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

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Mormons make me nervous. . . . They just seem to be a slightly *superior* breed of human: they seem taller and more bright-eyed. Mormon kids have straight teeth. The women are all pretty. They are a wholesome, better breed of people. Never mind that Mormons wear more than their fair share of Dockers. Never mind that Utahans consume more porn than anybody else: that just speaks to their superhuman testosterone levels. . . . Salt Lake City is Mormon Mecca, spiritual and administrative home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. SLC is LDS, and being there can make you feel like you are on LSD.

One of the games I have always enjoyed playing when visiting SLC is “spot the Mormon.” It’s easy. You just look for anybody who looks happy. I can’t explain it. Maybe it’s the lack of alcohol. Maybe it’s just that structure makes people happy. Maybe, ironically, in a country that prides itself on being the free-est in the world, strict guidelines actually make people happier.

—Michael Ian Black, *America, You Sexy Bitch*

Mormonism is one of the fastest-growing religions in America. Whatever criticism is made concerning some of the more atypical Mormon traditions, radical undertones, and beliefs, no one can suggest that this religion isn’t hitting some kind of chord with Americans . . . The appearance of being an extremely conservative throwback to a time when America was different seems to be the defining characteristic of the Mormon lifestyle, one that appeals mightily in a world where everything can feel a little too fast and somewhat scantily clad. Maybe American culture has gotten to the point where we are so over-stimulated, sent so many sexualized messages from the media, and desensitized in our reaction to overly bad behavior, that in comparison Mormonism can appeal as something that is safe.

—Meghan McCain, *America, You Sexy Bitch*
In 2011, as a lead-up to the U.S. presidential election, conservative princess, talk show radio host, and Fox news pundit Meghan McCain went on the road with liberal comedian and sitcom actor Michael Ian Black to tell their version of America. As the epigraphs that start this chapter attest, taking the American collective temperature means reckoning with the Mormons, their unique and recognizable visibility, and their massive appeal. By the time of their book’s publication in 2012, Mitt Romney was poised to become the Republican nominee for president, and Mormon visibility was high, leading Walter Kirn (2011) to announce in *Newsweek* that the United States was in a Mormon Moment. These factors combined to put the Salt Lake City church in a position as a cultural authority that betokened a new mainstream status for Mormons and Mormonism.

That period of time was itself fleeting—by generous measures, about three years. In the wake of Kirn’s declaration and Romney’s loss of the race for president, many pundits decried the end of Mormon prominence. In 2014, for example, Cadence Woodland wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* declaring “the end of the Mormon moment,” based on the “crack-down” against a number of church liberals and intellectuals, including Kate Kelley, who lobbied for women to hold priesthood status within the church, and John Dehlin, who founded *Mormon Stories*, a podcast interview program that gives voice and amplitude to Mormons struggling in their faith journey. For Kirn in 2011, to be in the Mormon moment suggested a level of unique influence and visibility to those things and people marked by Mormonism; for Woodland in 2014, to be out of the Mormon moment indicated a failure on the church’s part to make good on the social justice opportunities its visibility provided.

In truth, public visibility did not begin for the Mormons in 2011 and it did not end in 2014. As one example, a 2007 posting in the online magazine *Pop Matters* reported that Mormons were at that time already “growing used to [being in] the spotlight,” a beacon powered by both politics (Romney’s first run for president) and art (in such feature films as *Georgia Rule* and *Napoleon Dynamite*, television shows like *Big Love*, novels with Mormon themes written by Mormon people, and music ranging from the Killers to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir). Explained Gregory Hahn (2007) in the *Pop Matters* article, “Mormons are ‘in,’ but that attention has brought an at-times-uncomfortable spotlight and a renewed pressure to maintain the uniqueness that has defined the religion since it started in 1800s America.”

The real point about spectacular visibility, then, is that Mormonism has consistently operated within the spotlight to play a clarifying role with re-
spect to broader U.S. understandings of itself precisely through the debated role of its own prominence and the implications of such status. If Mormonism has often walked the razor’s edge between marginalization and the mainstream, between persecuted outsiders and American everyman figures, this has only enhanced its centrality as a hinge in the American hermeneutic. Media—in all of its new and old forms—are central in the cultural (and divine) politics of F/LDS Mormonism.

Consider, for instance, Kristine Haglund, the editor of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, who wrote for Slate Magazine in 2014 that with the “unprecedented attention” generated by Mitt Romney’s political bids for president, “Mormons hoped that becoming better known would mean becoming better liked.” Much like Woodland, Haglund does not feel that the SLC church made good on its moment in the spotlight. Instead, she argues, “Media attention was a megaphone for the voices of Mormons who might ordinarily find themselves on the fringes of their congregations—academics, feminists, LGBT+ Mormons, and Mormons questioning their own beliefs” (Haglund 2014). Yet this consequence, she argues, is a step forward, since the elevation of marginal voices to mainstream positions largely through cross-platform mediation has advanced a more inclusive discursive culture where progressive members of the LDS persuasion might find common cause with one another, amid an “idealized America” governed by a “pluralistic creed.” “Even as Mormons recognize their continued, unwilling exile from that America,” she reflects, “we are affirming those ideals by learning, haltingly, to cope with our own messy history and to tolerate, albeit imperfectly, difference and dissent within the faith” (Haglund 2014).

Haglund gathers many of the outliers whose voices fill this book—academics, feminists, LGBT+ Mormons, questioning Mormons—as critical agents in a salutary social agenda. In this chapter, I want to focus very specifically on a different set of people who have been involved in one of the larger controversies faced by the mainstream Mormon Church and, to a lesser degree, fundamentalist LDS groups—those marked and affected by the F/LDS regard toward race and racialization. Let me start by coming back to that lyric line from The Book of Mormon musical: “I believe in 1978 God changed his mind about black people!” In the show, Elder Price’s ballad, “I Believe!” is meant to be a moment of hyperbole that adds to and punctuates the increasingly outrageous positions these fictional Mormon missionaries, and the actual F/LDS churches, preach—“ancient Jews built boats and sailed to America,” “God lives on a planet called Kolob,” “Jesus has his own planet as well,” “The Garden of Eden is in Jackson County, Missouri,” and so on.¹
But it is the divine mind change about black people being eligible for LDS Church membership in 1978 that centers this discussion and puts it in my own analytical spotlight.

Mormonism as a visual spectacle indicates that as a meme, it marks something extraordinary. This concept accords with the ideas raised in the epigraphs from McCain and Black (as well as a host of other bloggers, writers, and cultural producers), that Mormons, as a people and a faith, can be spotted, visually recognized by the radiance clean living confers. Across mediated Mormonism, this spectacle is called the Mormon Glow. Given the very clear associations between glowing and light, between light and white—what Richard Dyer has termed in *White* an “epistemology of light”—and given the rather large social and cultural history that conflates sin with darkness, and darkness with blackness, the racialized logics of the Mormon Glow key to an increasingly global preoccupation with those things “fair and lovely” as a signifier of whiteness and modernity. The racialized logics that come together under the broad sign of “Mormon” illuminate (and I choose this word specifically) a broader set of concerns about race and gender that link to norms of value and behavior. In this chapter, then, I consider the raced and gendered valences that are part of Mormonism’s messy history with visibility, a set of complicated relations that continue, by most accounts, in an equally fraught present day.

The Mark of Cain: Historical Context

To better understand the implications of both visibility and race in and to the church, some historical context is helpful since one of the major issues the LDS Church has had to tackle in terms of its public mis/understanding has had to do with race. In the early days of the church, prior to Joseph Smith’s death in 1844 and prior to the LDS/FLDS split, social tensions were often due to Mormons’ perceived permissiveness and overall friendliness toward people of color, specifically Africans and African Americans held in bondage. Before the Civil War, black people—both bonded and free—were admitted as members, and black men were able to hold priesthood authority. Indeed, Joseph Smith was a public abolitionist, and part of his presidential platform in 1844 included the nationwide eradication of slavery. It was largely, though not exclusively, due to this stance on slavery that Mormons elicited such widespread animosity in the pro-slavery state of Missouri in the late 1830s.
It should be noted, however, that Smith and the early church founders (and most of white America) were highly racist by today's standards. Consider, for instance, that in 1836 when the Mormons were located primarily in Missouri, Smith entered the charged racial rhetoric of the antebellum South by writing a position statement that favored a time-released manumission of nearly twenty years. Smith did not support immediate and universal abolition due to concerns that it would “set loose upon the world a community of people who might peradventure, overrun our country and violate the most sacred principles of human society, chastity and virtue” (Smith 1836). Oliver Cowdery (1836), the first baptized Latter-day Saint and scribe to Joseph as he interpreted the golden tablets that would become the Book of Mormon, was more contemptuous in his racial dislike:

Let the blacks of the south be free, and our community is overrun with paupers, and a reckless mass of human beings, uncultivated, untaught and unaccustomed to provide for themselves the necessaries of life—endangering the chastity of every female who might by chance be found in our streets—our prisons filled with convicts, and the hangman wearied with executing the functions of his office! This must unavoidably be the case, every rational man must admit, who has ever travelled in the slave states, or we must open our houses, unfold our arms, and bid these degraded and degrading sons of Canaan, a hearty welcome and a free admittance to all we possess!

...And insensible to feeling must be the heart, and low indeed must be the mind, that would consent for a moment, to see his fair daughter, his sister, or perhaps, his bosom companion, in the embrace of a negro!

So though Joseph and early church leaders might have been open to converting those with dark skins, the ruling brethren were hardly convinced of black people's equal personhood.

This is somewhat surprising given that, as W. Paul Reeve has convincingly shown, early church members—the inheritors of a white-skinned Anglo-Scandinavian bloodline—were themselves racialized and denounced as historical throwbacks in an emerging United States challenged by its own vertiginous plurality. Reeve argues through scholars such as David R. Roediger that “race operated as a hierarchical system designed to create order and superiority out of the perceived disorder of the confluence of peoples in America” (Reeve 2015, 3). As such, the predominantly white-skinned Mormons (as well
as Irish and Jewish people) were perceived as racialized subhumans in the
nineteenth-century American imagination, a “new race” of devolved people. Mormon devolution was tied to the rumors of polygamy and inbreeding, and the Saints were often depicted as “distinct, peculiar, suspicious, and potentially dangerous outsiders” (Reeve 2015, 14). When their polygamous ways were publicly confirmed in 1852, Reeve notes that “Mormonism represented both a religious and a racial decline,” thus solidifying the notion that the Latter-day Saints betokened atavism rather than modernity. It’s remarkable, given these ties to both racialization and devolution, that Mormons today might be linked with both hyperbolic whiteness and modernization.

Mormons in the 1800s were also racialized due to their close trading and social ties with Native American peoples, whom they perceived as their “red brethren” and the remaining inheritors of the dark race of Lamanites, who had been, according to the Book of Mormon, “cursed by dark skin” for their treacherous ways against the Nephites, the godly whiter race in Joseph’s holy book. Indeed, some Judeo-Christian traditions and Mormonism attribute the Curse of Ham as the mark of God’s censure for iniquity (Genesis 9:25–27; 2 Nephi 5:21–23). According to LDS theology, the Lamanites were a “chosen people fallen into decay”; their darkness made them suspect—the mark of Cain—but their chosenness also made them worthy of sympathy and salvation (Reeve 2015, 55; see also Bushman 2005; Givens 2002; Skousen 2009; Mauss 2003).

Under Brigham Young, the Mormon relation to “people of color” intensified into the racist position that would mark the church for nearly 130 years. In 1849, Young announced that black men were disallowed from attaining priesthood status. Young was no nobler in his regard for Native Americans: “There is a curse on these aborigines of our country who roam the plains and are so wild that you cannot tame them. They are of the House of Israel; they once had the Gospel delivered to them, they had oracles of truth; Jesus came and administered to them after his resurrection and they received and delighted in the Gospel until the fourth generation when they turned away and became so wicked that God cursed them with this dark and benighted and loathsome condition” (Journal of Discourses vol. 14, Discourse 12, 87). Young’s justification for racial intolerance stemmed from the social eugenics so popular among white elites in the nineteenth century. Young noted that “some classes of the human family that are black, uncouth, uncomely, disagreeable and low in their habits, wild, and seemingly deprived of nearly all the blessings of the intelligence that is generally bestowed upon mankind” had been purposefully marked by God as sinners. “The Lord put a mark
upon him, which is the flat nose and black skin. Trace mankind down to after the flood, and then another curse is pronounced upon the same race—that they should be the ‘servant of servants’; and they will be, until that curse is removed; and the Abolitionists cannot help it, nor in the least alter that decree” (Journal of Discourses vol. 7, 290–91).

In similar fashion, Native Americans, Polynesians, and other darkened peoples bore God’s punishment, Young argued, so that skin color betokened God’s long-standing punishment of an age-old sin, though Pacific Islander men were able to hold priesthood standing within the church, as opposed to those with African lineage. As these peoples became more holy, they would also become “a white and delightsome people” (Journal of Discourses vol. 7, 335–38), literally growing lighter as their commitments to Mormonism grew, the holy glow replacing the mark of Cain.2

As I’ve noted, Young’s decree stood as official church policy from 1849 until 1978, 129 years of formal—many believed God-inspired—racism. Twentieth-century brethren changed the tone of Young’s invectives against dark-skinned peoples, so that it was no longer inherited sin that brought the mark of Cain but a more neoliberal motif of personal failing. In 1954, Mark E. Petersen, member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, put these feelings into words when he referenced a major teaching of the church—that all people who live on Earth had at one time lived in a preexistence where there is free agency. “We could be lazy there or we could be industrious. We could be obedient or careless. We could choose to follow Christ or to follow Lucifer” (Petersen 1954, 6). As such, dark skin marked poor choices in the preexistence—an individual punishment for an individual wrong. Writes Petersen, “We cannot escape the conclusion that because of performance in our pre-existence, some of us are born as Chinese, some as Japanese, some as Indians, some as Negroes, some as Americans, some as Latter-day Saints. There are rewards and punishments, fully in harmony with His established policy in dealing with sinners and saints, regarding all according to their deeds” (10). This logic establishes the terms for spiritual neoliberalism, in that it imposes a recalibrated market logic not only working in tandem with religion but using a religious ethos as its endpoint for racism.

The insidious logic of causality, virtue/vice, and race clearly indicates that if dark skin is the punishment for sin, white skin must be the reward for good deeds. Do right and be white. Or in the words of the Book of Mormon about Lamanites who convert: “And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall
not pass away among them, save they shall be a white and a delightsome people” (2 Nephi 30:6).

In all fairness, I should note that there is some difference of opinion about the wording here. The phrase “white and delightsome” was included in the original translation from 1830. In 1840, the phrase was changed to “pure and delightsome,” though European editions used “white and delightsome” until 1981. To my mind, there is little difference in the connotations behind the words “white” and “pure”—or for that matter, my word “fairness”—since these words often naturalize the racialized meanings that link purity with lightness and virtue with pale complexions. In the ideology of mediated Mormonism, “pure and delightsome” serve as adjectives for goodness, enlightenment, and God’s blessing, while those things dark indicate impurity, sin, and collusion with Satan.

As it concerns 1978, cultural matters might well have helped God along in the change of opinion. In the lead-up to the 1978 decree on “those of African descent,” black leaders in the civil rights movement had organized boycotts of the state of Utah and all Mormon Tabernacle Choir products. “The NAACP brought discrimination charges against the Utah Boy Scouts for prohibiting a black member from assuming a senior patrol position. College athletes refused to play Brigham Young University teams. Groups protested at the church’s twice-yearly general conferences in Salt Lake City. Mormon leadership finally acknowledged that many, perhaps most, of the converts to the Church in Brazil had some degree of black ancestry. While their donations helped build the São Paulo Temple, they were not permitted to attend it” (Bennett 2011). By some accounts, the church handled the situation by declaring not that God had changed his mind about black people but that the injunction and prejudice against people of color had been a policy (rather than a prophecy) and thus amenable to new social conditions. In discussing the terms of the change, the church president at the time, Spencer W. Kimball, spoke of his continued requests to God for a new revelation. None was forthcoming. His solution was to tell God that the church planned to change its edict and to ask for a sign if God disapproved. Absent that sign, the new revelation was conferred (Young and Gray 2009). The website lds.org, the mainstream church’s primary public relations tool, now considers the 1978 change a matter of divine revelation that is canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants as “Official Declaration 2.” So, God changed his mind on racial matters when human provocation made the mainstream church’s stance untenable.
Coming into the Light

It wasn’t until 2013 that the mainstream Mormon Church officially denounced the racial policies of its history, an announcement that made worldwide headlines. The *Guardian*, a major UK newspaper, quoted from the church’s broadside: “The church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavour or curse, or that it reflects actions in a pre-mortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. . . . Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form” (“Race and the Priesthood” 2017; “Mormon Church Addresses Past Racism” 2013). As historian of Mormonism Armand Mauss surmises, this announcement may indicate a “new church commitment to greater transparency about its history, doctrines, and policies” (“Mormon Church Addresses Past Racism” 2013). Yet it also continues to give evidence for why there is a growing niche of mediated Mormonism dedicated to working through, and not always forgiving, the racist positions the church has held and still promulgates.

One case in point is the array of media fare discussing race and the mainstream as generated by two active *LDS* members, Darius Gray and Margaret Blair Young. Gray is one of the founding members of the *LDS* Genesis Group, established in 1971, an advocacy group for black people within the mainstream church. Though the pronouncement on race in 1978 allowed men of African heritage to hold the priesthood and all worthy Saints, regardless of sex, to participate in temple ordinances, the Genesis Group continues today “based on a perception that African Americans still had unique issues and could benefit from a chance to affiliate with one another, especially because many were the only members of African descent in their local wards [local congregations] and even in their stakes [geographical collection of wards]” (“Genesis Group” 2017). Young is a white author, filmmaker, and writing instructor, who taught for thirty years at Brigham Young University. Together Gray and Young have authored three historical novels on black Mormon pioneers under the broad title *Standing on the Promises*. They also created a documentary film, *Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons* (Young and Gray 2008), which received respectable circulation, including airtime on *PBS* and the Documentary Channel. *Nobody Knows* recounts the historical record of the church’s prohibition on black men holding the priesthood, and, perhaps more importantly, it details the emotional toll of racism.
Tamu Smith, a young black woman featured in the documentary, poignantly recalls a moment when a white sister in the ward approached her with praise: “You’re so sweet,” she exclaimed, seemingly in friendship. “But I don’t know how I’m going to recognize you in the Celestial Kingdom. I try to imagine you white, but I just don’t see that.” Smith’s story puts a fine point on this sliding scale of value, whereby whiteness marks those who are worthy and thus in the highest of heavens, the Celestial Kingdom, even if that person’s earthly body has dark skin. If Tamu earns her way to the Celestial Kingdom, the belief system reinforces the idea that her skin will lighten as a result of her righteous living. These ideas reinforce a racist presumption that dark skin is a temporary curse that will be replaced with the more divine glow of whiteness, both on earth and in the afterlife. Darius Gray told a Washington Post reporter that “at church functions,” he and other black Mormons were reassured, “you will have the priesthood in the world to come.” They were also encouraged to believe that if they lived worthy lives, they would “become lighter and lighter” (Horowitz 2012). In his memoir Black Mormon, Russell Stevenson (2014, iii) similarly suggests that the “Mormon tradition is built on the hope that Zion—the city of the Saints—could transcend the racial divisions of this world,” not through radical inclusivity but through universal deracination. Smith’s and Gray’s experiences indicate such racial transcendence is actually a substitute for whiteness, as indicated both by skin tone and by social arrangements.

Probably one of the more influential contemporary Mormon bloggers and blogs is Jana Riess’s Flunking Sainthood, distributed by the Religious News Service web network (Flunking Sainthood is also the name of her 2011 memoir about her year of spiritual experimentation and failure). In 2015, Riess featured “African American convert” and Relief Society president Bryndis Roberts in a guest blog post. Roberts argued that the church owed its members of all races a fuller accounting and apology for its racist past. She argued that the church’s 2013 Gospel Topics statement acknowledging racial mistreatment did not go far enough to stem the ongoing tide of racial wounding among mainstream Mormons. She includes four examples:

- In 1977, an African American woman was ready to join the church. When she learned of the priesthood/temple ban, she did not join.
- In 1997, a white teacher told a young African American man that the reason for the ban was that “Blacks were less valiant in the premortal realm.” The pain of that statement ultimately resulted in him becoming inactive.
• In 2007, an African American woman was investigating the church. She was repeatedly informed that the priesthood/temple ban had come from God and that her faith simply needed to be strong enough to accept that fact.

• In 2014, an African American woman was told that the “Race and the Priesthood” essay did not mean that the church had been wrong; instead, God had simply changed his mind about the “worthiness” of people of African descent (Roberts 2015).

In this blog post and other online forums—such as Mormon Press, a conglomerate of liberal Mormon voices and opinions—Roberts asks that the mainstream church do more than acknowledge its past with respect to race; it must actively reteach members through a proclamation from the First Presidency (the group of three men who helm the SLC church), including translating this document into every language spoken in the church worldwide and clarifying that neither the ban on black people nor its justifications came from God. Further, Roberts insists that the proclamation be read in every ward worldwide and incorporated into the church’s curriculum and teachings. While church leaders have been reluctant to heed her call, mediated Mormonism has taken up the banner of racial equality, moving candid conversations on race to the forefront.

As one example, when Darius Gray and Margaret B. Young were featured on a two-episode podcast of Mormon Stories, listeners expressed gratitude for their frank disclosures on race. Wrote one respondent:

I am so grateful to have found this podcast. I have been asking this question since I was 12 years old and I am going to be 50 next year!!!!! I have had debates, arguments, shouting matches (not the most effective mode of communication), and just plain cried many tears over this issue. Even as a young girl, the whole “fence sitter, seed of Cain” just seemed a smoke screen for racism. I left the church for 25 years and this issue was a large part of the reason that I left, when I returned with my family that is an interracial family, my husband is Black and my kids are mixed, I was not sure what to expect. I am ashamed to tell you that I have searched and studied, and searched for a reason that the priesthood was denied and I have never been able to find an answer. Today I know why. I am listening to Darron Smith [coeditor of Black and Mormon] as I am writing this response to your Podcast. My kids and husband have asked me and I have given them my own theory, which had nothing to do with any of the “folklore” that the Church had put out there. (Dehlin 2006b)
Here we witness a conversation on race and racialization unfolding amid media cross-platforming—a woman writing a public response on a website to a podcast featuring two people who are novelists and filmmakers—all illuminated by the spotlight on Mormonism.

The mediated public sphere has been a force of visibility, compelling answerability in the church. While those troubled by the priesthood ban and continued racism have pushed for the mainstream church to “come into the light” by speaking openly about race, their very provocations have forced much of the transparency they seek. If the overall codes of the LDS Church or the political temperaments of Mormons have not radically shifted, the mediated public culture around Mormonism has allowed atypical Mormons (people of color, LGBT+ Mormons, those excommunicated or apostatized from the church) a place to find and talk with one another.

In some ways, this is progressive political change 101, whereby revolutionaries use publicity as a means of leveraging new legislative and social positions. The media is one of the many tools women used to gain the vote in the early twentieth century, for example, and the court of public opinion continues to be essential in determining the threshold for domestic equality. It is perhaps more important (and also more depressing) to realize, then, not that media/image/visibility are used for political ends but that there is little, if any, consolidated political ideology or unifying goal attached to much of mediated Mormonism. Indeed, while any number of the social controversies—from gay marriage to the ban on black people to polygamy—elicit the words and responses of True Believing Mormons (TBM), the aggregated discourse on these topics represents a fusion of anonymous, amateur LDS and Gentile media producers, wanting to join a conversation about something that they consider to be important but not political. The progressive outcome is thus not a planned revolution but the political change that arises through the clustering of mediated conversations, both professional and amateur, all bent on understanding fairness and truth.

In concluding this section, let me come back to Kristine Haglund, who has argued that media attention put Mormons otherwise on the fringes into a more mainstream position, allowing them a megaphone to amplify their voices. The result has been to disrupt a public image of Mormonism as homogeneous and unified. Doing so has forwarded a progressive end, Haglund argues, in creating the terms for a complex diversity that mirrors the idealized codes of American plurality. The mainstream church, however, has disallowed these uses of media, often, as we shall see in later chapters, excommunicating those who bring public attention and scrutiny. Responding in
Slate to Haglund’s ideas, Miriam Krule (2015) noted the catch-22: “The only way to effect change is to get the media involved, but if you get the media involved, you may face excommunication.” If part of the dazzle of the Mormon moment, then, is to shine a brighter light on Mormonism, a darker shadow threatens active members who point the spotlight at the church itself.

The Mormon Glow

As you seek to know the will of our Heavenly Father in your life and become more spiritual, you will be far more attractive, even irresistible.—James Faust, general conference president, “Womanhood: The Highest Place of Honor”

We have been taught that “the gift of the Holy Ghost... quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections... It inspires virtue, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and charity. It develops beauty of person, form and features.” Now, that is a great beauty secret!... It is the kind of beauty that doesn’t wash off. It is spiritual attractiveness. Deep beauty springs from virtue. It is the beauty of being chaste and morally clean. The world places so much emphasis on physical attractiveness and would have you believe that you are to look like the elusive model on the cover of a magazine. The Lord would tell you that you are each uniquely beautiful. When you are virtuous, chaste, and morally clean, your inner beauty glows in your eyes and in your face. There is no more beautiful sight than a young woman who glows with the light of the Spirit, who is confident and courageous because she is virtuous.—Elaine Dalton, president of the Young Women, “Remember Who You Are!”

As the almighty Bloggernacle teaches, Mormonism very much reinforces a notion that true believers are not only special people, but they give off an aura of blessedness, called the countenance, or in a more colloquial parlance, the Mormon Glow. The glow is believed to be a sign of God’s (or some say Jesus’s) divine presence, the Holy Spirit oozing from human pores and legible on Mormon families (see figure 2.1). Those who convert to Mormonism are thought to lighten in complexion, and those who leave the faith, the apostates, are thought to take on a darker countenance. The glow is also perceived to be a magnetic tool that draws others to true believers. Missionaries can use their glow to recruit investigators, and singles, particularly women, might lay claim to their glow to recruit potential spouses, who serve as eternal companions. Writes LDS blogger Malcolm Ravenclaw (2014): “Developing the Mormon glow isn’t easy and it doesn’t happen overnight. But when we have the image of the Savior in our countenance, people recognize
it. In an increasingly dark world, we have a responsibility to bring light to everyone we meet. As LDS single adults, having the Mormon glow is especially important because it helps us attract people who can add value to our lives.” As the racial plurality of the I’m a Mormon Campaign indicates, the mainstream church tries very hard in its present iteration to suggest that the Mormon Glow is not about skin tone—all true believers, regardless of race, might possess the glow. But equally, references to the Mormon Glow make it impossible to strip the associations of the glow from its commitment to whiteness, since, as we have already witnessed through earlier discussions in this chapter, closeness to God is thought to materialize and be manifest on the (increasingly lightened) skin.

Ravenclaw is not alone in believing that Mormons have a special light shining in and through them, and this light operates as a divine cosmetic

FIG. 2.1 Glowing, the Mormon way: dōTERRA promotional film, Our Story.
that makes believers whiter and, thus, according to the perverse logic of racialization, more attractive. Brigham Young taught, "‘Mormonism’ keeps men and women young and handsome; and when they are full of the Spirit of God, there are none of them but what will have a glow upon their countenances; and that is what makes you and me young; for the Spirit of God is with us and within us" (Journal of Discourses vol. 5, 332). The Strangites, an LDS splinter group that emerged after Smith’s death and in opposition to Young, literalized the Mormon Glow. Led by James Jesse Strang, the Strangites thrived in their remote outpost on Mackinac Island from 1844 to 1856. During ordinance ceremonies, believers would be anointed with a mixture of olive oil and phosphorus, a combination that not only produced a heavenly glow but also, on occasion, caught fire (see Van Noord 1997; Beam 2014).

In a present-day context, two of the many LDS MLM companies based in Utah, dōTERRA (essential oils) and NuSkin (youth-enhancing skin products), make much of the light of inner calm and, one presumes, health that emanates from those who use their products. dōTERRA literalized its claim to health, wellness, and whiteness with the 2017–18 introduction of a brightening gel, meant to reduce age spots and maximize “skin tone and brightness.” I discuss these and other MLM companies in chapter 1, but as notions of health, complexion, and the glow relate to race, it’s important to note that the ties are so obvious that the BunYion, a Mormon version of the satiric paper and website the Onion, mocked the glow—and its instantiation of whiteness:

“Here I was, thinking they were total suckers for buying all that crap from NuSkin and dōTERRA,” said Draper resident Ashley Summers. “But now that ‘Mormon glow’ is all the rage, I guess I’ll have to buy some too.”

“I remember my friend Lucia Escobar, a sweet, Lamanite girl from Mexico, who stopped using dōTERRA about a year ago,” continued Summers. “It was so sad. All at once her foundation went away and she grew dark and loathsome in complexion. But I guess it serves her right for leaving the true path of essential oils. And, you know, for not being white.” (“New Dermatological Study” 2015)

In quite a different context, psychologists Nicholas Rule, James Garrett, and Nalini Ambady decided to test the hypothesis that Mormons give off a heavenly light and that others could detect their brilliance. In 2010, they published “On the Perception of Religious Group Membership from Faces,”
which argues that Mormons could indeed be identified by face alone (Rule, Garrett, and Ambady 2010). The researchers structured their experiment by asking people to look at gray-scale photos of people in emotionally neutral poses. The photos had been cropped “to the smallest frame that included the sides and tops of targets’ hair and the bottom of their chins.” The experiment asked subjects to determine which of the people thus imaged were Mormon and which were not: respondents were slightly better than 60 percent accurate in their determinations, a percentage superior to guessing. Because the images were blocked so as not to show major distinguishing details, the researchers concluded that respondents used skin texture and tone in making their determination. The study further linked the smooth skin texture of Mormons to the overall longevity of LDS peoples, as augmented by the health codes that ban alcohol, restrict most forms of caffeine, and outlaw cigarettes and a social culture that prevents them from consuming “toxic media” such as R-rated movies.4 “In conclusion,” wrote Rule, Garrett, and Ambady, “Mormons and non-Mormons subtly differ in their facial appearance and perceivers are able to perceive these differences in a way that allows for accurate categorization. The two groups are distinguished by differences in apparent health, which appears to be expressed in facial cues signaling skin quality.” It didn’t take long before this scientific study appeared in popular magazines such as Psychology Today and from there on the internet. Now to Google “Mormon Glow” is to find a cache of articles citing the study as proof that, as lds.net put it, the “Mormon Glow is real” (Hampton 2015).

My point here, as with so much in this book, is not to come down on a side for the glow or against it. Instead, I hope to illustrate the resonance of this luminous metaphor as a salient and racialized signifier of a state to be desired and, in turn, to demonstrate how a host of media platforms sustain the intelligibility of the Mormon Glow. I believe the debate about the glow as expressed in mediated Mormonism is itself evidence of deeper investments in the meanings of raced personhood and embodiment, whereby those who are blessed with qualities of lightness, brightness, and whiteness are positioned as being in holy alignment with human perfection and godliness. I also hope to demonstrate how these ideas about race—the whiter you are, the closer to God—find their way into mainstream ideologies that seemingly have little to do with race or religion. In this ideological creep—from the actual bodies of Mormons to the aura that surrounds mediated Mormonism—the glow functions simultaneously as phenotype and media spectacle.

The captivating allure of the glow finds full expression in the spectacular vampire alluded to in the introduction, Edward Cullen from the Twilight
Stephenie Meyer’s sexy vampire family are unlike those who have populated literature and film in that they hunt and consume the blood of animals but do not drink human blood, thus calling themselves vegetarian. Importantly, *Twilight’s* vegetarian vampire coterie does not turn into dust when exposed to direct sunlight. Instead, with Edward as their primary representative, the Cullens sparkle like diamond-encrusted marble. In the novel, Meyer describes it as focalized through Bella: “Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn’t get used to it, though I’d been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday’s hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn’t sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal” (Meyer 2011, 260). Edward is here the perfect über-man: strong, immortal, imper- vious to human weaknesses, and, in Meyer’s words, “white,” “sparkl[ing],” “incandescent,” “scintillating,” “glistening,” “pale,” “perfect,” “glittering.” I’ve already made the point that in an oversimplified parallel, Edward represents the True Believing Mormon and Bella the investigator drawn by Edward’s charismatic and embodied glow, desiring the dividends Edward can offer, for both time and eternity, but also, quite literally, desiring his body. Here, Edward as the godlike former human neatly fits with an LDS cosmology of the Godhead, particularly since a unique feature of the Mormon notion of God is that he used to be a man and continues to propagate children with a Heavenly Mother (or several) in a sublime afterlife. For his part, Edward seems to be a monogamist.

Due to the immense popularity of Meyer’s novels, young adult fans expressed deep investments in the scenes they wanted to see reproduced on the screen. The filmmakers anticipated some of these: Edward and Bella’s first kiss, Edward’s lullaby for Bella, Edward and Bella at the prom. Yet director Catherine Hardwicke told the *Los Angeles Times* that she was surprised when fans were so vociferous about a key scene in the first book, in which Edward reveals the truth of his vampirism to Bella by allowing her to see him sparkling in sunlight as they lie together in a secluded flower-strewn meadow. Hardwicke notes that it was “super challenging” to make Edward glow on screen: “We had probably 10 special effects companies trying out experimental ideas on some footage we had to see how we can make him dazzle and sparkle and shimmer. . . . You know, the description in the book is a tiny bit contradictory. On one level, he is supposed to look like cut diamonds, on
another, he’s as smooth as marble. So you’re like OK, when you think of
encrusted cut diamonds that’s faceted—and when we first did that it almost
looked like acne, like a skin condition. And you want it to be smooth” (Mar-
tin 2008). Hardwicke also acknowledged that given *Twilight’s* extremely pas-
sionate fan base, if she didn’t get the meadow scene right, “people [were]
going to stone me in the streets!”

This deep investment in things that sparkle, glow, and are luminous—as
here represented by a hunky shimmering vampire—are both about Mor-
monism and completely detached from it. Without speaking its name, the
Mormon Glow comes to personify the special qualities of this new breed
of the undead, but it also eclipses (excuse the pun) Mormonism as a media
spectacle. In this respect the Mormon Glow is bigger than itself, since it is not
only a signifier of value on the individual body, but a marker of passionate
investment among a collective, a passion so strong that it constitutes media
innovation. Indeed, if we let them, Bella and Edward can offer another point
of access into these light-filled metaphors, what we might call luminosity,
that will be very helpful throughout the consideration of *Latter-day Screens.*

**Luminosity and the Raced and Gendered Politics of the Spectacle:**

*The Glow as Phenotype*

Another way to think about these matters of race and the glow is through
two light-filled metaphors that we inherit from French philosophers to in-
dicate both the emergence of consciousness and new, if fleeting, knowledge:
Gaston Bachelard’s notion of shimmering and Gilles Deleuze’s idea of lumi-
nosity. Bachelard (2014) uses the word “shimmering” to indicate an endless
vacillation in the “duality of subject and object,” a dance between forms that
he calls “iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions.” Gilles
Deleuze describes luminosity as “visibilities” that are “not forms of objects,
nor even forms that would show up under light, but rather forms of lumi-
nosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist
only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer” (1988, 45). In this respect, luminosity is
not a thing so much as an experience-made-thing through media.

In this book, I talk about Mormonism as an optic, a gathering of ideas
projected onto a set of overlapping screens, amplifying and making clear
a network of social relations that might not otherwise come into visibility.
In this—and just like the Mormon origination story, when a young Joseph
Smith created a new media technology by putting seer stones in his mother’s
spectacle frames—Mormonism is both mediated and media. Yet, given the
emphasis on screens and their shifting form in the twenty-first century, the Mormon Glow as media spectacle is situated not in the flatness of the screen itself but in the ephemera of dynamic particles that dance in the shafts of light projecting toward those screens.

I should note, here, that not everyone has such optimistic regard for either shimmering or luminosity (or for Mormonism, for that matter, but that is the stuff of another conversation). Several major feminist media theorists have decried luminosity for the way it keys to consumer-driven mandates, as Guy Debord (1967) argued so persuasively in his Marxist critique The Society of The Spectacle. In more recent scholarship, concerns about consumerism and spectacularization are expressed about girls, who receive countless pitches urging them to make themselves passive and glamorous spectacles for the male gaze (Kearney 2015). Sarah Projansky writes, for instance, that “media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such, media turn girls into spectacles—visual objects on display” (2014, 5, emphasis in original). In The Aftermath of Feminism, Angela McRobbie similarly writes that “luminosity captures how young women might be understood as currently becoming visible” (2012, 60). Girl power of this sort, argues McRobbie, is no power at all, particularly since such logic of spectacularization colludes with marketplace goals that require young women to become neoliberal agents in the policing of their own image. “It becomes increasingly difficult to function as a female subject,” argues McRobbie, “without subjecting oneself to those technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine” (2012, 60). In turn, these technologies of the spectacle, what McRobbie terms the postfeminist masquerade, “implicitly re-instate normative whiteness” through “violent exclusion of diversity and otherness.” In effect, as we saw in earlier discussions in this chapter, light and luminosity function as the constitutive corollaries of whiteness, goodness, and valuable personhood, instantiating an epistemology of light that both “underscores white masculine domination and resurrects racial divisions” since it excludes “non-white femininities from the rigid repertoire of self-styling” (McRobbie 2012, 70). Indeed, the epistemology of light underscoring the Mormon Glow makes the rigid repertoire of self-styling relevant not only for the earthly frame but also for the afterlife.

But rather than simply turning our backs on what is clearly a fraught metaphor, I believe it important to consider how the ephemeral glitter and sparkle that Deleuze and Bachelard theorize might be of benefit. Indeed, many recent cultural theorists, particularly those who work in gender studies–related
fields, have adapted these theories of shimmering and luminosity. Ben Singer’s work on the transgender sublime, for instance, references shimmering for the way it “proposes a reading practice that allows holding incongruent registers of meaning in mind at the same time” (2011, 29). For Singer, shimmering allows not only for an oscillation in the object of consideration but a wavering of “interpretive movement” that, in relation to transgender embodiment, creates a “disorienting encounter . . . that unsettles familiar ways of seeing enough to enable a ‘new kind of subjectivity’” (2011, 56, quoting Phillips 2009, ix). Shimmering thus heightens agentive possibilities within a larger inchoate field and promises power in the context of the objectifying spectacularization of modern mediation.

Mary Celeste Kearney (2015) further regards both shimmering and luminosity as key components in what she terms the “sparklefication of late modern life.” Kearney calls for a “taxonomy of sparkle” or, in the words of Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen, an “anthropology of luminosity” to account for the specificity of light’s meanings: how it is used, what modes it appears in, its various social manifestations and experiences (Bille and Sørensen 2007). Through this taxonomy, Kearney (2015, 268) argues, we might better glean sparkles’ “semitotic and discursive power,” since the participation in sparkle culture may not be the entrapment that postfeminist scholars have posited. She believes that scholars who critique luminosity “do not dig deeply enough into a compelling part of [the] arguments, which is the pronounced superficiality, theatricality and ironic knowingness of postfeminist glamour” (Kearney 2015, 156). These are the watchwords of camp, and they signal what to my mind is a necessary move to queer theory, particularly as related to the light-filled spectacles we are discussing. Kearney advocates that feminist media scholars resist the “moral panic discourse often asserted in the face of spectacular bodily displays” so that we might perceive a delight in illumination through a critically conscious engagement with its function.

In the context of this discussion, the Mormon Glow functions as a bodily distinction or phenotype, by which I mean it is malleable, individual, and conditional, and yet still codes as a stable and seemingly lifelong indicator of social identity expressed through and read on the body. As such, the Mormon Glow is also a condition of embodiment that keys very specifically to race. The biological meaning of phenotype suggests that it is visually available information made legible on a body, a signifying system that rises from a combination of environment and genetics. The phenotype can include not only the physical appearance of an organism but also its behavior. Colloquially, however, phenotype often stands in for its opposite: as a synonym for
the natural body, or a form of immutable embodiedness born in the blood—much like the social understanding of race. Biologists have argued for years that race has no meaningful relation to genetics—there can be more genetic variation between people within the same national and skin-tone groups than those across racial types. The meanings of race also vary across time, nation, and place. It is for this reason that most scholars consider race to be constructed, even while the social investments in race as a reliable marker of identity are very real. In its connection of goodness, lightness, and godliness, the Mormon epistemology of light is complicit with a larger Western notion of enlightenment, both of which participate in a process of racialization whereby the glow (of knowledge and of spiritual purity) functions as both phenotypic ideal and as a way of knowing.

**Whiteness under Siege**

I want to turn briefly to another case study to make these points about race, the body, media spectacle, and the functions of light clearer, particularly as they are focalized through the latter-day screens of mediated Mormonism. Between 2016 and 2018, U.S. news outlets were agog over the right-wing siege of a federal building in Burns, Oregon, a small town in a remote south-eastern section of the state. Most of the speculation about the reasons for the takeover pointed to long-standing tensions between the U.S. federal government and protesting ranchers, many of whom felt they had ancestral rights to use the land as they saw fit. The family behind the siege, the Bundys, traveled from their homes in Idaho to stage the takeover of buildings at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in protest of what they considered to be the unfair sentencing of Dwight and Steve Hammond, a father and son imprisoned for arson due to fires they started on their own land that spread to federal property (the Hammonds had served some time in prison and were released, only to be incarcerated again so that the minimum sentence could be served). The Bundys—father Cliven, son Ammon, and son Ryan—had been involved in their own anti-FBI and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) resistance in 2014 and felt inspired to launch the protest in support of the Hammonds.

What wasn’t much mentioned about the siege was how fully it was supported by an ideology of Mormonism that perceived armed resistance as the right and obligation of God’s elect. Indeed, in the larger mediascape, Mormonism as a meme often carries these valences of righteous resistance to government oppression. For instance, David Brooks describes Senator

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Jeff Flake in terms that correlate with Mormon separatism: “As a Mormon he learned to be wary of the government, and especially the way it can persecute minorities” (Brooks 2017). Many of the key players in the siege were multi-generational Mormons—primary among these being the Bundys, Robert “LeVoy” Finicum, and a supporting player named Dylan Wade Anderson, who would only identify himself to the press as Captain Moroni, a military figure who fights for justice in the Book of Mormon. Ammon Bundy spoke of receiving heavenly confirmation of the holding of the government facility. In his words: “I clearly understood that the Lord was not pleased about what was happening to the Hammonds.” In a YouTube posting, Bundy spoke of being concerned about their arrest, of lying in his bed fatigued, only to hear a push notification on his phone. When he looked down to read the news, he saw it was about the Hammonds, and he “knew he was supposed to write something.” His emotions were clouding his thoughts, he says, so he asked God for clarity, “and [he] was able to write.” He then composed a letter to “individuals and government officials” arguing for justice and calling supporters to meet together to protest in Oregon, “so that they could get back to prospering again.” He promptly posted these reflections to his Facebook page, and they are now available on YouTube (Hatewatchblog 2016). The video is a callout to sympathizers, asking them to join the militia in their Oregon siege.

In much the same way that Joseph Smith asked converts to reflect within themselves on whether Mormonism was the One True Church and to be guided by their internal testimony, Ammon Bundy appealed to his fellow patriots: “I am asking you to come to Harney County, to make the decision right now of whether this is a righteous cause or not, whether I am some crazy person or whether the Lord truly works through individuals to get His purposes accomplished. I ask you now to come to Harney County to participate in this wonderful thing that the Lord is about to accomplish.” It was a patriarchal vision as good as the brethren in Salt Lake City might have offered.

For its part, the LDS Church denounced the militia and their use of Mormon theology. The Hammonds, who were the metaphorical damsels in distress in this scenario, also distanced themselves from the Bundys, seeing the tie between their arrest and the Bundy-led siege as a publicity stunt. The occupation of the Malheur Refuge lasted for forty days, finally ending after one of the members of the antigovernment militia, Robert Finicum, was shot and killed by federal authorities after refusing to comply with authorities, an altercation caught on video from the backseat of his truck by a passenger
with an iPhone. The footage is now available on YouTube as posted by the newspaper *The Oregonian*, as yet one more element of the latter-day screens of mediated Mormonism (“Shawna Cox” 2016). For roughly six weeks, the international news cycle and social media chronicled and commented on the comings and goings of the siege, reporting on the militia men as “rebel cowboys” (Levin 2016) and patriotic upstarts, who, according to James Purtill (2016), writing for the Australian Broadcast Company, “seemed to welcome the blurring of spectacle and entertainment with political protest.” For many, the siege represented the quintessence of both Americanness and Westernness, given that the United States was founded by patriots fighting a revolutionary war against a much more powerful state. Noted Carol Bundy, matriarch of the Bundy clan, “The west was won by people standing up. It runs deep in our blood. Do you give up on something that is born in you?” (Levin 2016). The Oregon siege thus announced a conjoined patriotism and rebellion, a defiant antigovernment act as national birthright and obligation, just the way the country was founded. It also worked to reinforce the central place Mormonism had in these values of Western Americanism, a Mormonism recognized by those who could see its valences and knew the Moroni connection or the call to testimony issued by Ammon but unannounced for those who did not.

The siege was fomented by a larger political unrest at work in the United States today but fueled through media technologies: God’s message sent through push notifications, a prophet’s call to arms announced on Facebook and YouTube, a patriot’s (or domestic terrorist’s) death captured on phone video, satiric and comedic reactions on network nightly talk shows, an endless number of blogs commenting and critiquing, international coverage in newspapers, magazines, and on television news. And much as Mormonism was simultaneously visible and invisible in this media spectacle, so were the workings of whiteness, of settler colonialism, and of ethnic cleansing, which often assert themselves in absence. As journalist Aaron Bady thoughtfully commented, the Bundys’ “libertarian fairy tale” required an extraordinary revisionist history that accounts for no history prior to 1870. No indigenous Paiutes, no Spanish exploration, no French Canadian trappers, no British occupation, no nineteenth-century government intervention to create a railroad that itself makes cattle ranching possible. Writes Bady (2016):

Western militia-types like to fantasize that they are oppressed by a “foreign” government. They like to play dress-up, to pretend that they are entrepreneurial family farmers who built it all themselves. But you
can tell the story of Harney County as a morality tale about the evils of big government only if you leave most of it out. And so they do. The story the Bundy brothers tell is mostly empty space, like the Western frontier of their imagination. And perhaps this is fitting. After all, what is American history if not a history of unspoken violence, told by erasure?

Indeed, behind Ammon’s desire to “go back to prospering” was a more sinister message about white privilege and a sense of dispossession. Cliven Bundy’s beef was not just with the U.S. government but with black and brown people. As the New York Times reported in 2014, Cliven’s resistance to the Bureau of Land Management made the “rancher a celebrity.” And when his resistance to the government failed to generate crowds, his daily press conferences turned into “a long, loping discourse” on topics such as abortion, welfare, and race. During one of these rants, Cliven spoke in “appalling and racist statements” about black people, suggesting that they “are better off as slaves” (Nagourney 2014). In the Oregon siege, Cliven’s sons reinforced this racist epistemology, and their white/right to prosperity, Mormonism here made to play the role of handmaiden in their quest for celebrity and rebellion.

The protestors made news again in October 2016, when a jury acquitted them of wrongdoing, their racial privilege as wronged white men evidencing a disaffected alt-right movement. Writing for the Los Angeles Times, Melissa Batchelor Warnke explicitly characterized the acquittal as a form of racial injustice. The militants, whom she described as “extremist Mormons with messiah complexes,” disputed a notion of mandatory minimum sentencing, a regulation that seemed fair when the “right” people, meaning those of color, were held to these restrictions. “When people of color are locked up for minor crimes—X time in jail for carrying Y amount of weed, for instance—that’s the application of law and order,” Warnke wrote, channeling the voice and ideology of the alt-right. “But when white people are locked up for substantive crimes—setting fire to 100 acres of land owned by the government, for instance—that’s an infringement of rights they believe they should have.” Her own opinions come through loud and clear: “Can you hear how entitled, how insane, how racist that is?” (Warnke 2016).

The siege in Oregon is not alone, either in its connection to the white colonization of Western lands or the Mormon connection to disputes about history, space, and identity. In 2017, for instance, a new land grab controversy emerged, in the form of Bears Ears, Utah, a protected national monument in southeastern Utah run by an intertribal coalition made up of the Hopi,
Navajo, Uintah and Ouray Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and Zuni nations. The monument, encompassing 1.35 million acres, had been targeted for reduction through a presidential order issued by Donald Trump. The order would thus open the land for cultivation. Coverage by NPR specifically labeled Bears Ears a part of “Mormon Country,” and Terry Tempest Williams, while not making overt connections to Mormons, made pointed ties to Utah’s LDS “bellicose politicians” Orrin Hatch, Rob Bishop, and Jason Chaffetz, who, with Trump, were engaged in a “new colonialism,” moving the country back a hundred years (Siegler 2017; Williams 2017).

Conclusion: The Holy Glow

In sum, the Mormon Glow is both a symbolic and a literal racialized conglomerate denoting spiritual purity, whiteness, boundless energy, and limitless success—all fused through the meme of Mormonism and animated through media spectacle. Given this, I’d venture to say there is no better example to end this chapter than the smiling superstar siblings, Donny and Marie Osmond. This is particularly true since both Donny and Marie repeatedly serve as New Year’s Eve poster children for youthful energy and good looks, their glowing and “age-defying” images designed to capitalize on the renewal projects that are so much a part of new year’s resolutions. In 2018, for instance, both Donny and Marie appeared on separate January covers: Donny smiled forth from the cover of Healthy Living Made Simple (figure 2.2), a lifestyle periodical circulated free for Sam’s Club, and Marie appeared hand-on-hip in First for Women, a periodical dedicated to health and wellness (figure 2.3). First Magazine’s back cover also featured Marie in her capacity as the spokesperson for Nutrisystem, a weight loss meal plan (this time with both hands on hips), making her the literal beginning and end of glowing health. Healthy Living’s feature article on Donny argued that a “lifetime spent in entertainment” provides him with the “motivation to stay in shape,” his life in the spotlight thus both an inspiration and rationale for his “boyish good looks” (Marsh 2018). Yet his story is also about the Mormon Glow. His life, the magazine tells us, is one of faith, family, and constant personal reinvention, augmented by a dietary discipline that restricts sugar, alcohol, and tobacco. The accompanying image of Osmond in the spotlight reinforces the glow of good choices and scrupulous self-management, in an arms-outstretched pose that fuses the iconography of religion and celebrity as amplified through and in the whiteness of his literal glowing (figure 2.4).
Interviews with Donny similarly work to sustain these connections between wellness, whiteness, and goodness, and Donny’s glow is often referenced as evidence of what good choices might bring. Although he has been public about his struggles with depression and the family’s bankruptcy, his present-day successes and youthful appearance are considered to bear witness to his right choices, scrappiness, determination, and resilience.\(^5\) In a 2007 interview with *BT*, British Telephone’s online magazine, for example, Donny notes that he was mocked mercilessly in his early career because he never drank, smoke, or took drugs: “My faith . . . and my upbringing kept me on a pretty straight path.” But Donny makes clear, “I think I’ve had the last laugh” (Fagan 2017).

Indeed, Donny reinforces these readings of himself as a signboard for glowing wellness, even offering “testimony” for products that enhance his appearance, such as the dietary supplement Protandim (manufactured by LifeVantage Corporation, a Utah-based MLM company), which promises

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*FIG. 2.2 Donny as glowing cover boy. Healthy Living Made Simple, January/February 2018.*
FIG. 2.3 Marie as glowing cover girl. *First for Women*, January 15, 2018.

FIG. 2.4 Beatific Donny.
to reduce metabolic aging by 40 percent. In 2012, he offered his personal testimonial on his blog: “I feel compelled to share it,” Osmond posted. “Whenever I have the opportunity to discuss health and wellness, I mention Protandim because it has made such a difference in my life” (Osmond 2012). “Look at you!” exclaims Dr. Phil on his talk show when Osmond is a guest. “You don’t ever get older.” Donny flashes his trademarked pearly whites and speaks in the language of the missionary: “People are quite shocked when they hear I’m fifty-four years old. They say, ‘How do you keep your youth.’ I have found something, Dr. Phil! I think it’s the closest thing to the fountain of youth. It’s called Protandim, and it works. I’m telling everybody about this” (McGraw 2012).  

What is perhaps obvious—but goes unmentioned—in this exchange of personal revelation and rejuvenation is that Osmond was contractually obligated to endorse the product as a paid spokesman for the mlm company.  

For her part, sister Marie similarly monetizes her celebrity brand through personal endorsements for products that make much of salvific selfhood—saving oneself through the power of personal change. In addition to being the celebrity spokesperson for Nutrisystem since 2013, she is also the designer and creator of a series of collectible dolls sold on QVC, the home shopping network. She has since 2010 put her domestic knowledge to fuller use through a series of crafting businesses and a how-to book called Marie Osmond’s Heartfelt Giving, which offers patterns and other projects, including that for paper roses (the name of her hit song in the 1970s).  

As with her brother, magazines make much of Marie’s amazing ageless-ness and boundless energy. First for Women writes, Marie is still “wow at 58!” With Marie featured on both the front and back covers of their January 2018 issue, the magazine’s feature article calls her “slim, energized, and happy as she go-go-goes,” and it offers various forms of “instant inspiration,” ranging from Marie’s “radiance secret” to her “loving mantra” (“Marie Osmond” 2018). Marie’s struggles—and victories—with her body position her as both relatable and transcendent, both good girl and wonder woman. “It’s time to take control!” she insists, in ad copy for Nutrisystem. In interviews, she often refers to weight loss as a feminist intervention, of finally learning to put herself first. Indeed, Marie remembers the last words of advice whispered by her mother, Olive: “Lose weight. Take care of your body. You’re like me. We take care of everybody. If I could do it over again, I’d take care of me. Love yourself enough” (Hahn 2011). But Marie also talks about weight loss as a way to better meet feminine demands for other-orientedness, telling Parade magazine: “Take care of your body—for yourself, and for the people you love that depend on you” (Stephens 2014). In this case, while brother
Donny perceives looking good as a requirement for his job, sister Marie sees it as part of her devotion to others, both statements reinforcing codes of conventional masculinity and femininity in the larger meme of Mormonism.

While celebrity endorsements are perhaps as American as apple pie, in Donny and Marie Osmond we see an additional connection between an ideology of Americanness and spiritual neoliberalism as manifested through media spectacle. The glowing celebrity is taken as proof not only of looking good but of being good. The Osmond glow, I argue here, also bears witness to a semiotics of whiteness. Indeed, within the broader logic of the Mormon Glow, whiteness is a sign of their good choices with respect to self-management, all made visible through boundless energy, youthfulness, and luminosity. It’s fitting given Joseph Smith’s early career as a diviner of lost treasure that the religion he created positions the self as the shining divining rod to the “white and delightsome” spirit.