affirm and critique their Mormon experience.

In his biography of Juanita Brooks, Levi Peterson explains that the modern church has demonstrated “little tolerance for ideas not sanctioned by the central leadership.” He speculates that this “extraordinary” need for conformity is due to Mormons’ history of “external persecution and internal divisiveness in frontier times.” Such unquestioning unanimity is always potentially damaging to the health of any organization. “Growing ever more centralized,” writes Peterson, “the modern church notably lacks a mechanism for eliciting and capitalizing upon change from the rank-and-file membership” (4). Church leaders and devout members may disagree with the view that few opportunities or “mechanisms” for change exist; however, these same Mormons could not deny that submission and obedience to church leaders’ authority is central to
their belief. Fortunately, Mormon congregations are not without what Peterson calls their “inside dissenters,” which he defines as “those loyal members who of their own initiative call for change and improvement.” I agree with Peterson that insider dissent and other such modes of change are “slow, uncertain, and fraught with hazard for the reformers,” especially for those who commit their ideas to writing (4). My own work aims to focus analysis on the moments in these six autobiographical acts when each author works through her narrative—whether explicitly or implicitly, whether directly or indirectly—to call for change in policy, practice, or perspective. My interest includes explicating those ways in which she has shaped or selected the stories of her life to illustrate and, thus, to invite, encourage, and affirm such change.

Mormons are most familiar with the term transgression used to mean “boundary crossing” when discussing Adam and Eve’s “transgression” in the Garden of Eden. According to LDS doctrine, it was necessary for Eve to first “transgress” by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil despite the fact that God had forbidden it, since God Himself had also given the married couple, Eve and Adam, another compelling commandment to multiply and replenish the earth—a law impossible for the couple to obey in their innocent state. Mormon theology teaches that Eve’s dilemma over these conflicting laws required her to make a difficult choice: remain safe and live childlike and childless, untested, in the Garden of Eden forever or “fall” by partaking of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. This act would force Eve and Adam out of the Garden but would make parenthood and mortality possible. From an LDS perspective, Eve’s courageous decision to “transgress” one law to fulfill another law created a way for her and Adam to live a new life together, separated from God’s direct presence, but able to raise a family of their own and to be saved and exalted through Christ’s atonement. This physical separation from God was necessary for the partners to learn and grow by exercising faith, as they confronted additional complex choices that would require them and their posterity to take personal risks, enabling them to develop intellectual and spiritual maturity.17

In my literary analysis of these six autobiographical texts, I explore “faithful transgressions” similar to Eve’s in the sense of crossing boundaries that have been set out by religious authorities. Transgressive writing occurs when a Mormon woman writer trusts her individual conscience and expresses ideas or beliefs that resonate within her as being right and true but which she knows implicitly or explicitly violate rules
of Mormon doctrine or cultural norms within her faith community. By examining each autobiographer’s central themes, evidence, audiences, and rhetorical style or ethos, I identify and explicate moments in the texts—some brief and others more extended—where these writers commit themselves to value and valorize their own personal experience and position over official religious authority.

In addition to analyzing such faithful transgressions, I examine literary aspects of each writer’s life story by noting key metaphors and formal elements (plot, theme, characters, climaxes, resolutions) that she uses to illustrate her life and to narrate her experience. As a feminist literary critic, I have been further interested in determining how the six writers’ status as women in a Victorian-minded religion with a male governing body has affected the way they construct their rhetorical and literary position in Mormon and non-Mormon society. I have paid particular attention, for instance, to how they write about being required to perform according to predetermined gender roles and how the requirement of, or resistance to, those gender performances may or may not influence the form and content of their autobiographical acts.

Although I claim Joseph Smith, a man, is the originator of the Mormon autobiographical tradition with the First Vision, Smith’s contributions cannot simply be labeled “male,” nor did his rhetorical and autobiographical style originate from only male-authored sources. The writing patterns he uses, in fact, are influenced by a long-standing tradition of conversion and spiritual autobiography that is quite complex and that has consisted of both male and female originators—St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and a variety of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Puritans and Quakers. Furthermore, while the men and women who have written Mormon life narratives certainly looked to Smith’s First Vision as one model for their own autobiographical writing, their own personal backgrounds—as immigrants, pioneers, and minority church members, for instance—and their own place in United States as well as Mormon history have further influenced the shape of their life writing.

A Mormon woman’s gender, therefore, is not the only factor that influences the writing strategies she uses to construct her identity in an autobiography. Gender remains, nevertheless, one major consideration that has guided the shape of this critical study and my selection of texts. Gender matters, but gender is not all, and sex-gender issues are, themselves, complex. While I focus on the particularities of six Mormon
women’s published texts, I also explicate and account for the general tradition of Mormon autobiography common to many male and female Latter-day Saints who write their life narratives. I am presently most interested in the writing strategies that Mormon women autobiographers have used to construct their life stories because of Mormon women’s institutionally subordinate position within the LDS Church and because of the relatively rigid gender roles Mormon women have been trained to take up as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers in a patriarchal religious tradition. These female roles, informed by nineteenth-century British and American Victorianism, have often dictated nineteenth-, twentieth-, and now twenty-first-century LDS women’s attitudes, behavior, and identity. As the six twentieth-century Mormon women writers in this project reflect on their life experiences, their autobiographical writing often reveals the degrees to which they are faithful to or cross over the boundaries of these traditional female roles.

Ultimately, my focus on Mormon women’s life narratives does not intend to argue for sameness among Mormon women authors. On the contrary, I insist on the diversity and variety of twentieth-century Mormon women’s experience, concurring with postmodern feminists that simply assuming an unproblematized “woman,” distinct and absolutely separate from the category of “man,” or simply assuming an unproblematized Mormon woman, for that matter, is reductive and misleading. I do not wish to oversimplify the complexity of Mormon women’s lives or of their life writing. Nevertheless, at this historical moment, I believe viewing Mormon women writers as a separate subgroup within the Mormon Church is necessary, not only because of the institutionalized gender separation in practice, but because Mormon women writers themselves experience their gender as an important distinguishing characteristic throughout their lived experiences. Such gender distinctions inevitably become integral to their life writing.

This beginning search for what constitutes a Mormon woman’s tradition of autobiography is what my larger literary project is all about. Many of the critical observations I make about these six particular Mormon women’s autobiographies will not be true for all Mormon women’s autobiographies or for all Mormon women. Furthermore, any distinctions between male and female Mormon autobiographers may prove, ultimately, to be slight. Understanding faithful transgressions in men’s autobiographies is also important. Nevertheless, gender in the Mormon Church remains a key characteristic used to distinguish among...
people, and the consequences of those distinctions are readily apparent in Mormon women’s texts. Ever since early church history, separate Sunday meetings have been held for men (Priesthood Meeting) and women (Relief Society Meeting); separate duties have been promoted within the home; and explicit messages about what constitutes “male” and “female” identity have been taught. These gender distinctions originate in a Victorian ideology that continues to be affirmed and promoted today through official church documents such as “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” widely disseminated by the General Presidency and Twelve Apostles beginning in 1995 to reenforce Latter-day Saints’ views about the family and gender (see appendix D). Since such gender distinctions pervade LDS doctrine and cultural practices, I demonstrate that these Mormon women autobiographers clearly wrestle with gender expectations, simultaneously embracing and needing to adjust to their place as “girls,” “daughters,” “ladies,” “women,” “wives,” and “mothers.” I further argue that Mormon women’s conformity or resistance to these religious and cultural gender performances occupies a good deal of textual space in their life writing and significantly influences the shape of their autobiographical acts.

The status, power, and authority of women in the LDS Church are not easy to explain, especially to outsiders, who have generally viewed Mormon women as submissive, overburdened, and unthinking. The reality of Mormon women’s lives—past and present—and the variety of Mormon women’s access to official or unofficial power have been more complicated than such stereotypes can convey. Despite the complex and significant power of women within the Mormon Church, however, their clout and authority can never be equal to men’s. Kate Millett’s classic Sexual Politics accurately describes the unequal relations between men and women in the church: “Nearly every powerful circle in contemporary patriarchy [i.e., Mormonism] is a men’s group. . . . Women’s groups are typically auxiliary in character, imitative of men’s efforts and methods on a generally trivial or ephemeral plane. They rarely operate without recourse to male authority . . .” (48). To be fair, the service, homemaking, and personal “enrichment” activities that female members engage in through Relief Society have been variously viewed by outsiders and insiders to the church as sometimes trivial and other times significant; in either case, auxiliary organizations within Mormonism have always been dependent on male leaders for their ultimate authority.

To one degree or another, all six Mormon women autobiographers have had to deal with such issues of power and authority to speak about
their own spiritual experiences and about their own struggles and successes within their Mormon families, community, and the public at large. These autobiographers challenge and revise the boundaries of Mormon identity writing in various ways. However, none of the women writers speaks with the same ecclesiastical authority on doctrinal issues as do such Mormon male notables as Smith or Pratt—and these women writers know it. The autobiographies of Tanner and Williams manifest direct frustration, even resentment, concerning their position as women within the LDS Church. The autobiographies of Hafen, Martin, Brooks, and Barber manifest such struggles less directly. Yet all six women writers demonstrate rhetorical and literary strategies that mean to authorize and legitimate their lived experience and opinions. Their stories demonstrate that they all feel a stake in their verifiable existence and attempt to tell the “truth” about their lives.

My approach to analyzing these six autobiographical acts in upcoming chapters rests on my view that these texts are not merely historical or sociological artifacts. Instead, I provide evidence to demonstrate that they are literary art and written rhetoric. Specifically, in the 1930s and 1940s, Tanner and Hafen write to prove to a Mormon and non-Mormon audience, first, that they made legitimate life choices to become nineteenth-century polygamous wives and, second, that they also have good reasons both to defend and to criticize the controversial marriage practice. In effect, then, these two chapters provide the historical background for understanding the doctrinal and cultural history of Mormonism, as well as its polygamous past. In the 1970s, Martin, a black Mormon woman writer, is challenged to establish credibility with her Mormon and non-Mormon audience as she negotiates her autobiographical way through Mormons’ historically racist practice of denying men of African descent the right to hold the priesthood and all black members the right to participate in ordinances available only in the temple. Similar to defenses of the church against charges of sexism, Martin’s purpose is to defend the church against accusations of racism. In fact, by describing the experiences she had before, during, and after her conversion to the Mormon Church, she views her writing as a remedy for race and religious prejudice. The problematic supplementary material accompanying her text has much to say about the historically subordinated position of nonwhite members in the Mormon Church.

Juanita Brooks’s autobiography provides a bridge from the first to the last half of the twentieth century. As a descendant of polygamists, she understands much about Tanner and her grandmother Hafen’s experience
in polygamy, not only from her own personal upbringing, but also from her academic study of the subject. In addition, the stories she tells about how her Mormon community regards “Indians” and people of other races points towards her concern about and attention to race issues that Martin takes up directly as a Black Mormon woman. Furthermore, Brooks’s expressed interest in caring for living creatures and the environment in the 1940s and 1950s foreshadows Terry Tempest Williams’s ecofeminist activism in the 1990s. Most clearly, though, Brooks’s overarching theme about longing for the “untravell’d wide world” is repeated with a difference in Phyllis Barber’s late-twentieth-century autobiography. Appropriately enough, both Brooks and Barber write from their Mormon experience growing up in Nevada. Both of them strain against years of enculturation toward Mormon ideals that would keep them safely at home, away from outside influences that their Mormon community constructs as particularly threatening to girls—a familiar strategy for regulating women’s desire for adventure, freedom, and opportunities to explore beyond motherhood.

In the late twentieth century, Williams addresses the issue of women’s obedience to a Mormon male hierarchy, and Barber dares to broach the topic of Mormon female sexual expression with all its attendant strictures and taboos inside a religiously-based value system that considers sex private, to be expressed only between a man and a woman, and then only after they are married.

Defining Autobiography and Constructing Identity

Literary scholars working in the field of autobiography studies have spent nearly half a century exploring issues that emerge from their repeated attempts to define “autobiography.” Summarizing the general nature of the discussions in the 1970s and 1980s, James Olney, a leading autobiography theorist, writes, “[E]veryone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement” (Autobiography 7). Revisiting these issues again in more recent work, he admits,

Although I have in the past written frequently about autobiography as a literary genre, I have never been very comfortable doing it, primarily because I believe that if one is to speak relevantly of a genre one has first of all to define it, and I have never met a definition of autobiography that I could really like. (Memory xv)\textsuperscript{20}
As discussion about the nature and complexity of autobiography continues into the twenty-first century, Olney adopts the term “periautography” or “writing about or around the self” in an effort to explore rather than to define the kind of writing he and scholars of autobiography address (Memory xvi).

One key issue that arises in literary debates concerning autobiography centers on the question of which texts should make up the genre. The term itself consists of three root words with Greek origins: auto (“self”), bio (“life”), and graphy (“writing”). Thus, “writing about one’s life” occurs in letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and oral histories—not just in formally published texts that look back on a “whole” life. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, major theorists in the field of women’s autobiography, there also remains an “enduring debate” about which of the various forms of life writing to include under the heading “autobiography.” In other words, various cases have been made for “how narrowly or broadly to construct the field of autobiographical texts” (Women 11). Debates such as these occur often because the aesthetic merit and, thus, the literary value of various forms of autobiographical writing come into question. Given the breadth of life writing, scholars ask, which texts are “worthy” of study? These debates have been especially significant to feminist literary scholars because many forms of life writing by women have historically been undervalued or ignored.

The same neglect is true for the canon of Mormon autobiographical writing, whether written by women or men. In addition to disputing which texts belong to the category called “autobiography” and which of those texts warrant literary analysis, scholars of autobiography have also reflected on whether fiction, poetry, and drama should also be considered autobiography. If any literary genre could be shown to manifest qualities considered “autobiographical,” then autobiography might not be a “minor” genre at all but could potentially describe all literature. About such broad-minded positions, Paul de Man cautions, “just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical we should say that by the same token, none of them is or can be” (922). De Man’s assertion that no text actually “is or can be” autobiography points toward what may be one of the most important issues of all when defining the genre—the fictional nature of any autobiographical act.

Literary scholars repeatedly demonstrate that by necessity, autobiography is imaginative writing just like any other “literary” production. No one can actually inscribe the totality of her lived experience. Human
memory does not allow an autobiographer to recall all life events, or any one event for that matter, with absolute accuracy. "Memory, at least in part, is an adaptive function," explains Olney. It has "a self-adjusting and self-defining plasticity about it, turning back to the past so as to position itself and us for what is to be dealt with in the future: it adapts continuously to changing circumstances, external and internal, to constitute the self as it is at any given instant" (Memory 343). Shari Benstock captures the elusive nature of autobiographical acts when she explains that writers assume they can understand who they are and then share that self-knowledge with others; nevertheless, when they undertake the task of explaining their identity, self-invention must prevail. "Autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction" (11). In short, depending on the autobiographer’s perspective or purposes at the time of writing, details are selected, deselected, forgotten, rearranged, blurred, emphasized, or de-emphasized. “[B]y the very act of seeking,” explains Olney, a human being “creates” the “order that he would have” (Metaphors 4). Inevitably and by necessity, an autobiographer must “construct” or “shape” the story of her life in an attempt to interpret and compartmentalize a vast array of experiences, frequently needing to reimagine, rearrange, or manufacture details that have been forgotten or, for that matter, might never have been known.

Even if memory, time, and space did allow for an autobiographer’s complete breadth and utter accuracy, no person would want to know everything another person ever did or said in life.23 Whether conscious of it or not, an audience expects an autobiographer to fictionalize and thus to entertain and control the way readers view the autobiographer/narrator/protagonist, as well as the story she tells about her life. “Autobiographical narratives,” writes Jill Ker Conway, “are fictions in the sense that the narrator imposes her or his order on the ebb and flow of experience and gives us a false sense of certainty and finality about causation in life” (vii). Describing autobiography as one of many different literary “acts,” Bruss adds that “[a]ll reading (or writing) involves us in choice: we choose to pursue a style or a subject matter, to struggle with or against a design” (4). Likewise, these choices lead to “an interpretation of life that invests the past and the ‘self’ with coherence and meaning that may not have been evident before the act of writing itself” (Smith, “Woman’s Story” 45–46). Thus, an audience’s assumption about getting the “complete truth” in an autobiography is a fiction
in itself. A life story is many times removed from reality: it is the creation of an illusion of a “whole” and verifiable life. Given these complexities, attempting to define the term “autobiography” and, thereby, to define the genre itself is impractical. Nevertheless, endeavoring to define uncovers intriguing aspects of imagination, creativity, memory, characterization, plotting, and storytelling inherent to the genre.

Because autobiographical writing is inescapably interpretable, analytical, and reflective, readers often receive a clearer picture of a writer’s identity as she exists within the present, rather than as she tries doggedly to reconstruct the picture of herself as she was in the past. Writing about one’s past self requires a person to split her “self” from a present “authoring self” and to create a “textual self,” who is both narrator and protagonist of her own story. Smith and Watson refer to this phenomenon as the various “I’s” of an autobiographical text, namely, the “narrating, the narrated, and the ideological I” (Reading 63). “The fictions of the autobiographer,” explains Smith, “are always mediated by a historic identity with specific intentions, if not pretensions, of interpreting the meaning of her lived experience.” The “I” of autobiography is a “fictive persona,” and a writer may “create several, sometimes competing stories about or versions of herself as her subjectivity is displaced by one or multiple textual representations” (“Woman’s Story” 46–47). For Olney, the autobiographer’s search for that “self,” or for what postmodernists refer to as the “selves,” is a “process rather than a settled state of being” (Metaphors 6).

Gertrude Stein, a modernist who prefigures postmodernist ideas, offers a compelling demonstration of the real but generally unrecognized complexity of this elusive genre through her own autobiographical and theoretical writing. Her work explores fragmented past, present, textual, and actual selves by depicting her “selves” existing in a continuous and recurring present. Ironically, she never presumes to write her own autobiography but, instead, writes about herself by adopting the voice of her longtime partner in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Four years later, she further problematizes the act of writing autobiography and selfhood in Everybody’s Autobiography. One passage in particular captures the essential problem of life writing as she contemplates the matter of identity and its unrepresentability:

And identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so well
so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself. (68)

Stein’s matter-of-fact aphorism that “You are of course never yourself” encapsulates the illusory nature of both actual and textual selfhood. In brief, modern and postmodern notions of conflicting and indeterminate identities differ markedly from an earlier Enlightenment ideal in which, it was assumed, an autobiographer could manifest a supposedly unique “individual” self—an apparently faulty assumption upon which the majority of Mormon autobiographers base their life writing.

When postmodern theorist Roland Barthes “announces” the “birth” of the reader and the “death” of the author, he adds to these literary complexities by subverting any illusions an autobiographer might try to sustain about the control she has over the meaning of her writing or, for that matter, her identity (or identities). Barthes argues, instead, that no matter how “sincerely” autobiographer/authors (Mormon or otherwise) might try to capture their lives in writing—and no matter how a modernist such as Stein might “play” with her own, Alice B. Toklas’s, or “Everybody” else’s identities—the meaning of writing does not occur, as formerly thought, within the mind of the author but, instead, within the mind of the reader: “[T]he reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination” (54). Thus, in modern and postmodern theories of authorship, the author/autobiographer has little to no “control” over the meaning of her work. The text itself is always unstable and cannot be fixed to a single meaning that would reflect an author’s “true” intent, no matter how much an author or autobiographer would wish it to be so.

Obviously, authors and theorists such as Barthes and Stein experiment with and challenge the boundaries and the “author-ity” of written texts. They play with and delight in the slippage, tensions, contradictions, and deconstruction always occurring, despite many authors’ attempts to fix their life experiences in writing. In contrast, the bulk of Mormon writers generally take a more straightforward approach to autobiography. Writing within the tradition of their religious culture, they remain adamant about seeking after and representing “truth,” a key tenet of their Mormon world view. No matter how naive it may seem,
their most frequent desire is to construct accurate, well-documented accounts of their lives and religious experience. Most traditional Mormon autobiographers assume they can at least select the most significant events that shape their life experience, believing they can make a “whole” life story that will become valuable to their posterity, the Mormon community, and the general reading public.

Given many Latter-day Saint writers’ sincerity, modern and postmodern explorations of identity and the autobiographical act may not be inclined to take seriously the local and particular nature of Mormon autobiographical writing. In fact, contemporary theorists might discount its religious and truth-telling premises altogether. Likewise, the male-centered, totalizing tradition of Mormonism might find postmodern theorizing about autobiography irrelevant, contradictory, and threatening; it might be, thus, inclined to discount such theorizing precisely because of its subversive nature. Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the “autobiographical pact,” on the other hand, coincides more readily than other contemporary theories with the view of life writing held by most Mormon autobiographers. According to Lejeune, an autobiography is a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). He insists that to be an autobiography, a text must not be “a guessing game.” Rather, the “pact” or agreement that an autobiographer makes with her readers is “the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.” While a reader may “be able to quibble over resemblances” that an autobiographer creates, there should be no question about the autobiographer’s actual identity as signaled by her signature (14).

This agreement about what actually constitutes autobiographical writing does not mean that either Lejeune or various Latter-day Saint autobiographers do not, at least in part, recognize the unreliability of written autobiography. On the contrary, Lejeune openly acknowledges the complicated nature of autobiographical texts when he writes, “I believe that we can promise to tell the truth. . . . But of course it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it. . . . In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing” (qtd. in Eakin On Autobiography xiv). Many Mormon autobiographers, beginning with Joseph Smith himself, also sense the challenges of writing an accurate, “complete” picture of their lives.
During a funeral sermon given to an audience of thousands on April 7, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois, just months before his untimely death by murder, Smith told the congregation, “You don’t know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it; I shall never undertake it. I don’t blame anyone for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself” (Smith, King Follett Discourse 21–22).

Yet such admissions still do not take into full account the real tension that exists between many Mormon writers’ fixation with truth telling in autobiography and contemporary theorists’ insistence that telling the truth is impossible. Late-twentieth-century Mormon women writers such as Williams and Barber, both of whom have been raised in Mormon faith communities and educated in postfeminist theory, construct texts that demonstrate the pull of these opposing forces. Such contradictory forces clearly impinge on the shape of their autobiographical acts. Consciously and unconsciously, the autobiographies of Hafen, Tanner, Martin, and Brooks also provide evidence for the intellectual, theological, social, and personal dilemmas that result from these women’s experience, education, intellect, and individual conscience coming into conflict with the colonizing nature of Mormon culture and doctrine. Working to write their way through and out of such dilemmas is no easy enterprise. The tension that results from their questions and assertions about Mormon culture, doctrine, and their own experience lies at the heart of these Mormon women writers’ faithful transgressions.

Choosing Texts from a Mormon Canon of Thousands

For this project, I distinguish between the genres of fiction and autobiography, although I acknowledge, with enthusiasm, that autobiography freely uses elements of fiction—plot, narration, character, climax, turning points, dialogue, setting, point of view, symbol, and metaphor—to tell a life story. Letters, diaries, and journals, in contrast, do not readily call on these fictionalizing strategies to the same degree. While I support feminist efforts to legitimize the value (aesthetic or otherwise) of all women’s writing about the self, including support for the shift from speaking about “women’s autobiography” to using more inclusive terms such as “women’s autobiographical practices,” “women’s personal narratives,” or “women’s lifewriting” (Smith and Watson, Women 29), I have excluded diurnal writing from this project and, instead, have chosen
published autobiographies that display a single signature on the book’s
title page, reflecting the identity of an author who is also both the first-
person narrator and protagonist of her life story. Rather than address the
vast repositories of Mormon women’s diary or journal writing, my proj-
ект focuses on autobiographies that Mormon women constructed either
at the end of their lives or at important moments when they took stock
of their experience and made time to reflect on themselves and their
relationships.25

In the sizeable canon of life writing by Mormon women, these six
published texts are logical places to begin. They represent much of the
best autobiographical writing to emerge from Mormon women in the
twentieth century. All six books are currently in print and available to
the public, except Martin’s Black Mormon Tells Her Story, which is gen-
erally available in libraries or secondhand bookstores that deal in
Mormon studies. Historically, autobiographies are written by individu-
als who have arrived somewhere near the chronological end of their
lives or at least at an important turning point often precipitated by cri-
sis. Two of the narratives I examine, Hafen’s Recollections of a Handcart
Pioneer of 1860 and Tanner’s A Mormon Mother, fall within expected
forms of autobiography as retrospective stories that intend to cover a
“whole” life experience. The other four autobiographies—Brooks’s
Quicksand and Cactus, Martin’s Black Mormon Tells Her Story, Williams’s
Refuge, and Barber’s How I Got Cultured—all focus on particular periods
of each woman’s life, mainly her childhood, teenage, or early adult years.
My analysis intends to demonstrate that these life narratives manifest
rhetorical and literary aims: they are engaging stories written to capture
readers’ imaginations; they are also crafted arguments meant to influ-
ence readers’ views on controversial issues related to religion, history,
and politics. Thus, each autobiographer is both literary artist and
rhetorician, both writer and protagonist of the story of her life.