Faithful Transgressions In The American West

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Chapter 4

Remedying Race and Religious Prejudice

[He] inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

—Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 26.33

Race will always be at the center of the American experience.

—Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Racial Formation in the United States

Wynetta Willis Martin explains and defends her 1966 conversion to the Mormon Church in Black Mormon Tells Her Story, a spiritual autobiography written during a time when civil rights activists in the United States severely criticized the church for discriminating against its black members.1 In 1972, Martin publishes the story of her conversion and experiences within a mostly white church for two main reasons. First, she wants to educate nonmembers about her new religion, urging them to examine any misinformation or misperceptions they may have about Mormons. Second, she wants her new Mormon sisters and brothers to see themselves in her stories, encouraging them to learn more about black experience and cultural difference through the story of her life. Like many women autobiographers, Martin writes so that her life narrative can be of use. Within the tradition of Mormon autobiography, such a purpose often means a woman constructs her life story to inculcate Mormon values in her descendants, promote faith, and explain or defend various church doctrines, such as nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy. Martin’s autobiography repeats these conventions, but
instead of defending the church against charges of sexism, she defends it against charges of racism. In addition, although she means to promote faith through her storytelling, she writes less for her posterity and more for her disapproving parents and other nonmember readers who, she believes, are misinformed about Mormons.

Many U.S. citizens during the 1960s and 1970s viewed the Mormon Church as a white Western religion with overt racist practices that denied black Mormons full privileges of membership. At the time, people of African (considered Hamitic) descent could be baptized into the church, but general authorities did not allow blacks to participate in a majority of temple ceremonies, preventing them from obtaining the religious ordinances most prized by Latter-day Saints. In addition, black Mormon men were banned from holding the priesthood. This restriction meant they could not hold significant positions of church leadership, power, and authority until the ban was officially lifted on June 9, 1978, permitting black members access to all religious ordinances in the LDS Church (see appendix C). All Mormon women continue to be barred from ordination to an office of the priesthood.

To protest Mormons’ treatment of their black members, civil rights activists in the mid-1960s began staging demonstrations against the LDS Church and instigating boycotts against Brigham Young University’s athletic program. Reminiscent of the late nineteenth century when the church repeatedly defended its “God-given” right to practice polygamy, the church in the twentieth century defended its “God-given” right to deny LDS members of African descent full access to priesthood authority and temple ceremonies. In order to deflect criticism from outsiders, general authorities publicly supported the civil rights of all people, regardless of their race. However, these leaders also argued that restricting black members from receiving priesthood ordination or temple ordinances did not deprive these people of their civil rights. From their perspective, they had been guided by a series of modern-day prophets, who instituted the ban according to God’s will. Furthermore, blacks were free to choose membership or not in the LDS Church. If blacks converted, then they also accepted church doctrines and practices. Mormon leaders argued, therefore, that as long as blacks’ citizenship rights were not being violated, then church policies could not be dictated from the outside.

Considering the discriminatory policies toward blacks in the Mormon Church, many have wondered why—then and now, twenty-five years
after the ban was lifted in 1978—any black person would choose to join such a religion. Through the genre of spiritual autobiography, Martin attempts to explain and justify such a choice. With multiple audiences in mind—blacks, whites, insiders, outsiders, and her own nonmember parents—she chronicles her religious quest, attempting to answer critics’ and supporters’ questions about the circumstances that motivated her 1966 conversion. The relatively short autobiography offers readers brief background about Martin’s childhood growing up in California with Christian parents who taught her to fear God. She then moves quickly on to relating a dramatic spiritual experience that parallels Joseph Smith’s First Vision. The experience compels her to search for a more meaningful relationship with God. Her religious quest ultimately leads her to the Mormon Church where, despite her skin color, she writes about feeling loved and accepted. She also, however, writes about frequently awkward experiences she has faced as a black woman in a mostly white church.

Different from the autobiographies of Hafen, Tanner, and Brooks—who were raised from childhood as Mormons and relate their experiences growing up in the faith—Martin’s text focuses more narrowly on her conversion and the issues of race and religious prejudice. Her book does not presume to cover an entire life, nor is it as well edited by family members and friends overseeing the publication process. The story that Martin tells has unfolded only recently; her life and personal narrative are still very much in process. Most important, at the time of her writing, the LDS Church had not yet rescinded its discriminatory policy against blacks. This means that, different from Tanner and Hafen, who could write more frankly and perhaps more freely after polygamy had been abandoned as an official church policy, Martin must still accommodate her life and story to a contradictory situation that had not yet changed for her.

Martin also writes her narrative at a volatile time in American history during the age of civil rights protests when people were engaged in volatile debates about black-white relations and the language they would use to discuss them. Critical race theory (CRT), which emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, grew out of critical legal studies and radical feminism. Scholarly literature by critical race theorists now provides a rich framework for understanding and discussing the history of race relations and terminology in the United States. Many in the field have worked to formulate language that more precisely and more fully
explains the nature and implications of terms such as “race,” “racism,” “bigotry,” “prejudice,” “Negro,” “black,” “Caucasian,” “white,” and so forth. Applying these theories and definitions to Martin’s text is not always easy or straightforward. She uses all the terms but bases her defense of Mormonism on her own stipulated and sometimes contradictory definition of, for example, the term “prejudice.” At times, this makes reading her narrative from a twenty-first-century point of view confusing and disturbing. That said, my analysis will attempt to lay out several of her most important assertions and narrative complications. The social, historical, psychological, theological, and textual problems of this particular text, however, invite additional critical debate from scholars in many disciplines.

After Martin was baptized a member of the LDS Church in San Diego, California, she writes that she had been touring California “giving talks on why she had joined the church.” According to a news article included in ancillary material following Martin’s life story, a spiritual leader told her that she had a “special mission” to “teach love” (76). The now published story, beginning with her childhood and ending several years after her divorce and subsequent conversion to the church, appears to be partially motivated by this spiritual leader’s advice. Determined to better educate outsiders about Mormons and to enlighten Mormons about black experience, she believes an account of her spiritual journey has the power to end ignorance, promote understanding among people of different backgrounds, and, thereby, remedy both race and religious prejudice.

A New Mormon Pioneer

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Martin recognizes that, as a black Mormon, she is a new kind of Mormon pioneer. By writing, she stakes her claim to several significant “firsts,” establishing her historical importance within the church. She writes, for example, about being the first black member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a well-known American singing group that has positively influenced the public’s perception of the church. Her choir membership brought Martin modest national attention. In one of the excerpted newspaper articles published at the end of her text, a writer from the Kansas City Call, a black newspaper, asserts that, as the first black Mormon Tabernacle Choir member, “Mrs. Clark [Martin] . . . challenges the commonly held belief that the
Mormon church is racist” (77). Besides this most notable “first,” Martin writes about being the “first black faculty staff member” at BYU in 1970 (68), the first black person to attend the Brigham Young University Ball (70), and the first black member of her San Diego, California, ward. She mentions these “firsts” casually in her text, but the accumulation of them has the effect of lending her significant authority to speak on issues concerning blacks in the Mormon Church. The collage of excerpted newspaper clippings, all with Martin’s smiling photo and eye-catching headlines, intends to illustrate the media attention her life story and conversion attracted in the early 1970s. “Choir Member Not Bitter on Mormon Restriction,” proclaims one headline. Other headlines focus on the combination of her unique identities: “Black Member of Mormon Tabernacle Choir Visits Here,” “First Negro in Choir Accepts Post at BYU,” and “Negro Singer Joins LDS Church, Pens Book” (76–78).

In addition to the public exposure and numerous “firsts” in the church, Martin mentions that she has been asked to address a variety of Mormon congregations about her experience. “I have had many speaking and singing engagements since 1967 in Utah. In less than six years I have spoken in more than one hundred Sacrament meetings and very close to a hundred firesides, in addition to many seminary classes” (70). This subtle boast about an impressive speaking and singing circuit reinforces her credibility as a speaker (and now a writer) who is often asked to relate her experiences to other members of the church. The broad attention also seems reinforcing for her as a person who grew up in poverty and obscurity, yearned for attention as a child “jokester,” and then, as an adult, aspired to become a singer on a stage. Besides bolstering her self-esteem, the publicity affords her unofficial authority to discuss Mormon doctrines inside and outside the church, especially with regard to the discriminatory policy against blacks.

As an adult convert, Martin writes in the tradition of original converts who recounted their search for and discovery of God in the Latter-day Saint faith. She also pioneers a revision to that convention of Mormon autobiography by writing as one of those who hail from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds at the margins of Mormon tradition. In early 1981, after the change in policy about black members, Mary Sturlaugson (Eyer) writes about her own conversion in A Soul So Rebellious (Sturlaugson). In 1982, she continues her faith-promoting stories about her LDS mission in He Restoreth My Soul (Eyer).
Sturlaugson Eyer’s two life narratives—published by Deseret Book, owned and operated by the LDS Church—have been well known among Mormon readers for many years. Similarly, Me and Mine: The Life Story of Helen Sekaquaptewa As Told to Louise Udall, first published in 1969 and now in its tenth printing by the University of Arizona Press, contains a late chapter entitled “My Church,” in which Sekaquaptewa, a Hopi woman, briefly discusses her conversion. “What [LDS missionaries] taught sounded good to me,” she writes, “like a familiar philosophy, like the teachings we were used to, like the Hopi way. I was really converted the first week and believed everything, although I was not baptized right soon” (241). Unlike most Mormon women autobiographers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Martin, Sturlaugson Eyer, and Sekaquaptewa are not typical Mormon immigrants and pioneers. Instead, all three authors make a conscious choice during adulthood to be baptized and then write about those conversions in their autobiographical acts. In many ways, their stories hearken back to original Mormon autobiographers who write about their life before and after they accepted a new system of belief. Some, like Sekaquaptewa, simply accommodate Mormonism into their own worldviews (e.g., “the Hopi way”). Such modern conversion stories, written from the advantage of the writers’ inside-outside perspective, have much to reveal about converts’ influence, or lack thereof, on Mormon doctrine and culture—all of which merit more critical literary attention than this chapter can address.

One way in particular that Martin’s story repeats and then revises the tradition of Mormon women’s autobiography is by focusing less on representing a communal religious experience—such as that narrated by Hafen or Brooks—and more on depicting her individual quest for God and personal identity. Instead of using the plural “we,” as Hafen does, Martin more often uses the singular pronoun “I” to narrate her individual experience. In this way, her life story looks more like the life writing produced by early Mormon autobiographers such as the Prophet Joseph Smith, Apostle Parley P. Pratt, and Mormon pioneer Sarah Studevant Leavitt. All three early autobiographers wrote about seeking God and finding Him through their own individual efforts. In fact, Martin’s method of investigating numerous religions like a “church tourist” (29) and her dramatic depiction of a scene in which she claims to experience the presence of evil followed by the presence of God (39) closely parallels the life experience that Smith relates in his First Vision narrative.
Parallels with the First Vision

Martin arranges her account to show that she became a Latter-day Saint after long years of searching for a religion that matched her experience with God on one eventful night.

What I lacked even then as a child, was a God—a God I liked and felt at home with—not a wrathful, spew-spitting God, but a gentle father, who wept with me in my anguish-filled moments and smiled on me with love and hope as He proved to me that God is Love, and that the giving of His Son was the real proof of His benevolence. (19)

When she unexpectedly found the God she was searching for in Mormonism, she insists on having made a free and eager choice to join the church, which she is now prepared to defend. Key portions of Martin’s text clearly parallel Smith’s now canonized First Vision. She even describes the influence it had on her decision to become a Latter-day Saint. “[T]he thing that really converted me was reading the Joseph Smith Story... It brought back to my memory my own very personal experience with the evil powers and praying within for deliverance and feeling the Lord’s spirit of peace come over me” (55). Her reading of Smith’s narrative was likely an additional compelling reason to write about her own religious experience. Identifying strongly with his spiritual journey, she reinscribes key elements of the First Vision using details from her own experience. A Mormon readership could not help but notice the similarities in form and content.

Like Smith, who felt “induced” to narrate his life experience in order “to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the church” (J. Smith, History 1: 1), Martin, too, writes her autobiography to provide an accurate self-portrait that will explain her controversial decision to be baptized. As a storyteller, she builds tension by describing the dissatisfaction and longing she had felt since youth. “I have always been a hungry person; yet no matter how I gorged myself socially, intellectually, spiritually, or even literally on food at the table, nothing ever satisfied me” (15). Her early loneliness and longing (22), combined with what she describes as a constant “vague dissatisfaction and anger” (23), led her on a quest similar to Mormonism’s founding prophet. Smith himself lived more than a century earlier than Martin during a period of American revivalism, when numerous religious sects
were vying for converts. In the First Vision he writes, “I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit.” But after studying “numerous religious denominations,” he remarks, “it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong” (*History* 1: 8). Learning about multiple religions brought Smith more confusion than clarity, yet he states that he had enough faith to keep seeking answers to his religious questions.

Martin, too, depicts herself as a hopeful seeker, who explores numerous religious faiths, providing evidence to demonstrate that she investigated many religions before discovering and deciding upon Mormonism. She wants badly to persuade readers that her conversion to the LDS Church was not a quick or casual decision but was based on lengthy personal research. “By the time I was twenty-four years old,” she declares, “I had been in and out of so many churches at this point, I felt like a tourist in Italy” (29). Explaining that this fruitless searching only increased her loneliness, longing, skepticism, and fright, she writes,

I was sure at this age that all churches were relatively void of meaning for me, and I nearly lost all faith in finding my truth, so long locked up inside me! The old pattern of fear and running initially set in my childhood was gravely reinforced as each church became a symbol to me of rejection of me by those who belonged and believed. (29)

Wavering between hopeful belief and utter skepticism, Martin explains that up to this point, she was filled only with “pseudo-intellectual comments on the personality of God if He did exist” (37). Despite a desire to fill her unknown hunger, she says she did not actually believe in God, especially the one her parents had taught her to fear. Describing herself as a full-blown skeptic, she declares, “The price of genuflecting to a malevolent and unkind monstrosity revolted me” (37). In several passages of Martin’s autobiography, she reveals her own critical reflection about the psychological motives underlying her attitudes at the time:

How silly and sad and ridiculous I must have been. My adamant and fervent denials of God only showed more vividly the need I had for a God who was kind; and the kindness [sic] I sought I knew inately [sic] did exist in God, and I had known it all my life, despite my caustic and juvenile dribblings and uncandid remarks about Him. (37)

In order to account for her dramatic change from skepticism to belief, she connects this previous skepticism with personal emptiness and a
case of low self-esteem. “I entered my apartment that night the image of a full-fledged, independent, and I thought very ‘with it’ single girl. This was my self-portrait. Sadly, I was exactly the opposite of all these. I sighed that night as I prepared for bed, feeling the acute shallow and empty behavior patterns of my life thus far” (37). With each description of her past anxieties and ineffectual denials about God’s existence, Martin works to recreate her sense of longing for authentic experience in the minds of readers, hoping to gain sympathy and understanding by explaining her identities before and after conversion. Drawing her audience further into the life story, she promises to share a most private—now made public—spiritual encounter: “In these next few pages, I am about to reveal with a natural and hesitating wariness, an experience so deeply personal in my life that I tremble when thinking of it; and my heart is stirred by the questions, paradoxically, as to how this vivid and very real experience of mine will be accepted” (35). She depicts this particular spiritual experience as an important juncture in her story and a turning point in her life, not only because she discovers that God does, indeed, exist, but because hearing God speak to her validates her own existence and worth. “At the outset of my revelation of this moment in my life, I must say I do not fear ridicule nor disbelief from others. . . . it truly was—a sacred, stunning and very wonderful revealing experience, which marked the beginning of a very definite turning point in my life” (36). The personal revelation that she is about to share is a familiar trope among Mormons and echoes the spiritual awakening described in the First Vision.

Like Smith, who insists that his story is true, even though many criticized, persecuted, and disbelieved him (History 1: 25), Martin, too, wants to convince readers of the truth of her spiritual experience. She knows, after all, that many in her audience are skeptical and critical of her conversion. She has also already admitted to fantasizing as a child. Anticipating that readers may think she was hallucinating or merely hearing what she wanted to hear, she works to persuade readers that she can distinguish fantasy from fact and fiction from nonfiction. To reinforce the credibility of her story, she claims to have “perfect and total recall” of the incident.

I do not hesitate to tell what happened to me because I fear others will scoff or smirk at my naiveté; what I do fear is that my ability to recount this very beautiful and very real episode in my life, will be called a “hallucination,” or a very “real dream.” It was none of these. It was really an occurrence that I would vow to my death I saw and heard while wide awake, and while fully
in tune with all of my senses—even so in tune that I was given the gift of perfect and total recall of the incident. (36)

Martin emphasizes that the extraordinary event she is about to divulge took her by surprise one ordinary evening. Nothing in particular—except a life of longing—foreshadowed her “moment of light” when she heard God’s voice.

When Smith begins the story of his own dramatic dialogue with two Beings who, he says, identified themselves as God and Jesus Christ, his story, too, opens on a normal “beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty” (History 1: 14). Never before, says Smith, had he actually prayed to God. As the fourteen-year-old begins to pray, he claims he is “seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.” Then he describes calling on God to “deliver” him “out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me” (History 1: 15). Martin reports a similar frightening experience:

I lay down in a prison of pillows and stifling bedcovers. I closed my eyes, but they flashed open again. Instantly, for reasons I cannot name, my mouth became extremely dry and I wet my lips fervently, after arising for a drink of water. Still the awful and empty black fear crawled persistently throughout my body. (38)

She describes pleading for help in “disjointed praises” and making “wild promises” to a God she had thought for so long was “cruel.” Finally, feeling a “horrid massive presence of a silent suffocating stillness” (38), she again called upon a higher power, just as Smith did, to deliver her from the evil presence that had engulfed her:

I began to sob a prayer just as a child would, begging something somewhere for a kind God yearning to pray to a Father-In-Heaven, not a monster from Hell, to help me; “Dear God,” I pleaded in tearful and convulsed spasms of sobs, “please, please, help me now in my most desperate hour of need.” (38–39)

A Mormon readership would find the similarities between the two narratives by Martin and Smith to be remarkable, reinforcing the truth and value of Martin’s story for them. A non-Mormon readership may be
more skeptical of her claims, but they might also find it difficult to simply dismiss the fervor of her account as she dramatizes it here.

Smith, too, describes feeling desperate during his own briefly terrifying experience: “[A]t the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me (History 1: 16). As soon as the light descends, he describes having seen “two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air.” Immediately after witnessing this vision, he reports hearing God speak directly to him. “One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (1: 17). Paralleling Smith’s narrative, Martin writes that she, too, prayed desperately for help and then felt “a most gracious and quiet peace,” followed by “a voice [that] spoke in the darkness, quietly, serenely, but with the most monumental majesty. . . . A very brief message was given me, as I felt a calming brush that might have been a hand on my damp and warm brow. The voice said, ‘BE STILL, AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD’” (39).

Both Martin and Smith conclude the stories of their extraordinary spiritual encounters by testifying of their truth. Each autobiographer works to reinforce the veracity of the account, claiming that personal knowledge overrides any skepticism they may face about their stories. Smith insists, “I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation” (1: 25). Martin, too, avows, “I shed tears because I know that it happened to me, and that will always be enough for me. If no one else can believe it really happened, that special moment of my life, I know that it did—and I am so very glad” (39). The repetition, emphasis, and diction of her final witness (“I know”), parallels the language of Smith’s own testimony. Likewise, their similar creative features, rhetorical structure, and evidence demonstrate that they both want to persuade readers they are telling the truth. During the unstable civil rights period of twentieth-century America, the stakes seem especially high for Martin as a black woman trying to defend her conversion to the Mormon Church. Nevertheless, her convictions and personal experience persuade her to write.

Knowing that many in her audience will be critical of her message, she works to disarm readers’ suspicions about her writing intentions by
declaring that she does not presume to know other people’s experience or feelings and that she does not write about her own conversion in order to convert them. "I cannot know what is in all hearts, and I cannot know the thoughts of all I meet; I do not judge them, nor do I ever try to convert or convince anyone of my race, even my parents, that this is the ‘true’ church” (11). Thus, from the start, she attempts to control her audience’s response to the narrative, insisting that her aim is not to convert readers, especially other black readers, but to help people understand her reasons for converting. “It is right for me, but I cannot hope they will understand, and if they would not find peace in conversion to Mormonism, as I have done, I would not wish it for them” (11–12). Although she works throughout the life narrative to persuade readers that above all else, she values individual experience, conscience, and belief, it seems unlikely that having been converted to such a missionary-minded religion that Martin does not possess some latent desire to persuade at least her parents to investigate membership in the Mormon Church.

**Two Faithful Transgressions**

By telling a dramatic, faith-promoting story about hearing God’s voice, Martin establishes her credibility and authority to speak as a Latter-day Saint to her Mormon audience. She also achieves credibility and authority by mentioning her modest fame and membership in the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Only after doing so does she dare to articulate a version of Mormon doctrine concerning eternal exaltation with God that differs markedly from church leaders’ teachings. Using italicized script for emphasis, she asserts,

*These two things, baptism and the Holy Ghost are the only requirements contrary to popular belief, for entering the Celestial Kingdom and being with God for eternity if one is worthy. Therefore, the Priesthood covenants of the Temple which we [black members] are not allowed at this point are not really so crucial as popular belief dictates.* (56)

Her deliberate choice to declare, in writing, that life with God in the “Celestial Kingdom” could be achieved exclusively by way of worthiness and baptism, rather than by way of worthiness and temple covenants, constitutes the most faithful transgression in her text. Such a liberal interpretation of doctrine would not have gone unnoticed by her Mormon audience. In contrast to Martin’s claim, church leaders have
always taught that the “Celestial Kingdom” is the ultimate spiritual achievement after death, made possible only through participating in vital temple ordinances. In this passage, Martin deliberately subverts “authoritative” doctrine with her own interpretation of the gospel, dismissing any “overemphasis” on temple covenants to mere “popular belief.” Although now a moot point since the 1978 change in policy, her bold assertion intends to force her contemporary Mormon readers to study the gospel and learn for themselves what the Book of Mormon might really mean when the prophet Nephi teaches that “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).

By offering a transgressive interpretation of Mormon doctrine in writing, Martin’s text becomes one of a number of modern autobiographies published by black members working for change in the Mormon Church. According to Eugene England, black Mormon writers such as Alan Cherry, Mary Sturlaugson Eyer, and Helvecio Martinez (a Brazilian and the first black general authority) raised “the consciousness and conscience of church members and leaders.” He explains, “They each wrote autobiographies that told honestly of the prejudice they encountered in the church and then endured because of spiritual witness they had of the Gospel’s truth.” England also argues that black Mormons’ autobiographies influenced other church members’ thinking and perceptions about race and the gospel. He posits, “Their lives made graphically real . . . the truth of patient church service as a means to make a profound change in the ‘truth’ of the Gospel as it was perceived by others” (“Revisiting” 1).

Martin actually writes more than one faithful transgression in her text. The first one she includes is a conscious, explicit interpretation of doctrine when she claims that temple ordinances are not necessary for people to enter into the highest kingdom of God. The second one is a faithful transgression she does not fully control, but it is perhaps the most important. This second faithful transgression emerges by looking at the publication of her book in total. As a faithful Mormon autobiographer, she purposely works to reconstruct scenes that illustrate the positive interactions and acceptance she has experienced as a black woman in a mostly white church. Although she intends to prove that the church and its members are not “prejudiced,” she also reconstructs awkward, sometimes troubling, interactions she has with Mormons that end up illustrating the very opposite. These difficult experiences, along with the racially charged supplementary material accompanying her defense
of her new religion, reveals the undeniable racist policy and racialized culture of the Mormon Church at the time. Thus, her faith-promoting conversion story provides evidence for Mormons’ sincere efforts to accept and love all people, no matter the color of their skin; however, it also provides direct and indirect proof that Mormon theology has not always been the pure, untainted religion that its members often assume or imagine it to be.

A Defense against Charges of Prejudice and Racism

From the outset, Martin confronts the issue of race head on with a bold affirmation of her multiple identities: “My name is Wynetta Martin. I am a Negro and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly called the Mormon Church” (11). In contrast to the conventional Mormon woman’s spiritual autobiography, this introductory sentence mentions nothing about her genealogy or place of birth. She delays such information until chapter 2, “My Early Years.” Instead of connecting herself with ancestors straight away, she knows she must first deal with color of her skin. As a scholar of racial identity formation, clinical psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum explains that when it comes to the lifelong pursuit of integrating and defining our identities, “[t]he salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives” (20). According to Tatum, “[t]he parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or ‘other’ in their eyes” (21). In Martin’s case, of course, her conversion to a mostly white church makes both her black and Mormon identities particularly salient, requiring her to address the issue of these seemingly contradictory selves from the start.

While the rare combination of being black and Mormon is the main impetus for writing, Martin nevertheless insists on her individuality, separate from the rigid categories of “black” or “Mormon.” Wanting readers to approach her autobiography as a sincere narrative about her own particular conversion, she asserts, “My story is not about Negroes, nor is it about Mormons or their church doctrine. It is about my life and how I became convinced to join the Mormon Church” (11). This initial assertion is undercut by the content of the autobiography itself because she does, in fact, write at least briefly about “Negroes,” “Mormons,” and
“their church doctrine.” Nonetheless, she begins the story of her life by resisting racial and religious categories and, hence, by refusing to accept racial and religious stereotypes. Her preemptive rhetorical move is meant to prevent readers from assuming they already know something about who she is and what her motives might be just because they know something about her race and chosen religion.

According to Leon E. Wynter in American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America, a perennial problem for African Americans has been other citizens’ inability to see them as individuals separate from their group racial identity. Basing his own conclusions on the work of sociologist John A. Hall and anthropologist Charles Lindholm, Wynter claims Americans place ultimate importance on the individual as “the fundamental unit of American society not the race or ethnic group.” Wynter defines individualism as “individual responsibility, personal honor and principled resistance to immoral authority.” He argues that such individualism “is a deeper creed than ethnic nationalism, racial chauvinism, and even racism itself. And while Americans do not openly recognize such core values as individualism summing to a common, unifying culture across racial lines, it nevertheless still does” (173). In the opening paragraph of her autobiography, Martin certainly appeals to the value that Americans place on the individual, hoping to distinguish herself in that very way. However, Wynter would caution, “the tragedy of America, and the only exception to [Hall and Lindholm’s] argument that American social cohesion at the dawn of the twenty-first century is stronger than ever, is the historic exception of African-Americans from the assumptions of inherent individual distinctiveness and endowment” (173). Tension between Martin’s desire to be viewed as an individual and to speak as an individual while also representing and speaking for both black Americans and Mormons permeates her book.

As she attempts to prohibit readers from stereotyping or reducing the complexity of her personal identities, Martin also insists that she is happy, that her new religious community is not full of bigoted people, and that she is fulfilling her own mission to spread love and end prejudice of any kind through speaking and writing. With these writing goals in mind, she begins the second paragraph of her autobiography by addressing critics who may believe that she was deluded or coerced into converting. Here she works to communicate the power of her religious convictions through strong verbs, purposeful adjectives, and explicit
appeals to readers' sympathy. Furthermore, she claims membership in both Mormon and black communities, repeatedly using the possessive pronoun “my” with regard to “my church,” “my race,” and “my own people.” Approaching her argument from a position of defense (a common rhetorical stance for a Mormon woman), she writes,

Perhaps the fact that I quite eagerly, even greedily embraced, and still do, the promises of my church, a church that has been recently the target of many, who have accused us of bigotry, segregation, and racism, and even in the most liberal of minds, my church has been cursed and despised, because it will not allow the people of my race the privileges, as yet, of the Priesthood, given to all other races. Perhaps this practice has instilled a great hatred and contempt for me in the eyes of my own people, and even in the eyes perhaps of many white people, both members and non-members, who learn of my conversion (11).

In this paragraph, she identifies her potentially critical reading audiences—blacks, whites, outsiders, and insiders—but she also maintains, with fervor, that despite the curses and hatred she must endure for her race and her newfound religion, she is at peace with her decisions. “I am now, happily, and willingly, a member of the church,” she writes. “Many cannot understand why a Negro would want to join the Mormon Church. This too I will attempt to explain, at least from my personal experience” (11). Similar to Hafen, who defends the church’s practice of polygamy even when she suffered because of it, Martin, too, chooses to defend a religion that excludes her from full privileges of membership. Whatever the drawbacks of such discrimination against her, the benefits of being a Mormon seem to compensate.

Martin also wants to convince readers that any negative judgments Latter-day Saints have formed about black people grow out of ignorance, fear, or naiveté, rather than hatred. She feels similarly convinced about the suspicions and negative attitudes of black people like her parents toward Mormons. In fact, her argument is based on what some might view as a perhaps naive but quite sincere premise that educating people out of their ignorance will eliminate misinformation and misconceptions (i.e., prejudice) of any kind. In this way, her understanding of various forms of prejudice aligns with Tatum’s contemporary theory about the origins and definition of the term. “Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice. Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited
information.” According to this definition, Tatum and other critical race theorists assume everyone has prejudices, “not because we want them, but simply because we are so continually exposed to misinformation about others” (5). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *prejudice* is defined as “a previous judgment; esp. a judgment formed before due examination or consideration; a premature or hasty judgment.” The term is also used to mean a “preconceived opinion; bias or leaning favourable or unfavourable; [a] prepossession; when used absolutely, usually with unfavourable connotation.” In the context of Martin’s argument, the term *prejudice* could be defined as forming an unfavorable judgment of some person or some group of people often based on their perceived race or religion. Assuming that Martin would agree with this definition and granting her insistent claim that Mormons are not prejudiced and certainly not racist (i.e., not hateful racists), then there are still many scenes that Martin depicts in which Mormons exhibit prejudice in the highly race-conscious subculture within which they live.11 As Tatum points out, “[p]rejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society” (6), and a racist society should be understood as “a system of advantage based on race,” rather than “a particular form of prejudice” (9). Separating—rather than conflating the terms “prejudice” and “racism”—better reveals the inequities and privileges that persist in American society. Tatum explains that, like other white Americans, Mormons would rather view racism as ignorance or hatred than recognize it also as a system of privilege. Defining racism in this way would violate Mormons’ stated belief in equality for all.

Understanding racism as a system of advantage based on race is antithetical to traditional notions of an American meritocracy. For those who have internalized this myth, this definition generates considerable discomfort. It is more comfortable simply to think of racism as a particular form of prejudice. Notions of power or privilege do not have to be addressed when our understanding of racism is constructed in that way. (Tatum 9)

In her own writing, Martin resists labeling any misinformed attitudes or behavior using the politically charged term *prejudice*. She even more assiduously resists using the term *racism* to describe the power and privilege that most church members enjoy over those members who are black. When civil rights activists were contending over how best to confront race prejudice in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s,
whether through direct confrontation or through nonviolent resistance, Martin chooses to employ the rhetorical and narrative strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King, rather than the more militant strategies of Malcolm X. Different from black radicals who felt no qualms about identifying racism when they saw it, Martin adopts the moderated rhetoric of passive resisters, judicially constructing scenes with Mormon characters, in which she endures, with stoicism, their racialized comments and behavior. She then records these experiences in her life story, implying that she hopes her writing will educate and ameliorate conditions for her and for others in the future. Even if Martin were willing to use the term prejudice to label a few of her characters’ attitudes and behavior, she can hardly afford to do so given her aim to defend the church against charges of racism. In a thesis-like statement located toward the conclusion of her text, she declares,

The Gospel is not prejudiced and I have met very few people in the church which show any prejudice. There will always be some. No matter what church one attends or what race, creed or nationality we deal with, we will find good and bad people. We must not pin point one race or one religious group as being prejudiced, or we are paradoxically “prejudiced” in so doing. I hope that I can remove any prejudice that may exist anywhere I go for my race or my church. (71)

Martin’s injunction against “pin pointing” any “group” for “being prejudiced” coincides with her desire not to overgeneralize or stereotype; however, her resolve not to identify instances of prejudice when she encounters them among Mormons leads to narrative tensions and contradictions that lie between the story she wants to tell about her new religious community and the story she actually tells. In other words, her written defense of Mormons against charges of racial prejudice becomes tenuous at best. At the very least, her text provides evidence to show that while many Mormon characters seem kind to Martin, they also lack meaningful understanding of or knowledge about black experience in America.

Martin writes, for example, that she “can remember one [Mormon] fireside in 1969 during which someone asked me if I would change my skin to white if I had the chance” (71). Constructing a poised answer to the offense that this question implies about white skin being preferable to black, she writes, “With a smile on my face I said that Mr. Clean, Ajax, and Comet serve the purpose for many things. I don’t care how
much I rubbed with those chemicals, nothing would take my built-in tan away.” Then, using capital letters in her autobiography, Martin completes her pointed, but cool-headed, response: “NO, I would not change my color from black to white because it wasn’t meant to be. Each race should be proud of their color” (71). Throughout her narrative, Martin characterizes herself as one who must often find the strength to exercise Christ-like patience and understanding as various Mormon characters communicate implicitly and explicitly that black skin is inferior to white.

In this scene and several others, she depicts brief interactions with Mormons in which she is subjected to jarring comments or racial infelicities that she must continually recover from throughout her day. Such incidents correspond with what contemporary social scientists now refer to as microaggressions. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic define a microaggression as “one of those many sudden, stunning, or dispiriting transactions that mar the days of women and folks of color. Like water dripping on sandstone, they can be thought of as small acts of racism, consciously or unconsciously perpetrated, welling up from the assumptions about racial matters most of us absorb from the cultural heritage in which we come of age in the Untied States” (Critical Race Theory: An Introduction 2). Mormon characters in Martin’s book commit a form of microaggression when their racialized remarks appear naive, ignorant, or patronizing and ultimately end up subordinating another person, whether intended to do so or not. The “vigilance and psychic energy” (P. Davis 145) required to deal with the psychological wear on the targets of such microaggressions are similar to the energy required to recover from microaggressions that occur when remarks, behavior, or body language explicitly communicate hateful or demeaning attitudes toward nonwhites. Mormon denial about their own form of microaggression is just as calcified and resistant to change as other forms of microaggressions against nonwhites because what people will not admit to, they cannot change (P. Davis 144). Furthermore, after such incidents occur, their effects can be far-reaching:

Its influence is not alone due to the fact that it is painful in its intensity, but also because the individual, in order to maintain internal balance and to protect himself from being overwhelmed by it, must initiate restitutive maneuvers . . . —all quite automatic and unconscious. In addition to maintaining an internal balance, the individual must continue to maintain a social façade and some kind of adaptation to the offending stimuli so that he
can preserve some social effectiveness. All of this requires a constant preoccupation, notwithstanding . . . that these adaptational processes . . . take place on a low order of awareness” (Kardiner and Ovesey, qtd. in P. Davis 145).

In a sense, Martin’s life story itself is a “restitutive maneuver.” She writes in order to process and maintain the personal and psychic order she needs to adapt to her new religious community and also to reeducate its members.

Mormons’ Racialized Culture

Martin’s most explicit motive for writing her autobiography is to educate outsiders about Mormons. However, her narrative also implies another motive, which she does not make explicit but which is nevertheless evident. She wants to educate her newfound faith community about the difficulties she faces daily as someone who looks different from the majority of them and who comes from a different background. The varied purposes and widely differing audiences that she anticipates reading her book complicate the way she negotiates and produces tensions in her own writing. For example, despite the autobiography’s insistent message about Martin’s newfound “happiness,” soon after her baptism, she begins working for the Genealogical Society (now Family History Library), where, she admits, “despite most people’s kindness, my race did present problems.” Because no other blacks sang in the Tabernacle Choir or worked with her at the Genealogical Society, Martin writes that “naturally” she knew her “race might be a handicap” (59). Feeling Mormon’s “over-kindness” and “uneasiness” toward her (59), she illustrates those experiences by her dialogue with various Mormons. Characterizing the majority of Latter-day Saints as mostly ignorant about black cultures and history, she depicts several scenes in which they display hyperconscious awareness of her skin color and their own lack of actual experience with African Americans.

Such problematic scenes reiterate what theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe as rules of “racial etiquette” that have developed over time in the United States. The rules become “a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life.” They argue that these rules have developed to direct the nature of interactions in a racialized society.
Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus we are inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world. (62)

Martin’s autobiography painfully illustrates the racial rules and tensions at play as she depicts them in the pages of her text. Although most of the characters she portrays would like to think they interact without race consciousness or “prejudice,” that is, without critical awareness of a person’s skin color and appearance, her Mormon characters’ attempts to treat people of all races and backgrounds “alike” frequently fail. In addition, those who believe they can interact without regard to skin color delude themselves. According to Neil Gotanda, “[t]o be racially color-blind . . . is to ignore what one has already noticed.” Furthermore, throughout the history of the United States, people have always organized themselves along racial lines, and Mormon people are no exception. Therefore, “[t]he characteristics of race that are noticed (before being ignored) are situated within an already existing understanding of race. That is, race carries with it a complex social meaning. This pre-existing race consciousness makes it impossible for an individual to be truly nonconscious of race” (36).

Because Martin herself refuses to use the term prejudice, she forces herself to identify and, thus, to “remove” prejudice indirectly by narrating anecdotes, mostly free of commentary, in which many Mormon characters inevitably give away their self-consciousness about race and their ignorance (i.e., prejudice) about blacks and black experience. To illustrate, she depicts her dialogue with a Mormon woman in a scene at the Genealogical Society. This scene demonstrates the naiveté and narrow cultural or racial experience Martin often encounters within her new Mormon community.

One day a lady came up to me and asked in the most sincere innocence, “Are you from the West Indies, Dear?” I said, “No, why?” “Well,” she said, “Your skin and hair are of the West Indian type.” I knew of course she wanted to know what nationality I was, for it was beyond her comprehension that a Mormon would be a Negro or vice versa. I told her in a quiet manner that I was a Negro. She said rather flustered, “Oh I’m so glad to see you working here, but are you a Mormon?” When I replied yes, she was close to collapse. Not a vicious woman, but a naive one, she made it a point to go out of her
way every morning and come to where I worked and say, “Oh hello there, good morning.” (59)

Because a key purpose of Martin’s autobiography is to convince outsiders, especially her parents, that Mormons are not racists, she gains several potential benefits from telling this anecdote. First, the scene acknowledges the awkwardness of her situation as one of the few black Mormons most members encountered in the 1960s and 1970s. She also portrays Mormon prejudice as “innocent” or harmless—not intentionally mean-spirited. In fact, Martin writes that, rather than ignoring or snubbing her, individuals such as this woman display “overkind” attention toward her. How, then, implies her text, can either she or her readers fault well-meaning white people for their “overkindness”? While Martin reveals enough for an audience to know that she is uncomfortable with the woman’s behavior, she presents the story with little interpretation, allowing the woman’s words and actions to speak for themselves.

Jessie L. Embry’s 1995 study of other black Mormons’ experiences presents similar revealing incidents. Two hundred twenty-four oral history interviews conducted by Embry, a white Mormon woman, and Alan Cherry, a black Mormon man, led Embry to conclude that while some black Mormons have suffered from instances of racial hatred or bigotry in the LDS Church, “[a] more serious problem than deliberate malice was ignorance, insensitivity, and a general lack of experience with cultural and racial diversity” (147). Embry also points out that, historically, “Mormons have not been hostile as much as ambivalent—and sometimes intimidated—by racial differences” (78).

A second scene that illustrates Mormons’ ambivalence and intimidation over racial diversity occurs when Martin recalls a question posed to her on the first night that she joined the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Describing a tour of the Salt Lake Tabernacle, she writes,

I remember one person approached me and said, “Sister Martin, we are very happy to have you with us. What shall I call you—Black, Negro, or colored?” I then said with a smile on my face and love in my heart, that they could call me anything as long as they spelled my name right! That was the end of that session. (62)

Although this white character’s question implies an ostensibly admirable desire to call Martin by the racial term that she would prefer
(“Black,” “Negro,” or “colored”), such a question posed to a stranger demonstrates the person’s casual disregard for the complex issues surrounding racial terminology and identification at the time. Racial infelicities and insensitivities of this sort are typical of many white Americans who have rarely had to think much about their own racial identity or the meaning and consequences of how they refer to minority “others.” In contrast, Martin has had to think about her identity, her skin color, and her place among Mormons every day of her life since she converted. She knows, too, that her physical appearance makes her a rarity and, thus, a curiosity among Mormons. This speaker’s question, obviously posed from a white perspective and, although awkward, meant as a gesture of acceptance, reveals the person’s lack of genuine understanding about people and cultures outside of his or her own insulated experience. Once again, a phenomenon such as this is common, not only among Mormons, but among American citizens in general. Tatum explains why members of majority groups know so little about those in the minority.

The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants. Even when firsthand experience is limited by social segregations, the number and variety of images of the dominant group available through television, magazines, books, and newspapers provide subordinates with plenty of information about the dominants. The dominant world view has saturated the culture for all to learn. (24)

Ironically, Mormons themselves, with their history of religious persecution and forced migration, understand, at some level, what living outside the normative dominant American culture means. Yet just because they themselves have been the targets of stereotype and misunderstanding, that does not mean they cannot be guilty of prejudice themselves. “Many of us are both dominant and subordinate,” says Tatum. “The thread and threat of violence runs through all of the isms. There is a need to acknowledge each other’s pain, even as we attend to our own” (27). In the 1960s, white Mormons, such as characters depicted in Martin’s text, behave very much like dominant white American culture. Mormon sociologist Armand Mauss reports, “Careful review of the history of Mormon racism will reveal that it has followed closely the comparable history for America as a whole, sad as that may be” (Bush and Mauss 176).14 Most whites at the time were not well educated about
the historical or cultural experiences of racial minorities living in the United States, and furthermore, they felt little need or reason to rectify that lack of knowledge.

Martin provides several other examples of negative encounters she had with Mormons, all the while avoiding calling Mormons prejudiced. She even goes so far as to counter one BYU nursing student’s actual admission to being prejudiced during a question and answer period at a lecture given by Martin herself. In her autobiography, she quotes the nursing student’s statement as though she remembers it verbatim: “Mrs. Martin, I was born in the South and I am prejudiced, but I don’t dislike you” (69). After this startling admission, Martin tells her readers,

She was so sincere and meant well. I told her that many things were instilled into her mind as a child while growing up in the deep South, where Blacks cannot defend themselves and where they are barred from restaurants etc. I said to her that I didn’t think she was prejudiced, and she felt good about my saying this. But as we all know by now, we all have some ‘hang-ups’ once in a while. (69)

As a United States citizen and a newly baptized Mormon, Martin grapples with a culture, inside and outside of Mormonism, steeped in racial stereotypes and prejudice. Her generous response to white characters’ racial prejudice is meant to minimize their words or actions by calling them something other than “racism” or “prejudice”—in this case “hang-ups” and, in other cases, “rudeness” (43) or “funny ideas.” Martin wants to avoid any language or accusations that might make her appear prejudiced herself or that might incur white readers’ disfavor. At times, the autobiography may even exasperate some in her audience who view Martin as a writer ready to assuage all her white readers’ consciences about their prejudice and make them “feel good,” as she writes about doing for this nursing student.

As a person raised in the United States, a deeply racialized country, Martin’s writing also suggests in places that she herself has internalized cultural messages about what it means to be black and a woman. She insists, for example, on “eagerly,” “gladly,” “happily,” and “willingly” (11) converting to a church that had not yet rescinded its discriminatory policy. She also purposely excuses discriminatory remarks or behavior among church members when she encounters them. Omi and Winant argue that a permanent “racial ideology” has shaped the history, social systems, relations, and minds of United States citizens.
The continuing persistence of racial ideology suggests that... racial myths and stereotypes cannot be exposed as such in the popular imagination. They are, we think, too essential, too integral, to the maintenance of the US social order. Of course, particular meanings, stereotypes and myths can change, but the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology, seems to be a permanent feature of US culture. (63)

Martin's writing gives evidence of many members' denial about the racialized culture of the Mormon Church. In the late twentieth century, decades after Martin published her autobiography, Eugene England discusses Mormon denial about its racialized theology by examining the way Mormon writers have dealt with the issue of race. These writers, he argues, have had to bear

a double burden of hidden black presence and denial, of fundamental contradiction between professed ideals and actual practices: We [Mormons] have all the American contradictions [Toni] Morrison reviews [in Playing in the Dark] and also our own unique theology, which has been more explicitly idealistic and non-racialized than traditional Christian thought, and our own cultural overlay, which has been in some ways more racialized than the rest of American culture: We claimed, as early as the Book of Mormon in 1830, that 'all are alike unto God... black and white' (2 Nephi 26.33), and Joseph Smith renounced slavery when that was a minority position, but we were the only church formally to declare a policy that made a distinction by race and to develop a powerfully influential, though unofficial, racialized theology.” (“Playing” 4)

Although Martin wants to combat and eliminate prejudice, she writes from a painfully conflicted position, struggling to account for the potential criticism from opposing readers and to accomplish the varied purposes that she set out to achieve through writing. Such personal and narrative challenges sometimes lead Martin to voice ideas that suggest she may herself have internalized stereotypical notions about the place of African American women in society and in the Mormon Church. When she discusses the day that she asked her daughter what she would like to be when she grows up, for example, Martin is at first disappointed but then writes approvingly about her daughter's decision to pursue a career in the service industry. "I have to be a waitress or something like that, mommy!" says her daughter. When Martin claims that she wanted to “deride” her daughter's choice and her “dogmatic approach to what her future must surely be,” she, instead, “holds back,” deciding firmly in
her autobiography that “[n]o job is too menial . . . since if a person wants to do it and enjoys it as well, it is indeed an enviable state, for how many people of any race or religion can claim a real love of their daily work?” (31). Alluding to race in this context reflects her understanding that since the time of slavery, blacks in the United States have been seen or have seen themselves pursuing service-oriented jobs. Rather than “condone” or “condemn” what she viewed as her child’s “innocent dream,” however, she “let silence be the binding link of further communication between us.” In short, this would not be a moment in the autobiography when she interrogates the subordinated position of blacks, especially black women, in the United States. She knows well that black females have historically been relegated to subservient work that other upwardly mobile white Americans would never “dream” of pursuing as a livelihood. By remaining silent, she believes she is allowing her child personal freedom—one of her highest ideals. “I was able to accept her goals as her right to achieve them, and not instigate my own fallen dreams on the life and mind of a child, with her own life to live, and her own right for individuality and finding herself” (31). Whatever freedom of choice Martin believes she promotes by relating this incident with her daughter, her reluctance to critique her daughter’s desire for a career as a waitress still suggests potential evidence for Martin’s own conditioned resignation to second-class citizenship. Psychologists refer to such a phenomenon among members of subordinated groups as “internalized oppression” (Tatum 6).

In a contrasting passage of her autobiography, Martin confronts just such stereotypes about black women when she admits to the difficulty of both extending and receiving acceptance in a mostly white faith community.

I try to turn away from snubs, and from derision, from forced toleration that is suffocation and an insult to me on the part of some narrow-minded people both inside and outside the Mormon Church. Some people really believe that all Negroes are “hotel maids” or “Southern mammys” who have gone to their glory, but remain alive in the hearts and labels and breakfast tables on a syrup bottle! A real mammy with a kerchief wrapped around her head, and acres of impossibly white teeth, gleaming like a banner against a black sky of skin is the only image of the Negro race some people comprehend! (12)

Such tensions between Martin’s desire to both reject and accept inequality inside or outside the church permeate the autobiography.
Many scenes illustrate the difficulty she faces as an autobiographer working to maintain favor with multiple and conflicting audiences, all the while trying to accommodate herself to membership in a church and a society that discriminate against her. Whether to garner favor with her white Mormon audience or to avoid committing “prejudice” by her own definition, the real story of racism in the Mormon Church inevitably leaks out, especially in the ancillary material that frames Martin’s text.

Framing Material

Martin’s life story does not stand alone as a published work. Although not an official Mormon publication, the book, printed by Hawkes Publishing, a small, independently owned press, is fashioned to achieve a sense of association and credibility with the mainstream LDS Church. The book’s front and back cover images, as well as supplementary material located before and after her own text, provide a problematic historical frame around her life narrative.

According to one excerpted news article, the original title of Martin’s autobiography was to be *I Am a Negro Mormon* (78). In addition, the photos, newspaper articles, foreword, and supplementary material provide the best indicator of the controversy, divisions, and angst inside and outside the Mormon Church over black-white issues at the time. Both front and back covers of Martin’s autobiography are clearly fashioned to market an explanation and defense of Mormons’ unpopular teaching about church members of African descent. Even the title, written in bold capital letters, “BLACK MORMON Tells Her Story,” emphasizes Martin’s racial and religious identity, a surprising combination sure to sell her book. In both words and images, the cover pages of this autobiography intend to capture readers’ attention by promising answers, once and for all, to the persistent questions that 1960s and 1970s America directed at Mormons. Small letters at the bottom of the front cover repeat the key question that critics of the church asked most often: “Why can’t the Negro hold the priesthood?” And an additional nagging question acts as a title on the back cover: “Can a Negro Find Happiness in the Mormon Church?” Martin’s final words in the autobiography intend to answer that question directly. “[I]t is difficult for me to imagine how I could possibly be more filled with happiness and how my life could be more saturated with blessings than it is at the present,” she insists. “I am so very glad that I AM A BLACK MORMON” (73).
Nowhere is Mormon equivocation on the issue of equality more evident than in indisputably racist supplementary material following Martin’s story. This essay, written by John D. Hawkes, the book’s publisher, and entitled “Why Can’t the Negro Hold the Priesthood,” is an illogical and nonauthoritative explanation about the discriminatory policy against black members. Hawkes begins by noting that he is “not a General Authority and therefore cannot act as an official spokesman for the church” (81). The manner in which he writes, however, intends to appear as though he speaks with authority, and the theology he spells out certainly reflects a common rationale for black priesthood denial circulating among Mormons at the time. He bases his argument on “why the Negro isn’t allowed the Priesthood” on what he refers to as “three very beautiful beliefs and teachings in our church”:

1st: We believe we are lead by Prophets of God who receive revelation.
2nd: We believe we had a pre-existent state with God that had a great influence on our positions in this life.
3rd: We believe that God has chosen people and rewards righteousness.

(81)

From these three “teachings” Hawkes claims, “A mature black person who decides to join the church accepts our prophets and also accepts their position in regards to the Priesthood” (83). The implication that black persons who are immature, as opposed to mature, will not accept their subordinate position in the church is no less than galling. Furthermore, according to Hawkes’s interpretation of the second and third “teachings,” black people’s subordinated position was one they understood and accepted in the preexistence.

All those born into this life accepted the plan of our Savior. And it is the author’s belief that we all accepted the conditions under which we would be born, black or brown, white or yellow. It is highly possible that we may have known all of the limitations and advantages we might have. We may have known whether we would be blind or crippled, whether we would be born in the jungles of Africa or into rich families in America. (84–85)

Additional illogical reasoning supports this flawed theology. “Everyone is our superior is [sic] some small way. There have been many wise men who have questioned the reality of God simply because they felt a just God would not make men so unequal, and yet everywhere they look they see great inequality among men right from birth” (84). Using people’s varying degrees of performance in premortal life as an
explanation for why they were born black or white and, thus, why they had achieved greater or lesser status (i.e., “black” skin color) in mortality, was a familiar, although not officially sanctioned, justification for the discriminatory policy against black members. In effect, Hawkes’s writing provides clear evidence for the perpetuation of bigoted ideas believed by many Mormons to be based in doctrine.

This undeniably racist theological justification for discrimination according to lineage and skin color is positioned after Martin’s defense of Mormonism. Its presence and content undermine her central contention that the church is not racist by ironically providing evidence for the very opposite. In such a racialized culture, perceived differences based on physical appearances (such as those expressed by Hawkes) constantly shape the behaviors and attitudes that Martin characterizes in her text. Mormon theology at the time—which espoused sharing the gospel with all people, regardless of race, while simultaneously enforcing contradictory policies that discriminated against black members—created unresolved tensions and racist notions of white superiority within Mormon people, no matter how many Mormons, including Martin herself, might try to deny it.

Ancillary material preceding and following Martin’s life narrative recalls characteristics of slave narratives. The text, for example, is a spiritual quest in which she focuses on a life-changing conversion experience, using a tripartite organization common to narratives by former slaves—before conversion, conversion, and after conversion. In “Singing Swords: The Literary Legacy of Slavery,” Melvin Dixon argues that “[c]onversion as rebirth or transformation was a central event in the slave’s recorded life” (302). Furthermore, slaves used a “conversion-like model of personal experience and testimony to construct their own ‘witness’ to the horrors of slavery and the regenerative joy of freedom” (303). Slaves often narrated their quest toward freedom as it was made possible by God and Christianity. Martin’s narrative, too, is a story about her religious quest for happiness and a kind of freedom in relation to God that she had not known before her conversion to Mormonism.

Despite her sense of liberating happiness, however, a problematic aspect of her autobiography is another parallel with slave narratives—introductory material written by white writers. Such material was usually situated before the actual narrative to confirm, for white readers, the truth of a former slave’s personal account of his or her life in slavery. Through the cachet they had established with other white readers, these white amanuenses/editors/authors would also lend credibility to the
strength of the black narrator’s good character. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave is preceded, for example, by both William Lloyd Garrison’s preface and a letter written by Wendell Phillips, Esq., two white male abolitionists with community status, confirming Douglass’s identity and endorsing his accomplishments. Before the text of Martin’s narrative, there first appears a statement by Mayor Bart Wolthuis typed on official “City of Ogden, Utah” letterhead, excerpted on the book’s back cover, and included as the first page of the book, next to Martin’s own dedication page. Mayor Wolthuis, a white male with community standing in Utah, confirms, “Wynetta Clark Martin is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and sings in the Tabernacle Choir” (3). He also declares that God has been guiding her life. Similar to Garrison and Phillips writing in support of Douglass, Mayor Wolthuis appeals to white readers for understanding as they read Martin’s life story. The problem with his appeal, however, is that it borders on patronizing sympathy, calling attention to what he regards as her lower station in life. “The reader will feel a genuine empathy for the plight of all individuals who strive to rise above the circumstances in all walks of life” (3). His sentiment establishes an “us” vs. “them” relationship that relegates blacks to a subordinated moral and economic position from which they wish to lift themselves up to the level of white readers like him. “For the caucasian [sic], this book gives a lucid account of the struggles the blacks face in being accepted as a full partner in today’s complex and sometimes disturbing world. We begin to understand the many problems and frustrations the minority people face each day as they strive to walk the same path of life as we” (3).

Although somewhat ambiguous, his writing does not persuasively show how much “understanding” he has for blacks. Besides clearly distinguishing them as “the other,” Wolthuis asserts that black readers will come to know “that within His church there is a place for all of the children of God” (3). Failing to recognize the irony of this glib statement, he overlooks the fact that blacks were relegated to a subordinated “place” in the Mormon Church at the time.

In effect, Wolthuis’s letter (4) and Hawkes’s supplementary essay (79–94) serve to problematically frame Martin’s narrative about her conversion. Thus, taken as a whole, the book denies Mormon race prejudice, illustrates it, and also attempts to justify it. Just as many early Mormon women in polygamy wrote to defend a religion that inspired and burdened them, Martin, too, appears similarly devoted to a religion
that both inspires and oppresses her. Ironically, her own narrative, the images included with her text, and the material that precedes and follows her life story provide evidence for just how far the contemporary LDS Church has moved away from its formerly racist position of black priesthood denial and temple restrictions. It is difficult to imagine that such a problematic, contradictory book would be published today.

A persistent question about whether or not her parents will ultimately reject or accept their daughter’s new religion is one of the most important purposes for Martin to tell her story. In the dedication of her autobiography, she writes, “To my beloved parents: Grace and Sentell Willis Sr. Daughters: Pauletta Rochell Martin and Ruth Ann Martin, Brothers and Sisters: Freddie, Diane, Carolyn and Anthony.” The conversations Martin reconstructs between her and her family serve to voice the suspicions and fears of outsiders, the explicit audience she means to address. As a writer, her rhetorical challenge is to represent her parents’ (the opposition’s) views accurately and fairly and then to allay their concerns. Her mother especially voices the suspicions of black outsiders. By reconstructing their dialogue, she demonstrates how her mother has been understandably concerned that the church may be exploiting her daughter for its own purposes. “I promise you, darling, I will never call your church weird again, but I will not humor you by saying that I believe it is true. If they are taking advantage of your race, making you a mockery, it is my prayer you will know it and become wiser in decisions that should be given extensive thought” (67). Of course, Martin tries to prove the extent of her thought and research about the church by writing her life story. She records another important observation that her mother makes after speaking with a Mormon missionary on Temple Square. “I was very impressed with the sincerity of the young man I talked with,” says Grace. “[H]owever, his answers as to where our [blacks’] place is seemed not to come from the deepest conviction in himself that it was right or even that he understood” (66–67). Here she records her mother as having astutely identified the discomfort that many white Mormons felt about the priesthood exclusion before 1978, reporting her mother’s words as evidence of that uneasiness.

Mormon social scientist and writer Armand Mauss explains that a significant alternative publication begun by Mormon intellectuals in the 1960s grew out of many Mormons’ great discomfort over the policy toward blacks in the church. “It is more than coincidence that the decade of the 1960s gave rise almost simultaneously to the Mormon
confrontation with civil rights and to Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought” (Bush and Mauss 1). In an essay written to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the lifting of the ban and to express concern over twentieth-century Mormons’ lingering denial about their racialized culture, the founding editor of Dialogue, Eugene England, reflects on the pain of that tumultuous period when Mormon intellectuals struggled over the church’s policy regarding black members.

We were especially uneasy about the unofficial but nevertheless widely accepted reasons for the ban—that Blacks were descendants of Cain through Ham, naturally fit for servitude and inferiority, or were given black bodies and denied priesthood and temple blessings because of some failing in their pre-existent life. Some of that uneasiness remains today, twenty years later, when we consider that most Mormons are still in denial about that ban, unwilling to talk in church settings about it, and that a remarkable number of Mormons still believe that Blacks, as well as other colored people, come color-coded into the world, their lineage and even their class are a direct indication of failures in a previous life. (“Playing” 1)

In Martin’s autobiography, her mother pinpoints the dis-ease of many Mormons that, according to England, continues even today. Eventually, though, she portrays her mother’s acceptance of her decision with certain reservations, providing a tentative closure to the strain between them and, ultimately, to the questions raised about her daughter’s motives for converting. Concluding her parents’ visit to Temple Square, she uses the episode as a symbolic resolution to any lingering tensions she had woven into her story between blacks and Mormons. “I had their blessings and their prayers for what I had done. Perhaps if I dare believe it, I had won possibly their admiration too” (67–68).

Love and Acceptance in the Church

As a black Mormon, Martin is obviously well aware of the critical assumptions and stereotypes that nonmember black readers such as her parents hold about her new religion. A significant conflict that plays out in the pages of her text is Martin’s strained relations with her African American readers. This tension carries over into the defensive way she inscribes the story of her life. In order to challenge their criticisms, she describes relationships with white Mormons who have shown her what she believes to be genuine expressions of love and acceptance. “So many
members have welcomed me with open arms, and I don’t find the general prejudice that so many think there is in the Mormon Church” (70). In her autobiography’s “Appreciation Page,” she names and thanks “the endless list of good members who have helped me and given me acceptance in the church” (6). Furthermore, as the first black faculty member at Brigham Young University, Martin forcefully defends this private university against what the outside world believed to be egregious acts of racism. “No race is barred from B.Y.U.,” declares Martin, “and I’m here as a material witness” (70). While her own presence, along with the presence of several other black students she mentions, at the university is enough to prove the school itself did not exercise an overtly racist policy of banning African Americans from attending, the fact that she could teach there certainly would not have been enough to convince critics that racism did not exist in the Mormon Church.

To persuade black nonmember readers (whom she refers to as “my people”) that Mormons did not merely deceive her into being baptized, she lets them know that she recognizes racism when she sees it. After working at a hospital, Martin writes,

I knew some white people violently objected to sharing the facilities of a room in a hospital ward with a colored person. In the weeks I had spent as an employee of this same hospital, I had had to handle many such situations in the most tactful manner I could manage without showing that an insult to my people was indirectly an insult to me, too. (49)

In this passage, she seeks to validate her black identity by portraying incidents when she was abused for the color of her skin. In effect, she must give witness to personal experiences of degradation in order to authorize her membership in a racially oppressed group, proving she has the personal experience to recognize and name racist attitudes and behavior when she sees them.

Martin contrasts episodes of racial hatred she has experienced with the kindness and acceptance in the church, including the joy she felt when she met a person who would become a dear Mormon friend. In comparison to racially motivated insults she has endured since childhood, Martin writes about experiencing something quite different among Mormons. To illustrate, when she herself undergoes minor leg surgery at this same hospital, she describes trying to avoid being subjected to “irate” or “superior-type white people” by requesting a roommate who had been asked beforehand “if she objected to my color” and
whether she was a nonsmoker since Martin suffered from asthma (49). As she regains consciousness, she sees an empty bed next to her, leading her to assume, incorrectly, that the nurses couldn’t “find even one person who would be willing to share a room with a ‘NEGRO!’” (50). Correcting her misapprehension, Barbara Weston, a Mormon and a “really darling gal” with an “infectious” laugh, soon arrived. “We were friends on sight,” writes Martin (51).

Recreating the scene with Weston when the two women discuss Weston’s Mormon religion, Martin admits to the ignorance and religious prejudices that she held before her education about Latter-day Saint beliefs. She confesses, “[O]ne of the first things [Barbara] told me next morning as she brushed her hair was that she was a devoted Mormon. I thought she meant something to do with her dietary habits, like a vegetarian or something, so I shrugged and said, ‘Me, I eat anything!”’ (51). Clarifying her roommate’s misperceptions, Weston explains, “A Mormon is a religion, you cuckoo! I’m a member of the Mormon Church—you know, Salt Lake City—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, alias also the L.D.S. Church!” (52). Here, using her new Mormon friend’s explanation, Martin clears up any confusion about the various names of the church. She then develops the scene further with an interchange about a common prejudice held against Mormons—religious fanaticism.

I looked at her apprehensively, “Hey, you’re no firespouting fanatic or something are you?” She laughed her merry laugh again and said in her pleasant musical voice, “Do I act like I would be a fanatic? I’m what is regarded as an active and average member of my church and I really love it! It’s my life as well as my husband’s and children’s, too. It gives us the ground rules to follow in leading a meaningful, happy life, with activity, spirituality, and a heck of a lot to live for now and for all eternity!!!” (52)

Recreating this dialogue between herself and her Mormon friend—who replaces the negative, stereotypical label “fanatics” with the more positive terms “active,” “average,” “meaningful,” and “happy”—enables Martin to acknowledge the misinformation (i.e., prejudice) against Mormons that she, too, held before converting to the church. Soon, though, Martin thinks Weston might be “the answer to my long and sincere and searching supplications through prayer for a channel to express my faith” (52). Writing that her hospital roommate had “a special sort of charisma” and “cheeriness” that convinced her “there was a rea-
son to like living” (53), she portrays Weston as a person who “radiated” what she believed to be “complete happiness and accordance with life and God” (53).

In like manner, Martin’s life narrative works to persuade readers that she herself had come to embrace and radiate this same happiness as a result of her own conversion to the Mormon Church. A two-by-two-inch photo of Martin’s image smiling out from her book’s black and white front cover, for example, is situated just above a larger, hand-drawn image of the Salt Lake Tabernacle organ and choir. Her pleasant image above the choir intends to confirm her black identity, provide evidence for her membership in this famed American choir, and reinforce the happiness she feels in the church. By the time she begins writing the story, she has been touring nationally with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for two years. “It seemed almost too good to be true,” she writes. “The Choir has meant more to me than anyone can ever imagine because as I stated before, music has been a way for me to express all the feelings I cannot sometimes verbalize” (62). Besides the front cover images of her and the choir, seven more photos toward the back of her book also show her smiling in excerpted newspaper articles profiling her life. All combined, the images intend to persuade readers that Martin made a free, happy choice to become a Mormon. These articles and their accompanying photos reinforce her fame as “the first Negro member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.” They also document the publication of her recent autobiography, which, according to one article, she says she wrote because “she wanted people to know how I feel about the church—that it is not prejudiced” (78).

Concluding her story, Martin writes, “My conversion to the Mormon Church has taught me, strangely enough, a greater tolerance for racial disputes than I ever thought possible” (72). To the end of her narrative, she maintains her “understanding” that “all people basically mean well, but fear and ignorance prompts many verbal remarks that I am sure are not intended to be painful. I have learned that a word is just a word and that deeds are more important than words. For deeds essentially lead men to words they speak” (72). Ultimately, this Mormon woman writer’s autobiography argues for examining one’s own prejudices, rather than pointing a finger at others. “I do not cry anymore over insults,” explains Martin. “I cry only over insults I give. If a person has been purposely unkind, I hope for them only serenity in finding God and learning to live life filled to the brim with kindness” (72). Determined to over-
look racial infelicities, she writes in order to fulfill her destiny to improve relations between blacks and whites inside and outside the LDS Church. Yet no matter what her writing intentions might be, the book as a whole both denies and affirms the racialized culture of the Mormon Church. In addition, it illustrates the racist ideas used to rationalize a policy that clearly discriminated against black church members.

Similar to Annie Clark Tanner in *A Mormon Mother*, the primary ideal that Martin intends to promote through her autobiographical writing is the importance of educating oneself about different races, peoples, cultures, and religions. Hired as a “Research Consultant on Black Culture” and as the first black faculty member at BYU, Martin writes, “I took advantage of this chance to do something for humanity.” During her first teaching assignment with BYU student nurses, Martin tells them, “[T]o become a good nurse one must know different cultures.” She claims to have “lectured to them for about forty-five minutes,” insisting that “for them to understand the beginning of White superiority and Black-assumed inferiority, they must go back to the discovery of America” (68–69). These educational efforts demonstrate that she does not want to accept the excuse white Mormons would likely offer that “they just didn’t know . . .” or “just didn’t realize. . . .” Instead, her life narrative prods them to become better educated about black history and black concerns, especially if they genuinely wish to welcome her into their Mormon community and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with its message of salvation, acceptance, and love for all people. In essence, Martin’s life narrative reflects a complicated rendering of her search for truth, identity, and a way to rid people of their prejudice toward any people for either their race or religion. Given the problematic nature of this text, however, the book itself is a significant faithful transgression that tells a story the contemporary Mormon Church and its members would prefer to bury in the past.