Latter-day Screens
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Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism.

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In September 2010, Kody Brown and his wives took a risk of phenomenal proportion. On a reality television show broadcast around the world through TLC/Discovery, the Browns exposed themselves as fundamentalist Mormon polygamists: one man, three women (as of 2010, four), and twelve children (as of 2018, eighteen) who together constitute the family at the heart of the reality show Sister Wives (2010–present). At the time of Sister Wives’ premiere, the Browns lived in Lehi, Utah, a small, largely fundamentalist town in the north-central part of the state, which is itself predominantly Mormon. While marriages between more than two people are illegal in every state in the U.S., in Utah it was also against the law to claim one is married to multiple spouses. In this regard, to speak of multiple wives was a performative act made illegal by the state. The Browns and other families like them lived under an agreement of tolerance between law enforcement and practitioners of polygamy, basically allowing those in plural marriage to be free of prosecution if they lived a quiet life. Airing their twenty-two pairs of dirty underwear on international television was living a bit too large, apparently, and after Sister Wives debuted, the state of Utah began gathering evidence for a formal prosecution on grounds of illegal cohabitation through bigamy. Kody Brown argued in court that because he was only legally married to one woman (Meri) and his other unions (with Janelle, Christine, and Robyn) were symbolic-spiritual relationships, he was not in defiance of the law. But the state of Utah viewed his long-term relationship with four women and
their multiple children as evidence of common-law marriages and thus a violation of bigamy laws. As Martha Beck has said about the rule culture of Mormonism more broadly, the eleventh commandment is “Thou Shalt not Commit Publicity” (2006, 207). In going public, the Browns violated this commandment against visibility.

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

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

As it was soon revealed, the ruling on bigamy also became a test case for marriage rights, and within one week, Utah—the most consistently conservative state in the nation—began issuing same-sex marriage licenses. Thirteen hundred marriages were performed in roughly three weeks, until the
Utah Supreme Court offered an interim stay that required citizens of Utah to vote on marriage rights through Proposition 3. This shift of marital rights and restrictions from the courts to the voters echoed a similar ruling against same-sex marriage in California in 2008 that was reinforced through the powers of Proposition 8, which prohibited future same-sex marriage rights but could not invalidate marriages that had already taken place (“Prop 8 Documentary” 2014). California’s Prop 8 was largely, and at the time surreptitiously, supported by the mainstream Mormon Church in Salt Lake City, which sent its members on a door-to-door crusade across the Golden State to wipe out the right to marital unions between same-sex partners.

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

I use this case as a curtain raiser for a book on gender, sexuality, and mediated Mormonism because it nicely sets the stage for the many themes that come together under the banner of Mormonism. Importantly, in the word “Mormonism” I mean not specific or actual F/LDS people, practices, or histories as much as the multiple stories told and retold about these things. It is thus mediated Mormonism as both an idea (meme) and a way of thinking (analytic) that beats at the heart of my inquiry. I regard Mormonism as a lens for seeing American social investments in the meanings of justice, particularly with respect to identity. I argue in this book that the ideas of what constitute Mormonism—which are distinct from the actual mainstream LDS Church or its many fundamentalist sects’ doctrine and social practices—function with rich symbolic meaning. “Mormon” is often used as a code word with respect to gender and sexuality, but the meanings of that code do not always tether to the same concepts. In some cases, “Mormon”
means sexually chaste; in other contexts it denotes sexual lasciviousness; in other uses still, the term means sexually bizarre. Gender functions as a similar sliding hermeneutic, given the contrasting expectation that adherents (across both LDS and FLDS groups) be simultaneously free agents and wholly obedient. In all cases, gender, sex, and sexuality speak very clearly about power, including how it is enforced and how it can be modified. Given that these mandates often find themselves enmeshed in cultural materials—from television to Broadway plays to feature films—to reference “Mormon” is to reinforce its various meanings as a hermeneutic that is ironically separate from yet wholly identified with the church/es and their followers, however broadly identified.

This American-born religion, conceived in the mind of its charismatic prophet, Joseph Smith, and nicknamed Mormon for its holy text the Book of Mormon, believes in love, optimism, meritocracy, family unity, hard work, and the ultimate form of gendered upward aspirationalism, whereby a man might inherit his own world and himself become a God. It is American through and through (even, one might argue, in its provocative polytheism). And yet Mormons have long held a contentious place in the American scene. From the very beginning in 1830, Joseph and his increasing flock of impassioned followers were perceived as threats to the establishment order, even amid a nineteenth-century backdrop of American religiosity, the Second Great Awakening, that fostered a number of new religions, from the Owenites (dedicated to separatist utopian socialism) to the Oneida Perfectionists (dedicated to sexual egalitarianism, or the idea that all men could be married to all women, and thus sex within marriage did not require monogamy). Mormonism struck its own rancorous chords for the way it consolidated the Saints into voting blocs, recruited new members, and formed monopolies in business and real estate. Throughout the early 1830s, there were also reports of “strange marital customs” among the Mormons, rumors of polygamy that threatened the staunch bourgeois sexual sensibilities of the American mainstream. As Nancy Cott’s (2002) Public Vows illustrates, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America created an ideological template whereby monogamy was linked to civilization and barbarity to polygamy. This contract had deep roots in the U.S. political order and fed much of the antipathy toward Mormons. It was not LDS separatism, then, but a refusal to be separate combined with Mormons’ popular and political influence and perceived disruption of mainstream moralities and governmental systems that upset the townspeople in Missouri, Ohio, and Illinois. This, in turn,
triggered mutual violence, persecution, and death (including that of Smith in 1844) and ultimately forced the Saints to venture westward to Salt Lake.

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

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

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

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

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

The vast cultural archive by and about Mormonism serves as a lens through which to perceive a distinctively gendered turn in the semiotics
of value, from those more masculine (emphasizing tropes of rationalism, individualism, domination, authoritarianism, accomplishment, and competition) to those more aligned with queer-positive and feminist-friendly politics (emphasizing collaboration, liberation, and community). In this, I hope my book demonstrates the civil rights adage made resonant through Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that the “arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fundamentalist Brown family also offers a ready example of the feminist-friendly and queer-positive consequence of Mormonism as a meme and analytic, since the phenomenon that they represent (an oppressed marginal group forcing themselves into the public sphere to counter damaging stereotypes) has itself become a flashpoint for conversations and legislative advancement that constitutes an agenda for progressive social change. While it is noteworthy that the Browns speak in liberal terms about acceptance of others, it is not necessary that they be so inclined for the public discourse that attaches to them to have this effect. As one case in point, for instance, the putative opposite of Kody Brown is Warren Jeffs, the imprisoned president and prophet of the FLDS, made famous for trafficking in women, raping children, exiling boys and men, and engaging in sex parties (what he called “heavenly sessions”) with his underaged brides at his temple in Texas. In 2006, Jeffs gained the notorious distinction of being the number one person on the FBI’s ten most-wanted list. He is now serving life plus twenty years in federal prison. By most accounts—including and especially those of the Browns and other modern polygamous families—Jeffs constitutes evil incarnate, the personification of a combined egomania and perversity, fed
by assurances of absolute godlike authority. One couldn't really find a less liberal, fluid, or progressive leader than Warren Jeffs. And yet his place in the mediascape demarcates something that he himself would never endorse, since the public conversation about Jeffs very much works to establish a protocol for social justice that gives women authority over their own bodies and all people the right to self-governance, a point I discuss at greater length in chapter 4.

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

Mediated Mormonism, in Context

From Victorian pulp serials and early twentieth-century silent films that depicted Mormonism as a dangerous cult to Mormon-produced magazines and documentaries that feature the religion's zeal for international proselytizing and conversion, media have served as the chief tool for spreading the word of and the fear about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both by the Saints themselves and by a broader Gentile culture. This is perhaps fitting given that the prominence of Mormonism now can well be attributed to its birth at the nexus of American nineteenth-century media culture. Smith and his supporters (predominantly Martin Harris) took full advantage of the rise of cheap paper, ready printing presses, and close proximity to the Erie Canal, which was under construction at the moment of the discovery of the holy plates and would soon become the distribution superhighway of the time. Indeed, the banks of the Erie Canal are easily visible from the back door of the Grandin Print Shop in Palmyra, New York, where the Book of Mormon was first published. Fawn M. Brodie, Smith's biographer, astutely notes, “Joseph Smith dared to found a new religion in the age of printing. When he said, ‘Thus saith the Lord!’ the words were copied down by secretaries and congealed forever into print” (1995, vii). One might argue that media made Mormonism.
It has surely sustained it. As I briefly discuss in the prologue, from its founding to the early part of the twentieth century, Mormons were regarded with a mixture of what Mary Campbell terms “fascination, distaste, and outright horror” (2016, 29), largely due to their separatism and adoption of polygamy. Mormons, and through them the territory of Utah (statehood was conferred in 1896) were referenced in “Orientalizing vocabulary” of the “seraglio,” “concubine,” “Sultan,” “Moslem,” “Mohamed,” “Turk,” and “Arab,” invoking racialized fears of a homegrown otherness (Campbell 2016, 31). Countering this notion required recasting the mold of Mormonism, using the powers of media to re-create Mormons as the very epitome of “civilized, cultured, and cosmopolitan” and thus, as the model of an idealized notion of American citizen (Campbell 2016, 23). As a consequence, the twentieth century saw a rise in Mormon-produced films, often called Mollywood, and television, which lead journalist Rollo Romig to quip, “Mormons are the filmmakingest of all faiths” (2012).

Media has also served a proselytizing message. In 1934, for example, Elder Joseph F. Merrill (1934, 568) wrote in the Millennial Star that “favourable publicity will open many doors now closed to the Gospel message,” a publicity that church leaders cultivated in order to counter the negative stereotypes promulgated about Mormons by “evil people” (Neilson 2011, 2). In The Book of Mormon: A Biography, Paul Gutjahr (2012) notes the extraordinary measures that the mainstream Mormon Church has demonstrated in its efforts to disseminate Mormonism throughout the world, both in its relentless production and translation of their primary religious text, the Book of Mormon (presently available in 107 languages), and in the church’s worldwide network of 55,000 Mormon missionaries made famous through a host of mediated fare. And lest we argue that Mormonism is anything but capacious in how it understands either media or proselytizing, The Washington Post reported a new variant—vending machines paid for by the Mormon Church that allow people to purchase “good things” as donations for various world charities (Iati 2018). After three weeks in operation in December 2018, the “giving machines,” as they are called, had generated $1.3 million to be collected and redistributed by the church. These vending machines are not only altruistic; they serve a secondary purpose of evangelizing through image management. The article quotes a Mormon named Anthony: “A lot of times when people think about our faith, they think about the missionaries traipsing door to door and trying to change you in some way.” The vending machines, by contrast, “can help non-church members better understand the religion’s emphasis on serving others.”
The media history of the American regard toward Mormons is vast, yet this present moment is unprecedented in terms of a U.S. fascination with and fear of Mormon people and practices, in some part aided by having in 2012 two Republican Mormon candidates, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman Jr., vying for the presidency of the United States (perhaps mirroring the religion’s founder, Joseph Smith, who was a candidate for president in 1844).11 These developments, joined with the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, the 2002 Elizabeth Smart abduction, the 2008 raid on the Yearning for Zion Ranch, the 2012 arrest and conviction of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs, and the 2008 silent effort by the Utah-based Mormon Church to block gay marriage—and the public blowback the church experienced when this political machination was exposed—have all compelled the LDS Church to become more savvy in its public relations efforts. Thus, in 2011, the mainstream LDS Church launched an insistent internet and television PR campaign, “I’m a Mormon,” featuring “Mormons with diverse backgrounds” who “share details about their everyday lives and their deep commitment to Jesus Christ,” many of whom, conveniently, are beautiful models or successful professional athletes (Mormon Channel 2018). Radio podcasts and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are also becoming increasingly popular new modalities through which to extend the message and image of Mormonism, at the same time as the internet has provoked a crisis of faith amid many LDS adherents (Goodstein 2013).

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

In many ways, this insistent strain of Mormon-made cultural production takes very seriously a mandate in 1952 that LDS members actively engage in politics, the arts, and social services, so as to increase the prominence
and visibility of the church more broadly. In this new millennium, being an active and visible thought leader often means running for office and living one's LDS principles publicly. As one example, Arizona senator Jeff Flake earned equal parts praise (from liberals and middle-ground conservatives) and opprobrium (from hard-line conservatives) when in 2017 he excoriated Donald Trump, declaring in a resignation speech from the U.S. Senate that he “would not be complicit” with “the indecency of our discourse,” the “coarseness of our leadership,” and the “compromise of our moral authority.” He continued, “We must never regard as ‘normal’ the regular and casual undermining of our democratic norms and ideals. We must never meekly accept the daily sundering of our country—the personal attacks, the threats against principles, freedoms, and institutions, the flagrant disregard for truth or decency, the reckless provocations, most often for the pettiest and most personal reasons, reasons having nothing whatsoever to do with the fortunes of the people that we have all been elected to serve.” Flake rose again as an independent thought leader when in 2018 he refused to follow his party in the confirmation of Supreme Court justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh until allegations of sexual assault had been more thoroughly investigated. While these stances need not be solely inspired by Flake’s identity as a devout Mormon, one might readily discern Mormonism’s adherence to a higher, better truth. Indeed, Flake’s larger persona, what we might call his star text, is a monumental tribute to Mormonism, and the many forms of mediation that he engages in offer a mighty testimony to the religion—from speeches gone viral (like that cited above) to his memoir (Conscience of a Conservative) to radio programs (Zoe Chase’s radio features on This American Life) to reality television (Rival Survival, in which Flake lives out his survivalist skills on a deserted island in a bipartisan effort with Democratic senator Martin Heinrich). Writing for The Atlantic, McKay Coppins (2017) describes Flake as “almost suspiciously good-natured” and possessing “preternatural niceness.” Similarly, David Brooks (2017) describes Flake as being “sunny and kind,” possessing a “serene courage” in a time when “politics has become a blood sport.” “Assume the best. Look for the good”—it’s a bromide often repeated when talking about Flake. This resolute pleasantness is coupled with a bulldog tenacity and unbending adherence to an ethical code, qualities that resonate with the associations evoked by the Mormon missionary. Describing Flake as having grown up in a “giant Mormon family,” Coppins (2017) quotes him in language that combines Flake’s Mormon ancestors and the country’s founders: “You can always find an excuse to not stand up for your principles. But if you don’t risk anything, it doesn’t matter

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

There are other, equally gendered, ways for Mormons to live out their ideals in the broad spotlight of the contemporary mediascape. Sustaining a blog post is one of these. In fact, blogging is so common within the fundamentalist and mainstream churches that it constitutes a genre of social media, the Bloggernacle. The website Mormon Archipelago catalogs more than two hundred different blogs that constitute the ever-growing territory of the Mormon blogosphere, from big islands like By Common Consent to atolls like Mormon Life Hacker. By far, the most prominent land masses in the archipelago are linked together under a broader term that we might call lifestyle blogging, which includes mommy blogs and beauty blogs (and, increasingly, vlogs). Indeed, the domination of these sites by Mormons is a bit of an open secret, made visible in places like the mainstream beauty magazine Allure, which provides the answer to that age-old question: “Why are so many of your favorite beauty personalities Mormon?” The reason, says author Alice Gregory, is because lifestyle blogging reinforces notions of conventional gender attributes in women, particularly physical beauty, and this, in turn, ties directly to one’s heavenly reward, in a logic of spiritual neoliberalism that I discuss in chapter 1. Gregory (2017) quotes Courtney Kendrick: “When you come from a patriarchal religion, your best bet for gaining power is to be appealing to the men in charge. It can be very hard for women who are outside of normative standards of beauty. In my religion you’re not just asking about having to look good now. You’re also talking about your eternal salvation. Ultimately these beauty standards are connected to what gets us into heaven.” Gregory also notes that lifestyle blogging quite literally puts a good face on the religion itself, making “Mormonism look not just normal but enviable.” This stance echoes Campbell’s comments, through the figure of early twentieth-century LDS photographer Charles Ellis, about the LDS public relations machine historically and the workings of mediated Mormonism more broadly since media of this type cast “the Latter-day Saints as models of high cultural achievement and refinement, icons of modern American citizenship for the larger country to admire and even emulate instead of indict” (2016, 18). In the process, mediation such as this helps to fold “the church itself and its followers in the national body politic” (18), so that to speak of Mormonism is already to work through an idiom of Americanness.
Yet it is not only BYU-based media or independent production houses that have found Mormonism a rich vein for mining. Mainstream feature films such as *The Other Side of Heaven* (2001), produced by 3Mark Entertainment and distributed by Walt Disney Pictures, recounts the coming of age of Mormon boys through the mission process (and stars television actor Christopher Gorham and Academy Award winner Anne Hathaway). Best-sellers from major publishing houses such as Joanna Brooks’s *The Book of Mormon Girl* (Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2012), Elna Baker’s *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance* (Plume, a division of Penguin, 2010), and Nicole Hardy’s *Confessions of a Latter-day Virgin* (Hyperion, 2013) offer “wickedly funny” and “homespun” witticisms about growing up Mormon in a non-Mormon society. Mormonism also relies on other major distributors, like Sony Pictures or Penguin, to forward their brand as a repository of family-friendly entertainment and educational media products.

Conversely, as the *New York Times* noted, when Hollywood wants “good clean fun,” it goes to “Mormon Country” for its writers, producers, and actors (Mooallem 2013). We’ve clearly come a long way from celebrity Mormons Donny and Marie Osmond and their homespun, toothy television show that ran on ABC from 1976 to 1979, though Donny and Marie continue to be fixtures of contemporary media thanks to YouTube, Las Vegas, and reality television, particularly *Dancing with the Stars*.

It’s worth asking if Mormonism is alone in providing this touchstone on the nature of the object. Do other religions offer a similar set of optics or modes of understanding? Not to equivocate, but the answer is yes and no. Certainly, all religions function both as things and as ideas of things, as both signifier and signified. And many other religious traditions, for instance Judaism and Islam, have experienced and continue to experience parallel events—such as persecution, misunderstanding, and outright bigotry—that make their self-definition as marginalized outsiders similar to the *FLDS*. Other religions, for instance Catholicism or evangelical Christianity, are also male governed and patriarchal; and other religions contain strong well-springs for reform, tolerance, and renewal operating within them. Finally, other faith groups are American born and steeped in secrecy, with strong charismatic leaders, stringent rule cultures, and mandatory proselytizing. Some, like Scientology, have also fostered a significant amount of mediation. But no single religion carries all of these markers save the Mormons. And indeed, I would argue that the closest partner in the kind of cultural work the Mormon Church performs is not another religion at all but an entity such as the Boy Scouts of America or the United States Chamber of Commerce.
two ideologically conservative enterprises that fly under the cover of patriotism and free-market principles to become what Alyssa Katz terms “influence machines” (Katz 2015; see also Jordan 2016).

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

Making the matters of the relation between religion and justice all the more germane, Mormonism is also a faith, unlike most other major religions, that builds flux and change into its very code of being. There are thirteen Articles of Faith to which LDS adherents subscribe. These are fairly standard declarations, particularly for those sects considering themselves to be Christian, such as “#1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” But the ninth Article of Faith sets the Mormons apart: “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (“Articles of Faith” 2018). This ninth article marks the faith as always about potentiality. It is ever possible that the church may change its stance. New revelations may come and
have come to the church’s prophets. In a twentieth-century social context, perhaps the most dramatic revelation was heralded in 1978, when the three members of the First Presidency, Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, and Marion G. Romney, announced a new revelation on priesthood that allowed male members of black African descent to function as priesthood holders (see chapter 2). It’s important to note, here, that these hopes for change as voiced in mediated Mormonism are always for more inclusivity and tolerance, not greater restriction and orthodoxy.

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

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

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

WikiHow offers a nine-step tutorial on how to date a Mormon, seemingly intended for the white, straight Gentile boy who is interested in the white, pure Mormon girl (“How to Date a Mormon” 2015). Their pointers include...
such admonitions as being open to prayer, refraining from consuming alcohol, tobacco, and caffeinated products, behaving modestly and respectfully (particularly to her parents), and remaining open to converting if marriage is a likely outcome of the romance. Point number 7, “Understand the Law of Chastity,” offers the most detailed set of injunctions. The broader rule is “no sex before marriage,” but just so everyone can be clear, the post details a series of other unacceptable forms of eroticism. Partners may not:

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

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

Tip number 9 of the WikiHow instruction, showing an attractive man and woman standing in front of the Salt Lake City Temple in silhouette, is illustrated by a wedding photo clearly drawn from teenage vampire juggernaut Twilight: Breaking Dawn (2011), here making Mormonism as a meme quite literal (see figures I.1 and I.2). As I have already mentioned, Stephenie Meyer, the author of the Twilight books, is a practicing Mormon, who lives in my hometown of Mesa, Arizona, and her best-selling trilogy detailing the star-crossed love between a vampire boy Edward and a human girl Bella has riveted millions. I wouldn’t be the first to suggest that the code of chastity between Bella and Edward—a no-sex-before-marriage policy meant to keep him from eviscerating her with his monstrous strength—is a lightly veiled rendition of the Mormon law of chastity, as is their steamy postmarital sexual experience that results in the destruction of their beachside bedroom. Indeed, Edward’s superhuman strength, Bella’s conversion to vampirism,
their resulting capacity to live as a family in perpetuity, and the fact that Edward is able (even as a member of the undead) to father a child, all evoke the broader codes of mediated Mormonism, which maintain not only that families can be sealed for all eternity, but that righteous fathers will become Gods, and the birthing of children will continue to take place in heaven, though only at the celestial level. The film version of Edward and Bella’s honeymoon in *Breaking Dawn* actually features a canopy bed with long diaphanous white netting, thus allowing Bella and Edward in their romantic foreplay to flirt with the idea of going through the veil, an important part of the supersecret Mormon marriage sealing ordinance. Indeed, I would argue that the parallels between the vampire idyll and the Mormon ideal are so strong that instead of being depicted in front of falling white flowers, Bella and Edward’s wedding picture would be more appropriate if they too had the Salt Lake City Temple as their backdrop. Given these connections, it is perhaps fitting that this advice—for the Gentile boy and the Mormon girl, for the vampire boy and the human girl—is communicated through WikiHow and illustrated by *Twilight*, thus cementing a code of chastity and Mormonism in the popular culture imagination.

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

Mormons are not the only religion to put a high premium on righteous virginity, of course, and thus many conservative religions have earned a reputation as agents of repression and sexual frustration: think chastity belts,
Realize that some Mormons will only marry in the Temple. In order to get married in the Temple you and your spouse both need to be Mormon. So if you’re dating a Mormon, and they wish to be married in the Temple consider converting to Mormonism if both of you wish to be married.

FIG. 1.1 “How to Date a Mormon” (2015, WikiHow).

FIG. 1.2 Edward and Bella, *Twilight: Breaking Dawn: Part I.*
vestal virgins, immaculate conceptions, semi-celibate clergy, and dire pronouncements about the sin of spilling one's seed. But even in the age of reality television's fascination with religious extremism, recent Catholic pedophilic sex scandals, or evangelical Christian father-daughter purity balls (where fathers vow to be leaders of integrity by serving as celibate boyfriends, and their teenage daughters wear promise rings and lay white roses on a cross as a silent commitment to their sustained sexual purity), Mormonism's brand correlates with tightly regulated sexuality. Elna Baker writes, for instance, about Mormon dances in New York City that require men and women to retain a distance at least as big as “the standard works” between them. “So when you’re dancing, the Old Testament, New Testament, The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price should be able to fit in the space between you and your dance partner—or you’re standing too close” (Baker 2010). In spite of the fact that Baker talks about this imposed distance between young desiring bodies with humor, the message is seriously rendered through her memoir as a whole: Mormonism mandates your absolute allegiance to the governance and suppression of bodily appetites, be that sexuality or cigarettes. Violating the Word of Wisdom is a slippery slope toward disloyalty to the entire faith.

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

We celebrate new official LDS Church curriculum for Mormon young women that eradicates the old chastity object lessons, even as we know that clearing them from Mormon culture will take much, much longer. . . . We’re still not doing young women in Mormonism many
favors in the way we teach sexuality and particularly in a hyper-emphasis on modesty in dress that has emerged in many Mormon communities.

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

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

Lest we think these are exclusively the devices of fiction or artsy documentary, the notorious Mormon Murder Case (also known as the Jodi Arias trial) put the same ideas front and center as American talking points. In brief, the case centered on the 2008 murder in Mesa, Arizona, of salesman Travis Alexander by his ex-girlfriend Jodi Arias, both of whom were members of the LDS Church, though Alexander converted as a child, and he baptized Arias into the faith in 2007. After changing her story several times, Arias admitted to killing Alexander but said her actions were in self-defense. Arias testified about a complex sex life with Alexander, including oral and anal sex, which Alexander considered to be not real sex and so not against the chastity rules of the church. (Arias and Alexander were not alone in this thinking about forbidden forms of sexuality, as an “oral is moral” refrain from Big Love nicely mocked.) The Arias case became a cause célèbre, largely due to the live video feed that ran from the courtroom as well as to the development of a nightly cable show, HLN after Dark: The Jodi Arias
Trial, which discussed and dissected each element of the case. An American documentary television series, 48 Hours Mystery, aired a feature story on the case in 2008, which was then used as evidence in the trial, making the already tenuous line between representation and reality all the more blurry. The Huffington Post deemed the case an “over-the-top media-spectacle” (Skoloff and Billeaud 2013) and the Toronto Star stated, “With its mix of jealousy, religion, murder, and sex, the Jodi Arias case shows what happens when the justice system becomes entertainment” (Quinn 2013). Postconviction of Arias, the media are still fascinated by the Mormon Murder Case, as evidenced by both a 2013 made-for-TV movie, Jodi Arias: Dirty Little Secret, and a 2018 three-part documentary retelling of the story in Jodi Arias: An American Murder Mystery.

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

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

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

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

Immediately following a discussion on whether Donny or Marie would marry a non-Mormon and if both intend to have only one sex partner for their entire lives (they answer no to the first question and yes to the second), Walters turns the topic to women’s rights and says to a pixie-haired Marie, “Now, I have noticed here that you have no trouble speaking your mind. And yet, in the church . . . it seems to me that the woman holds a secondary role.” Donny and Marie’s mirrored stance is striking, their matching beige shirts, broad smiles, full dark hair, and earnest attention a visual
assertion of agreement and harmony, as their right hands both clench in determination to make points about their religious beliefs (see figures I.3 and I.4). Marie responds to Walter’s questions with a classic verve but an unfortunate choice of pronouns. “Secondary, no. But you have to remember that you need a patriarch at the head of the home. . . . The woman is equally as important, but as far as speaking her mind, that should be the man’s job.” While there is much to discuss in this interview, for my purposes the relevant point is that both Donny and Marie project a feminized position in relation to the authority of the church, even while occupying conventional gender roles with respect to one another. Their job is not to question but to believe and to follow. And to smile. And Marie’s job is further to tease Donny, even while she upholds his greater authority to speak for her. This reinforces what Matthew Bowman characterizes as the mainstream church’s emphasis on living a “tight moral code” rather than encouraging intellectual inquiry, where church governance “is designed not to promote theological reflection but to produce Mormons dedicated to living the tenets of their faith” (Bowman 2012, 206, 197). And while both men and women are implicated in this code of submission and subordination, the hierarchy of power reinforces a gendered power relation that masculinizes those who make the rules and feminizes those who must adhere to the rules.

To see the connection between mediated Mormonism and a fascination with sex, one need only follow the golden thread of the Osmond family through the tapestry of latter-day representation. One prime example occurred during Howard Stern’s 1998 interview with Donny Osmond. The conversation ranged, in typical Stern fashion, from whether or not Donny ever sexualized his sister, Marie, to the kind of sex Donny would or wouldn’t have with his wife (no anal or oral, no porn). “You are sexually repressed, Donald!” yells Stern. “No, no, no I’m not,” says Donny with a smile on his face. “I’m happy.” In interview after interview—from Barbara Walters to Larry King to Katie Couric to Oprah Winfrey—the Osmonds are genuine, decent, happy. Even in pain—as, for instance, during Marie’s divorces, the death by suicide of her son, Donny’s long struggle with depression, their father’s death at age ninety—Donny and Marie are public Mormons, eager to speak of their faith, of forever families, of being happy in their ethical commitments. As Donny tells Ellen DeGeneres (2013) about Marie’s remarriage to her first husband, “It’s a Cinderella story with a lot of bumps in the road but a beautiful, happy ending.” And as we shall soon see, this version of happiness is critical to the gender-sex dynamic of mediated Mormonism.
FIGS. 1.3–1.4 The mirrored stances of Donny and Marie Osmond.
Happy Valley and the Kingdom State of Deseret

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the nineteenth century, the West offered a remote space promising the church’s safety where worshippers could follow the edicts of their prophet and live in peace, unmolested by the outside world. On the Mormon Trail as believers laboriously trekked with their loved ones across the Great Plains of the American Midwest—often on foot or pushing unstable handcarts to carry their possessions—Western meadows and grasslands beckoned as a place of rest. On longer sojourns, they offered soils for cultivation of wheat or barley or oats. But meadows were also potentially a place of vulnerability,
where those with harm in their hearts could isolate and wound. These associations are palpable even on contemporary television, as evidenced when an episode of *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993—2001) features a flashback in which its protagonist, Cordell Walker, played by Chuck Norris, saves a vulnerable Mormon party making passage to the West. The narrative of stalwart-but-ultimately-vulnerable Mormons is as well worn as the rutted Mormon Trail itself. Indeed, the great Western director John Ford committed the story of defenseless Mormons in need of saving to film in *Wagon Master* (1950).

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

The Great (Normative) White Way

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

In terms of gender progressiveness, women within the mainstream church are still lobbying for priesthood (as well as the right to wear pants to Sunday services), and while there are no longer official test labs at BYU designed to “dehomosexualize” Saints through means of electroshock therapy and other forms of extreme behavior modification, the church takes a hard stance against LGBT+ rights and people. It is for this reason that stories of the clean-cut Mormon man tempted by SSA (same-sex attraction) or even premarital and extramarital sexual desire provide such a titillating consideration in such fare as The Book of Mormon, Angels in America, Latter Days, Orgazmo, or even Big Love (if a homicidal fundamentalist false prophet can count as clean-cut). Indeed, as I noted, when Jodi Arias murdered her boyfriend in grisly fashion, the press made much of their shared Mormon faith and unmarried eroticisms, putting one more version of LDS sexual repression/perversion into public discourse. So while the representation of actual Mormon people tends to reinforce a whiteness of skin that correlates with heteronormative identity, one outcome we might see in the broader signifying system of mediated Mormonism is that the hegemonic hefts of whiteness and heteronormativity do not always prevail.
Before laying out a description of the chapters in this book, I want to address the topic of trigger warnings. I’m of two minds about whether or not an author should warn readers about potentially traumatic materials, particularly those related to sexual violence. Trigger warnings can sometimes serve to create the very thing they seek to suppress: anxiety and trauma. They also make a priori assumptions about what might count as traumatic, often reinforcing feelings of alienation and misunderstanding for those people who have experienced violence outside of the purviews of the warning. Some people also feel that trigger warnings dull the necessary challenges that come with a call to critical thinking. With all of that being said, I feel it ethically important to note that the kind of violation and suffering experienced by children who are sexually abused is different in kind. I thus wish my reader to know that there will be many moments in the ensuing text during which I speak about sexual violence, including rape of children. I admit that this finding surprised me when I began to engage with the broad archive of mediated Mormonism, for it is a sad reality that many of the memoirs about being in and leaving the church (both LDS and FLDS) are also harrowing accounts by survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The patriarchal cultures of LDS and FLDS cultures, combined with the notion that children are innocent until they join the church at age eight, provide the perfect breeding ground for the abuse of young children. Further, patriarchal ethoses that emphasize obedience and sexual purity often reinforce the discursive codes of abuse. As the Salt Lake Tribune warns, “Teaching youth that it is permissible and appropriate for authority figures to ask personal, invasive sexual questions grooms them to not recognize abusive situations” (Dodge 2018). This is not to say, by any means, that all or most Mormon children are abused, sexually or otherwise. But it is to say that sexual abuse is a major motif of mediated Mormonism and is addressed, sometimes in painful detail, in this book.

Chapter 1, “Mormonism as Meme and Analytic,” demonstrates how the idea of Mormonism as a faith fixes the meanings of what I call spiritual neoliberalism, a gendered aspirational target that is marked by the imperative to make good choices and improve the self as fused with marketplace goals of financial success that have long been the hallmark of neoliberalism. The chapter examines how Mormonism is variously used by those within and outside the church and by both amateur media producers and professionals to reinforce and renegotiate codes that align with a democratic norm of the
citizen-self, who believes in (and thrives due to) egalitarianism, meritocracy, self-actualization, self-determination, and seeming free choice. These investments manifest through an orientation toward screens, self-reflexivity, and the monetization of identity or self-branding. In fact, I argue that the politics of representation at play in larger popular narratives about Mormonism perfectly combine a cultural logic about neoliberalism and globalization that meshes well with the mainstream LDS Church’s own logic of neoimperialism and new technologies of communication. The amalgam marks a period that mobilizes media savvy and manipulation of the image but that also requires the machinelike routinization that serves as the hallmark of industrialism, elements we see perfectly manifest in the worldwide missionary program that so emblematizes the LDS Church. Work ethos and business savvy are also critical to an F/lds notion of financial and faith-based rewards. In this respect, Mormonism epitomizes the theoretical ground staked out in a post-Enlightenment democratic temporality, where concepts of rational individualism and meritorious labor, rather than aristocratic lineage, cohere over time to earn one success in its own version of the prosperity gospel. That this model of rational advance adheres to a religion and thus secures one a place in the ephemeral domain of a celestial paradise is only one of Mormonism’s more brilliant contradictions—or contributions, depending on your point of view.

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

Chapter 3, “The Epistemology of the (Televised, Polygamous) Closet,” turns to a discussion on modern polygamy, including issues of privacy and publicity. If one of the undergirding modes of Mormon self-understanding is the church’s separation from mainstream society, mediation and celebrity
complicate the edict of separatism that has functioned as the backbone of
the church’s regard toward its own identity since its inception. Mainstream
postmillennial Mormon polygamy stories have been largely grounded in
HBO’s critically acclaimed drama *Big Love* (2006–11). And while *Big Love*
has arguably been the most respected and expensive venue for the portrayal
of what one way of doing modern polygamy looks like, it has hardly been
the only site for such depictions. Since 2010, reality television has offered its
own point of view on anomalous family arrangements. *Sister Wives*, on TLC,
presents a fringe group of Mormons—in this case the polygamous Brown
family—as a composite family that neutralizes the extremes of FLDS. This
depiction conflates mainstream Mormon and Fundamentalist Mormon
alike under the big, if controversial, tent of polygamy. Both *Big Love* and
*Sister Wives* have, in turn, created a market for other mediated fare that has
linked itself to this new public fascination with modern polygamy. Rather
than seeing these linked media/consumer networks as capitalism run
amuck, I’m much more interested in the way these narratives position the
modern polygamous family as the quintessence of contemporary American
individualism, steeped as it is in entrepreneurial spirit, aspirational ambi-
tion, management efficiency, and image savvy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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