5. Gender Trouble in Happy Valley

CHOICE, HAPPY AFFECT, AND MORMON FEMINIST HOUSEWIVES

I had a very interesting opportunity to teach one of my nieces a very valuable lesson last night. . . . As I sat with [her] allowing her to tell me all about her life, experiences, friends, and what’s important to her, she made a comment that struck a nerve with me. She was telling me of a young girl (my niece is in the 5th grade) that is choosing to “Go Out” with a boy. She was telling me in not so many words that she was better because she was choosing to not “date” because she’s not old enough. She then made a very revealing comment. She said, “This girl probably won’t get very far in life because of the choices she’s making.” I about jumped out of my skin. It reminded me of the way so many of my family members treated me over the years. As I finished letting her tell me about this girl, I said a silent prayer asking the Lord to help me teach my niece a very valuable lesson. We should never judge anyone.

As she finished I said, “Sweetie, do you think Aunt Jilly is a good person?” She said, “Yes,” then I said, “Do you think I’ve gotten very far in life?” (Knowing that this little angel thinks the world of her Aunt Jill). She said, “Well, yeah.” I then took a beautiful opportunity to teach her something. I shared with her that I stopped going to church when I was 14 years old. Her mouth about hit the floor. I told her that I didn’t believe in the church, I swore, I hung out with bad people, and I even dated boys before I was 16. She was stunned. Then I asked her this, “Do you think Aunt Jilly turned out okay?” You could see her little brain turning. She said, “Yeah you did.” I said, “Do you think that this little girl might turn out okay too? She’s doing the same things that Aunt Jill did, and you just said that I turned out okay.” She said, “Yeah Aunt Jill. She might.” Then I took the opportunity to teach her how very wrong it is to judge another person. Not only that, I taught her that judging someone can often keep them away [from the church] longer, but if we will show them love like the Savior, they might come back.

—Jilly Strasburg, “Judgement Is of the Devil,” from The Mormon Housewife
As I discuss throughout this book, happiness as affect and as visual signifier is critical to the broader ideology and implications of mediated Mormonism. Indeed, aspirational cheerfulness—at times, coercively so—is very much in evidence in the above posting from The Mormon Housewife blog. Riddled as it is with sentiments of positive advice giving, sunny affectation, and encouraging lifestyle modeling, undercurrents of damnation eddy just below the surface. In this particular entry, a young Mormon woman (age twenty-eight) counsels her preteen niece on the matter of social relationships, cautioning the girl to veer away from judgment and, in so doing, to avoid the devil. It seems somewhat churlish to point out that in chiding her niece about judging others, Jilly participates in her own form of judgmental and potentially damning behavior. What I want to focus on, then, is the way this Mormon housewife’s “very important message” is less about judgment and more about the need to develop one’s capacities for personal choice as a governing apparatus for spiritual aspirationalism.

By abstaining from active participation in judgment culture, the argument goes, this young girl will also develop the possibility of moving herself and others closer to a heavenly goal. In this context, both self-reflexivity and personal choice work as agents that may lead to salvation. Conversely, however, poor self-reflection and bad choices lead directly to Satan. To “get very far in life” is thus not only coded in the double valences of heaven and earth, since the upward mobility referenced by Aunt Jill connotes both earthly riches and celestial paradises, it is also marinated in the spiritual neoliberal juices of redemptive (and condemnatory) individual choice. In this case, spiritual neoliberalism is made all the more piquant through mediation, since it is not an interaction between aunt and niece that we witness in this exchange but the telling of that interaction, as disseminated through and amplified by the internet colossus.

For this Mormon housewife blogger, choice about normative gender roles for girls and romantic intimacy (to “go out”) and their implied extensions and variations—to abstain from going out, to commit to modesty and virginity, to buy into the sexual-moral mythos of both the mainstream Mormon Church and a larger politically right way of positioning and restricting girls’ sexuality—are, by themselves, not enough. A young girl must cultivate her powers of self-reflection, to see herself from the outside and work to make others happy by comporting herself in a way that will not cause discomfort or harm. She must always be pleasant and seemingly kind to the outside world, at least to those within her faith system. In doing so, she must
internalize the critical gaze of others and guard herself from being offensive to those around her—femininity at its most perversely toxic.

I discuss this term “toxic femininity” in far greater detail in the next section, so here I will bookmark my use with a condensed definition: toxic femininity takes the mandate of a usually white, mostly middle-class, relentlessly heterosexual, and typically politically conservative norm of gender for girls and women and insists on the internalization of these mandates to such a degree that it immolates the self. The workings of toxic femininity within F/LDS cultures follow the routes of most hegemonic systems, which is to say this form of gender instruction is anything but particular or specific. It is both overt and invisible; it is everywhere and nowhere; it seemingly doesn’t exist and yet is extremely influential. While individualism and personhood are prized, particularly in the mainstream church, patriarchal authority governs the hierarchy of access to spiritual power and thus to social organization. And because F/LDS cosmogony dictates that righteous men (and only men) might inherit their own heavenly kingdoms and rule as a God, personhood-into-Godhood is a prized objective for men, while being a helper to male priesthood holders is the sine qua non for women.

Awareness of this gendered two-class system floods the writings of Mormon women. Novelist and memoirist Judith Freeman reflects, for instance, on an emerging consciousness of her second-class status: “From a young age I realized that men would always have powers unavailable to me and thus I would always be beholden to them, required to obey their dictates as bearers of the holy priesthood, and thus I would forever exist in a somewhat lower realm” (Freeman 2016, loc. 976). Former F/LDS member Elissa Wall offers a similar reflection: “It should have dawned on me that many aspects of the religion were based on revoking the rights of women. If a girl speaks her mind, get her married. Once she’s married, get her pregnant. Once she has children, she’s in for life—it’s almost impossible for any F/LDS woman to take her children if she leaves, and no mother wants to leave her children behind” (Wall and Pulitzer 2012, 235).

Throughout this book, I have written much about voice as a defining characteristic of feminist and queer empowerment, a trait that is readily manifest through such media as F/LDS polygamy stories, including Wall’s, where formerly victimized subjects describe their experiences of consciousness raising, of learning to speak, shout, and scream in defiance of patriarchal mandates that demand their silence and submission. In this chapter, I reflect on feminist identification in relation to affect and choice, specifically the sort
of feminine persona espoused by Aunt Jilly in *The Mormon Housewife*. Cultivated femininity requires careful honing and shaping. For many bloggers and memoirists, it is called simply being a good Mormon girl. The notion of choice is, of course, central to progressive gender movements, particularly the pro-choice arm of feminism and the Act Up activism of many LGBT+ political movements. Progressive gender politics demand that individuals have the right to sovereignty over their bodies, desires, and modes of expression.

Somewhat ironically for a religion stressing absolute obedience, personal choice is also critical to Mormonism. Fueled by a belief in individual authority as reinforced by American democratic values, Mormonism (in both mainstream and fundamentalist forms) highly values conscience, personal truth, feelings of individual conviction or testimony, and going against the grain of worldly trends as part of its ethos for being—free agency. Mormonism also, however, governs through a patriarchal hierarchy. In women’s writings, this theme of the harsh demand for an unerring submission to male authority and the difficulty in meeting the high bar of perfectionism is a raging river that etches out the gendered canyon lands of mediated Mormonism.

In fundamentalist parlance, the demand for obedience often requires total physical, emotional, and sexual compliance with the prophet; in a mainstream context, while obedience to church authority is highly valued, enacting the codes of submission is often more internalized and socially maintained. Edicts from the LDS such as the Proclamation on the Family make the Mormon mandate for conventional gender ideology clear with statements featured on lds.org like, “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (“The Family” 1995). But the policing of these “solemn responsibilities,” particularly for women, often devolves to the realms of social criticism and private shame.

In both LDS and FLDS contexts, earthly behaviors, beliefs, and desires accrue value toward a heavenly balance sheet: if one lives the gospel and obeys all church rules, a life of glory in celestial heaven awaits—one hopes. This paradise is made all the more appealing by the reassurance that a righteous man or woman can be sealed for all eternity to an eternal companion and children, the forever families of the afterlife an insurance policy against the dark anxiety of floating alone in perpetuity in the isolation of outer darkness.¹ In this, mediated Mormonism doubles down on the meritocracy promised by the American Dream, but it does so by taking advantage of the fear inherent in these ideologies of self-making: if you fail, it’s your own damn fault.
I engage in this consideration of choice, happiness, perfectionism, and gender by thinking quite specifically about women, female and woman-identified embodiment, and femininity in mediated stories about F/LDS culture and lives. Gender, of course, is not a synonym for women, and femininity is not the sole domain of biological or women-identified persons. It is, in turn, extremely important to resist the conflation of masculinity with men or as naturally and exclusively issuing from the male body. In the popular context, however, sex and gender are in almost every case understood and referenced as fused, so male equals masculine and female equals feminine. In mediated Mormonism this is also the case. Given this, I work to balance the gender-fluid objectives of scholarship with the gender-as-sex worldview of my subjects and textual examples, all as set within the mediation that catapults these ideas into the public sphere.

Indeed, while men are also implicated in the complex gender codes of Mormonism, the privilege of patriarchal authority (not surprisingly) gives natal men greater flexibility, status, personhood, and guarantees for the outcome of the Godhead. Gendered dynamics are made all the more complicated in the F/LDS insistence on heteronormative desire and cis-gender identity. As I discuss more thoroughly in chapter 6 on queer politics, neither the mainstream nor fundamentalist churches recognize LGBT+ individuals or partnerships as viable unions eligible for personal exultation, celestial marriage, or family sealings. In the context of this chapter’s discussion on women, lesbian and transgender women might as well be invisible, and, indeed, they are frequently excommunicated from the LDS church or expelled from the FLDS branches, making their absence virtually assured.

Yet the democratizing impulse of twenty-first-century media formats gives voice and presence to these persons. These include Marnie Freeman’s (2014) *To the One: You Don’t Get to Be Mormon and Lesbian, Even If You Were Born Both*; Alex Cooper’s (2016) *Saving Alex: When I Was Fifteen I Told My Mormon Parents I Was Gay, and That’s When My Nightmare Began*; Sue-Ann Post’s (2005) *The Confession of an Unrepentant Lesbian Ex-Mormon*; Katherine Jean Denton’s (2015) *Breaking Free: Gay Mormon Guilt Free*; Cindi Jones’s (2011) *Squirrel Cage*; documentaries such as *Believer* (2018), produced by the rock band Imagine Dragons and starring the band’s frontman Dan Reynolds, who was also the film’s executive director; Pinterest sites such as Lesbian Mormon Poetry; independent documentaries such as *Transmormon* (2014); and YouTube channels or podcasts featuring the stories of transitioning Mormons. These are but a small sampling of the insistent mediation that establishes the existence of queer difference in a tabula rasa
of hegemonic sameness. This queer residue adheres to Mormonism even when, as in most cases, it is expressed from outside of Mormonism’s center, post-excommunication. I examine Mormonism’s negotiations with queer lives, identities, and desires at greater length in the next chapter.

In this chapter I go to the heart of toxic femininity by working through the mediation that surrounds the category of Mormon womanhood, in its pressures to be perfect, its affective imperative for happiness, and its mandate for obedience and social homogeneity. I look at these social practices amid Mormon women’s struggles for agency and personhood, as circulated through a broad range of media including published memoirs, blog posts, YouTube videos, and news events. Indeed, within the vapors of toxic femininity and the restrictive measures manifest through strong codes of modesty and sexual purity, one of the more surprising social consequences of the restrictive gender codes of Happy Valley is that Mormonism fosters an exceptionally robust strain of political feminism.

**Toxic Femininity and the Compulsory Logics of the Glow**

Sometimes in Mormonism we go a little overboard on the striving for perfection stuff. There are lots of cultural rules (and gospel rules) that we feel guilty over because we aren’t following like we think we “should” (or maybe the way other people think we “should”). “Should” is a pretty heavy burden to be carrying around all the time.

I’m not saying that everyone should (see—there it is) stop trying to do their best in whatever areas feel important to them. I’m suggesting that continuously holding ourselves to impossible standards is a recipe for mental health distress.—Alliega tor, “When Striving for Perfection Just Makes Us Feel Bad about Ourselves,” in Feminist Mormon Housewives

Let’s begin with a fuller discussion of toxic femininity, a state of being that works against itself, in that it denies full personhood to those who are women and women-identified. In this, toxic femininity is not a synonym for femme (as in the femme fatale or the lesbian femme) or even heterofemininity. To be femme is an outward manifestation of style and demeanor. It is often (but not always) deliberate, values driven, and reinforcing of an ego state. By contrast, toxic femininity is corrosive, internalized, and shame filled. Toxic femininity is based on core beliefs that are not always cognitive but are always insistent: I’m not worthy. I don’t deserve good things. I shouldn’t bother people. Love and acceptance are conditional on my compliance. Toxic femininity works in negating imperatives: Don’t take up too much space. Don’t ask too many questions. Don’t challenge orthodoxy. Don’t
upset others with your needs or concerns. Don’t be unpleasant. Relying on a logic of compulsory heteronormativity, toxic femininity positions a girl or woman’s value as first and foremost heterosexual. Her worth is thus conferred through male desire and secondary to male needs. It undermines her right to sexual expression and pleasure and makes her a device for achieving the goals of men and boys. In all of these ways, toxic femininity reinforces its own unworthiness by suggesting there is no a priori female self that merits priority, protection, or empowerment.

I want to be very clear about my discussion here. Toxic femininity is a prescriptive code, not a descriptive reality. It stands for an idea, and for some even an ideal, of gender, and thus I do not mean to indicate that any woman, Mormon or otherwise, is herself toxic or that femininity is in all cases contaminated. Instead, I hope to show that these forms of gender ideals function as impossible-to-achieve imperatives. And here I hasten to add that while Mormonism (both mainstream and fundamentalist) neither created nor solely perpetuates toxic femininity, the many screens sustaining mediated Mormonism witness toxic femininity’s workings with remarkable clarity.

Described as “America’s sweetheart” (Cooper 2018), entertainer and generational Mormon Marie Osmond offers a ready resource for seeing many of the characteristics of toxic femininity at work, sometimes reinforced and other times repudiated. In Osmond’s memoir Behind the Smile, which details her long-term struggle with postpartum depression after the birth of her seventh child, she writes: “Sunk deep in depression, I found when I tried to throw myself a lifeline that I didn’t have a self or even a life I could identify as my own” (Osmond, Wilkie, and Moore 2001, 15).4 Why? Because, according to Osmond, “Women are caretakers by nature. We know how to fix things. I didn’t need help... I was the one who gave help” (15). Her job as entertainer, mother, and wife was exclusively other-oriented, she explains. Her function was “making everyone [else] happy” (25). She had no capacity to even discern her own needs, she confesses. “What defined me as an individual?” Osmond wonders. Her value had always been determined by others. “I had gone from a little girl who was her mother’s helper to a businesswoman who took care of her coworkers, to a wife who took care of her husband, to a mother who took care of her children” (195). And though she was and is an international celebrity, Osmond acknowledges feeling like a hapless failure. “I had always felt the need to please, to fit in, to succeed, so I set aside my need and desire to explore on my own, fearing that I would fall short, make an irreversible mistake, or embarrass myself and my family” (213).
For some, Marie Osmond—with her wide smile, upbeat personality, and showbiz panache—personifies both Mormonism and a certain kind of hyperfemme glamour, what Judith Freeman calls “the Marie Osmond look” (2016, loc. 3687). For others, such as memoirist and scholar Joanna Brooks, Marie Osmond set the template for how to embody Mormon womanhood with style, grace, and celestial certitude. Brooks writes in *The Book of Mormon Girl* about turning twelve and being given *Marie Osmond’s Guide to Beauty, Health and Style*: “She was, after all, someone I could really trust. A Mormon girl, for starters—and better yet, a rare kind of Mormon girl, just like me, with dark hair and a twinkle of definite ambition in her eye. . . . Who else could give me up-to-date but faith-tested insider information on ‘turning 12 clothing separates into 3 dozen outfits,’ ‘ten hair do’s and don’ts,’ ‘complexion routines for four kinds of skin,’ and my ‘three makeup personalities’” (Brooks 2012, 47–48). Much as I describe the workings of self-management in chapter 1, adhering to Marie Osmond’s beauty principles constituted a time-managed exercise in personal governance and self-control. Brooks writes of following Osmond’s “repertoire of routines essential to [her] personal transformation” (50), including self-scrutiny of skin type, aspired acquisition of “cosmetic, applicators and other beauty tools” (51), and the adoption of “Marie’s 62-minute . . . early morning routine,” which consisted of seventeen “numbered and precisely timed steps” (55) from calisthenics, to moisturizing the eyes, to hair styling, to breakfast. But Brooks also perceived, at least in hindsight, how Osmond’s careful regime served as a religious system in itself for the indoctrination of a spiritualized toxic femininity:

You and me, Marie, wrestling the dark energies of childhood depressions and nascent eating disorders. You and me, with visions of self-harm, dark impulses we could only describe as religious. These wars with our own bodies, how did we understand them but as a battle against the traitorous flesh that stood between us and our holiest inner selves, that stood between us and God?

What to do with our bodies? If they were not instruments of priesthood power, and not yet instruments of eternal procreation, what was our purpose? It was you, Marie, who gave me the doctrine of the wardrobe grid, the seven quick and healthy breakfast plans, three makeup personalities, the sanctifying discipline of daily reducing exercises, the promise that I could have as much diet gelatin, chicken bullion, or vinegar-dressed salad as I wanted and still keep my diet virtue. . . .
Marie, your precisely numbered regimens gave me great comfort. Especially the idea that with a little practice, I could change, I could convert those long columns of personal minuses into a perfect string of plusses. (64)

For Brooks, and one might argue also for Osmond, the gospel of personal body management and gendered beautification provided a necessary function for the early adolescent girl, neither (and never) the bearer of priesthood power nor prepared for the years of continuous pregnancy that is the destiny of many Mormon women—indeed, Osmond reminisces in her memoir about motherhood, *The Key Is Love*, that her own mother, Olive Osmond, bore nine children and endured/experienced/enjoyed “twenty-five consecutive years of teenage children” and “twenty-two consecutive years of changing diapers” (Osmond and Wilkie 2013, 15).

Brooks also indicates that the major unexpressed function of these sanctified beauty rituals is to contribute to a woman’s erasure by removing the flaws and distractions of the flesh, so that she might serve as an object of space, a window, a shimmery absence that allows for a greater divine (and male) presence: “I too wanted to be pure and clear, an open door, a spotless window. I wanted the love of God to shine brightly through me like a perfect frame, no bitten nails, or blemishes, or extra pounds, flyaway hairs, or personal character minuses to bar the view of His eternal brightness. What, after all, was the point of the small but burdensome body I freighted about in these middling years, when already I knew, I knew, that beyond this life was a place of total understanding, and already I hungered to evaporate into it” (2012, 63). We would be wise to remember Naomi Wolf’s prescient observation about these sorts of evaporative fantasies with respect to weight loss and beauty regimes: “A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience” (2001, 187). In this case, the Book of Mormon Girl desires an obedience so pure that, in her words, “I too might disappear” (Brooks 2012, 65).

In chapter 2, I discuss the trope of the Mormon Glow at some length, indicating its historic ties to Americanness and racialization, as well as its continuing presence as an epistemology of light that teaches to be bright and white is to be righteous and to be dark and dull is to be a sinner. In the context of this discussion on toxic femininity, the properties of the glow take on added meaning, for here the glow asks of women a form of self-immolation. It is the female Saint’s absolute management of the body, the perfect obedience of her will, her unending commitment to perfectionism.
and cheerfulness that yields the prized goal—not of personhood but of dissolution into light.

These, of course, are not new ideas as they relate to female embodiment, norms of beautification, or to Western religious systems: the achievement of spiritual union between the female body and the transcendent god is often sexualized with tropes of light. Gendered acculturation for women and girls has likewise long stipulated erasure, smallness, being and becoming diminutive. In many religions, spiritual annunciation requires the absolute control and subordination of the body. The history of anorexia nervosa cannot be told, for instance, absent the backdrop provided by fasting nuns of the twelfth century, whose emaciation and paper-thin luminescent skin seemed to prove their closeness to the divine (see Vandereycken and van Deth 1994). As with so much else, Mormonism transports these features of the ancient spiritualized world not only into the lived experience of the modern but through the very devices and technologies of modernity. Indeed, if we take both self-help culture and self-improvement strategies to be technologies of identity in a postindustrial frame, as scholars such as Micki McGee (2005) and Anthony Giddens (1991) argue, then the incessant shaping, scrutinizing, and obsession with the body that Brooks describes through Osmond perfectly epitomizes the modern subject.

Further, if we consider the glow to be a prominent feature of not only a light-as-right epistemology but also of the imperative markers of feminized value, then Mormonism provides another vivid screen on which to witness its operation. As a colloquial referent, the glow is almost exclusively tied to women’s experiences of what are considered to be the three major rites of passage in the heteronormative frame: when she falls in love, when she marries, and when she is pregnant, typically with her first child. In this, the glow is temporally bound; it marks the moment out of time, the nonquotidian, when something special and supposedly singular occurs. We often hear of glowing brides and luminous expectant mothers; we rarely hear of women who glow due to the personal accomplishments of a degree earned or a raise secured. For that matter, rearing children does not carry associations of the glow. Instead, in the words of Marie Osmond, the period of motherhood is the time when women need an especially good “under-eye concealer stick” with “incredible camouflaging capabilities,” particularly when parenting infants and teenagers, since parental sleep deprivation is rampant during these stages of a child’s life (Osmond and Wilkie 2013, 11).

In the broader aura that is hegemonic femininity, the glow is not only temporally bound; it is for the young: the dew of youth. Yet, across media,
women of all ages and races are hailed to “develop your glow,” to “awaken the glow” and to let the glow be the solution for the problem you didn’t know you had (but certainly, you felt that something was not quite right). The glow, and other light-filled words indicating luminosity such as “sparkle,” “brilliance,” “brightness,” and “shine,” constitute a normative birthright—something immanent to a woman that can only be experienced through her active commitments for resuscitation and, typically, her continual purchase of just the right face cream, exfoliant, aesthetic procedure, diet, workout regimen. Rather than the glow being time-bound, natural, and only on offer for one or two years during the teens and twenties, the glow here functions as an elusive, critical, and enduring requirement of the worthy female self, available for those willing to work hard enough to achieve it. Indeed, there are even pedagogies in the contemporary mediascape on how to manage one’s glow and prevent oneself from “glow-verload,” an idealized state in which the glow is hyperarticulated (see figure 5.1). Even when the glow securely articulates itself, then, it is management that is most at the heart of these imperatives. The trick of these meritocratic claims and pedagogies for success? No amount of care or work is, or ever will be, sufficient for achieving and managing the glow in its consummate fullness.
As it pertains to LDS women, the glow reinforces a broader ideology of reflective beauty where the righteous Mormon woman visually signifies her adherence to the body/beauty-as-good motif. The properties of the glow fuse into an amalgam of attraction and attractiveness, where conventional forms of feminine beauty serve as evidence of righteous living and as lures for those who desire the rewards of sanctified living. Emily Pearson writes of her responsibility to “sparkle for the Lord” as part of her experience as a member of the Young Ambassadors, an LDS singing and dancing troupe. “It was our job to sing, dance, and above all else, smile as we shared the gospel of Jesus Christ through our Broadway Musical Review and Sunday night firesides” (Pearson 2012, loc. 2589). It was not lost on Pearson that her physical attractiveness was critical to the success of the appeal she offered audiences, particularly when her wardrobe notes included (in bold letters): “Emily P: wear padded bra with everything. Thanks. Your clothes will look better.” Pearson ruminates: “May as well have read: ‘sister pearson: we have got to get you some tits.’ Heaven forbid my small breasts should ruin the entire show and keep hundreds, perhaps thousands, from feeling the love of Jesus Christ” (loc. 2626). Pearson’s function in the Young Ambassadors was to serve as a bright object—a dazzling, glittering, sequined, “personification of all that was good, and pure, and joyful in the Mormon Church” (loc. 2652). Yet the brightness brings a dark side. “We sparkled so brightly,” she recalls, “that no one would ever have been able to see into the shadows where, among the fifteen of us, there were a staggering number trying desperately to hide their homosexuality, eating disorders, catfights and love triangles. We even had one future polygamist” (loc. 2652). Here we see a different aspect of the glow—it not only attracts the gaze but it blocks it, or at least obscures the process of seeing to such a degree that the gazer is blinded by its light.

In chapter 2, I argue that the Mormon Glow is often referenced as a particularly effective and irresistible tool in the arsenal of erotic attractiveness that Mormon girls use to draw their eternal companion and thus ensure their personal plan of happiness. “So, you’re in love with a Mormon girl,” writes Gale Boyd (2014) on Mormon Hub, congratulating her interpellated male, heterosexual, and Gentile reader. “You’ve been attracted to a girl who is glowing for all the right reasons, which means you chose her not because she was wearing black and red skin-tight jeggings from Frederick’s of Hollywood. Aha! That’s a clue you might be leaning toward the light yourself.” The Mormon girl’s gravitational pull is potent, writes Boyd: “The Mormon girl has the light of Christ shining through her, and you were drawn in.” And
the “lucky” fellow pulled into her orbit should anticipate not only the light of her beauty. He should know that he “will be expected to give the gospel a chance.” Her glow is thus assurance of not only her own eternal progression but of the church’s as well.

Radiating Mormon girls cannot help their luminescent attractiveness; their glow is simply a by-product (rather than a calculated effect) of pure living. Writes one LDS woman (unnamed) about living in Israel: “I can tell you that both the citizens of Israel and the Palestinian merchants in Jerusalem’s Old City could identify a Mormon on sight, just by the ‘Mormon glow’ that studies have shown is palpable and identifiable by Mormons and non” (“Those Beautiful Mormon Girls” 2013).5 While the writer attributes the glow to all Saints, she notes that this aura is particularly resonant for “those beautiful Mormon girls.” In a series of examples, two are particularly telling:

On the Fourth of July, the Jerusalem Center faculty and students joined Marines and U.S. Embassy staff for a picnic at a large park in downtown Jerusalem. The lunch was great, and a softball game ensued. Everyone was having a lot of fun, but the students had other commitments and had to abandon the game a little before its natural end. As the girls walked together across the diamond and up the hill to the buses, the Marines stood frozen in place, gazing after them, longingly, for a very long time. It seemed to me that they stood there even after the girls were out of sight. What was it that had made such an impression? All the girls were modestly dressed and clean-cut.

A Sunday at the beach was even more interesting. The beach near Tel Aviv was managed by a nearby kibbutz and closed on Sundays. The kibbutz had reserved it during the closure for the BYU students to enjoy a day at the Mediterranean seaside. Again, the girls were dressed in modest swimsuits in [sic] a day when many European beach-goers wore nearly nothing. Two bus-loads of Israeli soldiers arrived in the spacious and empty parking lot so that the soldiers could buy lunch from the kiosk on the beach. In full uniform they filed from the parking lot to the kiosk, but a few stragglers made their way to the seaside. As one approached, he caught sight of the Mormon girls arrayed on the sand, at least 60 of them, glowing. Gradually, he eased from a slow walk to a little run and then raised his arms in the air to signify a rejoicing soul, and he began a slow spin. He looked like a dancer from Fiddler on the Roof. He looked like he had found heaven on earth. (“Those Beautiful Mormon Girls” 2013)
I leave it to my reader to determine if linking kibbutzniks, Israeli soldiers, and *Fiddler on the Roof* evidences a poverty of imagination that cannot see outside of reductive ethnic stereotypes. More importantly for my purposes is the way the glow is positioned as a reflective property immanent to Mormonism that exudes in a palpable, eroticized, and feminized manner, transfixing the soldier and the Jewish man (whom Mormons consider to be a Gentile) in a spiritualized scopophilia. The writer of this post notes that she sees “this kind of resolute, secure morality everywhere . . . in Mormondom. Mormon girls know who they are. They are educated, talented, and beautiful inside and out” (“Those Beautiful Mormon Girls” 2013). The spiritualized allure—this composite of good choices and righteous living that makes itself visible on the bodies and faces of glowing teenage (and nubile) girls—here also functions as a sweetly provocative proselytizing tool for the mainstream Mormon Church.

As comments such as these clearly evidence, the glow is here understood to shine more brightly on and through girls who know themselves and “choose the right” (CTR)—the aura conveniently making itself legible through conventional signifiers of beauty. Choice is not only important in this formulation, it is critical to the glow. Indeed, CTR is a central component of the ethos of modesty and sexual chastity that binds all of Mormonism together, as I discuss later in this chapter. For now, I want to stay on this idea of the glowing Mormon girl as objectified lure.

Perhaps nothing makes this claim more salient than a discussion on a mail-order bride web forum called Happier Abroad that evaluates the pros and cons of F/LDS Mormon women as potential wives. Writes Winston (2013), “I just got back from traveling through Southern Utah and was impressed by how wholesome and friendly people there were. . . . And the girls had this wholesome innocent look that is rare in America today. I think it’s due to a combination of their Mormon religion which emphasizes a clean, pure, moralistic lifestyle, an inner glow in them that is divine, and the unparalleled beauty of the nature in Utah.” Winston asks the hive mind if a Mormon girl would make a good prospective spouse, a question that generates seventy-two responses. In a viral village that can often generate thousands of reactions, seventy-two sounds modest, but it’s helpful to be reminded of the niche within a niche that a question about Mormon women as wife material on a site dedicated to shopping for international brides otherwise connotes. Indeed, amid embedded images of available and, one presumes, desirable women, male-identifying responders sort out the dilemma of the Mormon
woman: she seems perfect and glowing, but she is a demanding princess. She is uninterested in sex except for children. She will only marry a fellow Mormon. She will get fat, presumably the aftereffects of birthing many children as well as from all of the baked goods consumed in lieu of alcohol or tobacco.

Interestingly, for my purposes, these respondents (who identify as heterosexual men, both Mormon and non) denigrate Mormon women for being feminists, their glow functioning as a currency that has purchased them entitlement. Winston’s first respondent, Bladed 11, notes in rather misogynist terms, “The only difference between them and other feminists is they are less whoreish but will likely still cheat on you if they can get a better deal. Most of them are snobby too. They are pure evil” (Winston 2013). Another responder, Tre, carries the conflation of Mormon women and feminism to a similarly woman-phobic conclusion:

They absolutely do [have unrealistic expectations], they have their heads in the clouds. I grew up LDS and tried to date LDS women. They know they have plenty of options and they are nearly always the “dumpers.” These guys come off of those 2-year missions and have absolutely no idea how to deal with women around their age. They don’t even know how to talk to girls anymore as they are 2-years without any practice. They are awkward and then get walked over. At the same time, young LDS women will only date you if you are a returned Missionary or planning to go on a mission. Don’t expect them to wait 2 years for you to get back though. Even if young men do get married . . . guess who most often wears the pants in the relationship? Make no mistake, LDS women are FEMINIST. (Winston 2013)

None of the responders on this discussion board define what they mean by the term “feminist,” but it is clear that Mormon women are like many AW (American women), in that they hold expectations for their partners and demand that their needs be considered. In this, we can see a rather surprising turn on the trope that suggests women in orthodox religions more generally and F/LDS women more specifically willingly participate in a patriarchal agenda, which calls for women’s perpetual secondary role. As these respondents make clear, female needs of any sort code as feminist, a trait too threatening to be attractive, even amid the wholesome, glowing good looks that so powerfully pull unsuspecting male converts into their orbit.
Molly Mormons: “If You’re Not Happy, You’re Failing”

It was in Mrs. Torrey’s class that we were told what to do if we ever felt as if we might get sick while listening to a concert. This really only applied to girls, she said. Don’t try to leave in the middle of the music, she advised, disrupting other people in their seats, but instead just very quickly grab your handbag and empty the contents on your lap and throw up in your purse.
—Judith Freeman, *The Latter Days*

The expectation for feminized perfection of body and behavior both overlaps with and departs from the stereotype of the Molly Mormon (or MoMo), an idealized and largely mocked extreme of gender conformity within mainstream Mormonism. The MoMo enacts the gender script of Mormon womanhood with scrupulous perfection: she is attractive, chaste until marriage, composed. Her house is spotless; her children well behaved. She always has a smile on her face. Her life revolves around marriage, family, and the church. She never disagrees with her priesthood husband, and she supports the church’s social and political views without question. She is a helper and a giver, cheerful, resourceful, never a burden. As Nicole Hardy describes her, the MoMo goes against her own personal convictions in order to “be polite,” sitting quietly in her church pew so that she might “pretend all [she] needed was a drink of water” (2013, 103). She would barf in her handbag to prevent someone else from being disturbed.

The ideography of Happy Valley—its simultaneous existence as a geographic location and an affective ideal—announces a specific concern, particularly for women: the unending pressure to be domestically passionate, logistically unflappable, and blissfully happy in all circumstances. These expectations create a life that for many feels like an emotional straitjacket of not-enoughness. In *Confessions of a Molly Mormon*, for example, Elona K. Shelley lays out the gendered aspirationalism that is part of the Molly creed:

She was everything I aspired to. She was organized, efficient, and always in control. Not only was she an attentive and charming wife, she was also the mother of several immaculately groomed, brilliantly creative, and perfectly behaved children.

Her home was spotless yet comfortable. She sewed all of her family’s clothing and promptly took care of any mending that needed to be done. Each week she made delicious whole wheat bread, often dropping off a loaf to someone who needed a little extra love or encouragement. She canned hundreds of jars of homegrown fruits and vegetables each summer and generously shared the bounties of her
flourishing garden. She served three delicious, carefully balanced meals every day, and of course she made full use of her ample food storage, which she rotated regularly. . . .

Without fail, Molly got up early each morning, studying the scriptures for at least thirty minutes before going out for an invigorating five-mile run. She magnified her church callings, volunteered at her children’s school, worked on family history, and attended the temple every week. She also babysat for her neighbors so they, too, could go to the temple. No matter how much she had to do, she was always calm and pleasant. I could go on listing the virtues of this amazing woman, but I’m sure you already get the picture. Suffice it to say, Molly was absolutely everything I thought I should be. (2013, 3–4)

Shelley writes of her struggles to achieve the qualities of “inspiring Mollies,” facing defeat at every step. “I couldn’t seem to discipline myself enough to conquer even one of the many weaknesses plaguing my life today. Furthermore, in spite of my constant nagging—oops, I mean ‘loving persuasion’—I couldn’t get my husband and children to do everything I thought they were supposed to be doing, either” (4). The potential consequences of Shelley’s lack of self-discipline (as she calls it) were enormous. “Regardless of my frantic attempts to prepare our family for that marvelous, celestial eventual-ity, it appeared that none of us were celestial material” (4). Shelley responded to the pressure through technologies of self-management: “I made endless lists of goals to avert the tragedy [of the separation of her family in the afterlife]. Whether I wrote them on paper or carried them around in my head, the lists were always there to remind me that I was completely and utterly failing. While my Molly Mormon obsession continued to thrive, the crushing weight of perfectionism left my guilt-ridden spirit struggling for survival” (6). The “chasm” between her “lofty ideals” and her everyday reality put her in a “losing battle with depression” (5).

Many have speculated that these pressures for female perfection are precisely why Utah, which is 62 percent LDS, leads the nation in antidepressant use, with women being prescribed SSRIs such as Prozac, Paxil, and Zoloft at twice the rate they are prescribed for men. While it cannot be proved that Utah’s majority Mormon culture is the direct cause of the high rate of prescription drug use, the correlation is compelling. The relentless demand for optimistic cheerfulness in both men and women has, according to mediated reflections in blogs, documentaries, and memoirs, created a culture of denial and despondency in church members, who often paper over their bad feelings.
for the sake of obedience and perfectionism. These tendencies are particularly acute for women, who bear the brunt of sustaining the nurturing happy homemaker image as a stay-at-home mother and nurturer of a priesthood husband and many children. Dr. Curtis Canning, president of the Utah Psychiatric Association, speculated to the *LA Times*: “In Mormondom, there is a social expectation—particularly among the females—to put on a mask, say ‘Yes’ to everything that comes at her and hide the misery and pain. I call it the ‘Mother of Zion’ syndrome. You are supposed to be perfect because Mrs. Smith across the street can do it and she has three more kids than you and her hair is always in place. I think the cultural issue is very real. There is the expectation that you should be happy, and if you’re not happy, you’re failing” (Cart 2002). This is Betty Friedan’s (1964) “problem with no name” in a different key, though equally tied to the middle-class, white, heterosexual women who are the focus of *The Feminine Mystique*. Here we see that malaise and depression haunt the visage of the idealized Mormon woman.

How to deal with Molly Mormon and the Mother of Zion syndrome? Kill her. The MoMo is a dangerous fiction, writes Lisa Ray Turner:

> If we are too anxious and overwhelmed, our relationships with each other suffer. Sisterhood fizzes in such a volatile pressure-cooker. Our friendships become counterfeit. Healthy, give-and-take connections are not possible if we always wear our Sunday faces, afraid our real selves are unacceptable. Sisterhood will elude our grasp if we continue to pursue the fictitious Molly Mormon prototype. We will never be as spiritual, knowledgeable, or kind as this mythical creature—just as horses will never be unicorns. The Typical Mormon Woman, much like the unicorn, is one-dimensional. Happily, Real Mormon Women are not. We are blessed with unique gifts and strengths, as well as idiosyncrasies and weaknesses. Thank goodness! Diversity enriches and deepens our bonds. Sisterhood happens when we permit each other to be human. (Turner 1993)

For Turner, staging a requiem for the Typical Mormon Woman (paralleling Virginia Woolf’s admonition to kill the Angel in the House) actually allows for the Real Mormon Woman to flourish.

But let’s be clear: the Real Mormon Woman is an equally idealized trope. The more realistic Mormon woman must still make good on the exhaustive list of tasks assigned to her under Mormonism (childbearing, child rearing, domestic management including freshly baked bread and the preparation of years of stored preserves, church relief society, journaling, genealogy proj-
ects, daily prayer and scripture devotions, monthly fasts, visits to the home-bound, Relief Society, family home evening, temple rituals, journaling, etc.), and she still must safeguard the worthiness of her husband and children for the highest of Mormon heavens, and she still must be cheerful. The LDS prescriptive codes for eternal advancement, in which earthly deeds directly build into heavenly rewards, make every feature of living not only important but critical to eventual residence in a celestial paradise. In this regard, the Molly Mormon stereotype functions as an ideological release valve, allowing more flawed versions of Mormon womanhood to hold hegemonic sway since they can be perceived as less extreme and more attainable by contrast. The Real Mormon Woman might engage with these imperatives somehow relieved by the perfectionism creed exerted by the Molly Mormon. It seems the very epitome of a Pyrrhic victory.

So even if the good Mormon girl has made peace with the cartoonish perfectionism of the Molly Mormon, she must still contend with the threat—implied and overt—that her failure to behave according to conventional gender scripts will result in hellish outcomes, for the girl herself, for her later womanhood, and for the unborn spirits that rely on her compliance to enter the mortal frame. Indeed, without the Mormon girl's buy-in to the pact of childbearing and family nurturing, the eternal progression of Mormonism's promises are dead before they can ever begin. As the epigraph that opens this chapter attests, the good Mormon girl must therefore be scrupulous, self-aware, and conscientious, working to subvert her baser and more selfish instincts in the service of the larger, divine good.

One of these baser instincts is resisting the rightness of the church and its fathers, since those who question will experience what Laura Roper Andreasen, the granddaughter of a church apostle, describes as “the shame attached to not being faithful” (Dehlin 2015b). On the topic of critical thinking, Heidi Bernahard-Bubb illustrates her own experience: “I wanted to keep being a good girl, one who didn’t stay up late thinking about scary questions, so I never told anyone about the nights I stayed up, my seven-year-old self plagued with anxiety over where God came from. If God had created me, who had created God? I didn’t know why, but asking felt like it would break my whole world apart. . . . I wanted to keep being a good girl, one who didn’t stay up late thinking about scary questions, so I stuffed my first crisis of faith down deep” (2016, loc. 784). Emily Pearson reinforces this idea of doubting as a dangerous form of resistance in a chapter tellingly titled “Doormat of the Damned,” saying simply and ominously, “It was dangerous to question the church and the brethren” (2012, loc. 3667).
Though I did not grow up Mormon, I had my own experience with toxic femininity and the sin of critical thinking in a scene I detail in the afterword: As a teenager, I entered a heated debate on the nature of the Mormon Godhead with a patriarchal authority in the LDS Church. Though I probably scored a number of intellectual points in our tussle, I felt far from victorious. Indeed, I felt shame and a tinge of personal inadequacy, believing I had acted wrongly by behaving boldly. The subtext of the exchange was clear: do not be difficult; do not be too smart; do not challenge men, particularly those in authority. It’s why I still feel myself shaken in inexplicable ways when I push back against my father or the dean of my college, as if I have done something unseemly. And in February 2017, after I posted a politicized call to arms urging people to send postcards to the White House, two of the LDS friends on my Facebook feed unfriended me on the grounds that I was unfriendly. “You have always been a lovely person. But if you don’t have anything nice to say, you shouldn’t say anything at all.” I will admit that their public disapproval both erred me. The angel is so hard to kill. And while this form of prescriptive pleasantry is not by any means exclusive to the Mormon Church, I do have a new appreciation for the particularly virulent form of gender instruction that girls and women within both the mainstream and fundamentalist churches experience.

Indeed, the relentless teleology of eternal progression, what Naomi Watkins calls the “Plan A” life, keeps firmly in place not only the domestic proficiency and affective cheerfulness of the Molly Mormon but also the appearance of the glowing Mormon girl. “At church, I learned what to expect from a Plan A life: meet a returned missionary, date, fall in love, get married, have a basketball team of babies, and live happily ever after. To make Plan A happen, I needed to be sweet and kind. I needed to cook and sew. I needed to be pretty (Watkins 2016, loc. 1710). Much as in mainstream culture, “I need to be pretty” tends to be the basso continuo sounding insistently below these messages of Mormon womanhood. In this logic of spiritual neoliberalism, prettiness thus serves as an earthly down payment on a heavenly paradise.

Given the young ages (typically eighteen to twenty-four) at which most Mormon women begin the heteronormative work of attracting a husband, the equally young age at which they start bearing children, the high number of children they are expected to birth (and thus the degree that multiple pregnancies alter a woman’s adult body), and the larger connection to the glow as goodness, it’s hardly any wonder that Utah boasts more plastic surgeons per capita than any other state in the Union. That unique fact and Utah’s high consumption of beauty-enhancing products, such as facial cos-
metics and hair dye, caused *Forbes* to crown Salt Lake “America’s vainest city” (Ruiz 2012). Writing for *Deseret News*, the Utah-based Mormon-owned newspaper, Marjorie Cortez took faux issue with *Forbes*’s use of the word “vain,” suggesting that it wasn’t vanity but insecurity that propelled Salt Lake City to the top of the charts. “As people in a small American city, we want very much for the world to take us seriously. We want very much to put our best foot forward. But not until it has been waxed, tanned, manicured, the unsightly veins removed and the extra fat purged through liposuction. Come to think of it, we may very well be vain” (Cortez 2007).

The major roads and highways going in and out of Salt Lake City are sprinkled liberally with ads for cosmetic surgery: billboards promising women a gift of perfect breasts for the benefit and satisfaction of their men or guaranteeing women that they might become an object of desire, even to themselves (see figures 5.2 and 5.3). The predominance of these ads is so strong that it has prompted beauty blog writer Emily Woodruff (2017) to note, “Utah’s Mormons can’t get tattoos, piercings or even drink green tea, but appear to be getting plastic surgery in droves. What gives?” Her conclusions are that the high level of homogeneity and like-mindedness in Happy Valley combined with the culture of perfectionism and conventional norms of femininity for women (wide eyes, perky breasts, youthful glowing skin, and straight white teeth) make plastic surgery culture normative. Woodruff quotes Amy Smith, a thirty-three-year-old Mormon and mother of two who has had both breast augmentation and liposuction. Smith presently lives in Utah but formerly resided in Los Angeles: “There is this weird thing in Utah. In Los Angeles, people accept you for who you are and being different is valued, but here it’s very ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’ You have to try to be perfect, everyone is kind of cookie-cutter and everyone looks the same. I think that the [popularity of] plastic surgery has to do with the image of being perfect. That’s very big in Mormon culture. If you’re different, you’re kind of ostracized” (Woodruff 2017).

Even given the ever-presentness of these literal billboards for personal enhancement, feminist resistance percolates. Writes Nicole Bullock (2013), “Utah’s freeways are littered with billboards . . . which tell women they are not beautiful enough until they choose plastic surgery.” Bullock finds this message offensive. She also takes issue with the frequent lessons on chastity and modesty Mormon girls are often subjected to as part of their weekly religious indoctrination. Mormon women are often, in Bullock’s words, “given lectures full of propaganda about why their dress and appearance will be the downfall of men,” men who will be led astray by a hint of lace or cleavage. Bullock argues
FIG. 5.2 Billboard advertising plastic surgery, I-95, Utah.

FIG. 5.3 Billboard along Interstate 15, which runs through the Mormon corridor of Utah.
(meme included, see figure 5.4) that it is “much easier to ask women to dress like shapeless, sexless adolescents than to expect men to think and act like decent human beings,” a feminist sentiment of particular resonance.⁸

I want to be clear: I am not opposed to plastic surgery. Indeed, I see it as a particularly effective and often agentive tool for achieving one’s goals within a culture of ideals that makes success for women otherwise elusive. Say what you will about the moral complexities of plastic surgery, but as a technology of self-change designed to earn women greater points within a rigged system of beauty culture, it gets the job done. So I do not mean to vilify Happy Valley for its high reliance on plastic surgery and other forms of cosmetic rejuvenation that are often practiced within it but to indicate the way that a happy Mormon affect and pretty appearance effectively function as microcosms of a larger American culture that is committed to appearance as the visual manifestation of ideals of meritocracy (effort earns rewards), image-as-currency, and beauty-as-goodness. The glow here puts a spotlight on the spectacular pleasure and anxiety of being looked at and suggests that modifying the body to maximize the glow is one way to survive the surveillance of the gaze.
These questions about gazing and the gaze raise old debates within feminist theory. The notion that women are rightfully the objects of the gaze and men are the gazers (in John Berger’s words, “Men act and women appear” [1990, 47]) reinforces a norm of masculinized agency and feminized passivity that feminism as a system of thinking and consortium for political change has long sought to critique and undermine—with great success, I might add. Yet we err if we believe that the mandates of toxic femininity as they assert themselves through bodily markers have been completely eradicated. Even in the midst of new modalities of power and possibility for women and new horizons for gender inclusion and LGBT+ diversity, toxic femininity continues as a hegemonic system that influences the intersubjective experience of woman-centered selfhood.

It is not so much that toxic femininity and the glow are common in Happy Valley or that plastic surgery might do much to heighten one’s currency in a dysfunctional system of value where beauty for women is a stand-in for goodness and worth. Instead, my argument is that Mormon women often exemplify a set of gender ideals long considered a thing of the past, ideals and even norms that are still active, pervasive, and pernicious in twenty-first-century Western hegemonic culture. In a political moment in which many strains of toxic femininity are still present—even while popular postfeminist discourses argue for their disappearance—mediated Mormonism offers a potent set of strategies for how to detect and resist them. Think of it like this: if toxic femininity is, metaphorically speaking, a resurgent old-world disease long thought defeated, like polio or smallpox, mediated Mormonism provides a petri dish allowing for the careful observation and study of the illness. As C. L. Hanson observes, “Sure, it’s not just Mormonism—girls also get these sorts of negative messages about their own value and importance from the culture at large. But Mormon culture shouts at them with a megaphone” (Hanson 2016, loc. 3932). In this amplified dynamic, mediated Mormonism offers a composite screen that renders generally opaque gender dynamics more discernible. Indeed, it may well be precisely because Mormon-centered and produced media so blatantly stage the inculcation, internalization, and resistance of these gender codes that it holds such an intense fascination for a broader public.

Through its many screens, mediated Mormonism allows viewers to play voyeur to a set of gender prescriptions that seem restrictive, regressive, and even anachronistic—yet it also implicates the reader, the viewer, the spectator in a gendered world that may feel uncomfortably familiar and contemporary. Like the ambient glow from a thousand television screens, mediated Mor-
monism spreads a diffused light that makes visible a network of gendered objectives that have implications far outside F/LDS cultures. Nowhere is that relevance clearer than in the way Mormonism is made to do a larger cultural work around the meanings and implications of sexuality for girls and women, a point I discuss in the next two sections.

Elizabeth Smart: “Just Be Happy”

I want people to know that “these things” [rape, being sold into slavery, abuse] happen, but it doesn’t have to define your life. You can move forward and you can be happy.—Elizabeth Smart quoted in Alan Duke, “Elizabeth Smart: ‘I Couldn’t Be Happier’”

Perhaps no Mormon girl has captured the twenty-first-century collective consciousness quite like Elizabeth Smart, who was abducted from her home in Sandy, Utah, on June 5, 2002, at the age of fourteen by Brian David Mitchell, who considered himself a fundamentalist polygamist prophet in search of a new wife. Given that the long history of Mormonism not only allows for but deifies self-nomination to prophet status, Mitchell’s belief in his own power is not so incredible. Yet the national and international discourses attached to Smart’s abduction and rescue play on fears of fanaticism, extremism, and the bizarre underworlds of the cultish. As I discuss in chapter 4, polygamous or fundamentalist Latter-day Saints adhere to a titillating rendition of religious extremism that often positions them as an American Taliban, fueled by unswerving devotion to a set of values perceived to be vastly outside of the American middle stream.

Elizabeth Smart struck a particular chord, as a young, white, innocent, and virginal girl, kidnapped from her bedroom in the dark of night, and forced to endure nine months of captivity and daily rape before she was freed. The abduction, which occurred less than six months after Salt Lake City’s shimmering presence on the global stage as host to the 2002 Winter Olympics, reminded the world of Mormonism and its darker polygamist history. When Smart was rescued in March 2003, the world breathed a sigh of relief that the happy, golden, blonde-haired girl was now reunited and returned to her family idyll. But how does the perfect Mormon family—and the budding Molly Mormon at its center—carry on and “be happy” after abduction, rape, rumor, and an “increasingly invasive” media? (Nelson 2012).9 In this case, by willing herself to happiness, by not dwelling on her trauma, by trusting God to demand restitution and recommitting herself not only to be unphased by her experience but to be happy in relation to it.

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Near the end of her memoir, *My Story*, Smart recalls a moment when her mother pulled her away from her jubilantly celebrating family:

“This is important,” [Lois Smart] started. . . .

“Elizabeth, what this man has done is terrible. There aren’t any words that are strong enough to describe how wicked and evil he is! He has taken nine months of your life that you will never get back again. But the best punishment you could ever give him is to be happy. To move forward with your life. To do exactly what you want. Because, yes, this will probably go to trial and some kind of sentencing will be given to him and that wicked woman [Mitchell’s other wife, Wanda Barzee]. But even if that’s true, you may never feel like justice has been served or that true restitution has been made. . . .

“You be happy, Elizabeth. Just be happy. If you go and feel sorry for yourself, or if you dwell on what has happened, if you hold on to your pain, that is allowing him to steal more of your life away. So don’t you do that! Don’t you let him! There is no way he deserves that. Not one more second of your life. You keep every second for yourself. You keep them and be happy. God will take care of the rest.” (Smart and Stewart 2014, 285–86)¹⁰

Smart calls her mother’s words “the best advice that anyone has ever given me” and credits the plea for resistance with changing her life from that point forward (Smart and Stewart 2014, 285). We can well understand why, since Lois Smart freed her daughter from a potential future of self-recrimination and bitter indignation. But her mother’s sentiments also robbed Elizabeth Smart of the expression of negative feelings. While the admonition to be happy is in some way a license for a better life, it is also an implication that sexual trauma is too dark to be aired. To spend time dwelling on her experience is to fill the world with the darkness of her pain; it is also to mitigate the justice God will exact. *Let go and let God.*

For her part, Smart converted the media attention her abduction and rescue garnered to her own advantage, parlaying her celebrity as a national figure of female suffering into a public platform as pundit and crusader on behalf of children. Popular media went along with her. In October 2003, her parents published *Bringing Home Elizabeth* with the major publishing house Doubleday; in November 2003, NBC premiered *The Elizabeth Smart Story*, a fictionalized made-for-TV telling of Elizabeth’s story (now available on DVD). Smart also hit the talk show circuit, from Oprah Winfrey and Meredith Viera to Anderson Cooper and Larry King. Tabloids, National Public Radio,
and papers such as the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* sought out her story. In April 2006, Smart’s uncle, Tom Smart, coauthored *In Plain Sight*, a retelling of the legal dimension of Smart’s case; in 2011, Elizabeth Smart became a guest commentator with ABC News, primarily commenting on missing children cases. In 2013 she published *My Story*, a memoir of her experience. In 2017, A&E aired *Elizabeth Smart: Autobiography*, a two-part retelling of her abduction and abuse, and *I Am Elizabeth Smart*, a fictionalized recreation of her story. In 2018 and as evidence that Smart’s abduction still puts her (and Mormonism) in the national Zeitgeist, USA Today selected Smart’s new publication, *Where There’s Hope*, for its national book conversation (the book is a reflection on resiliency, featuring her own experience as well as twelve other stories of adversity and resilience in the lives of public figures, many of whom are LDS). This bounty of media certainly follows the Mormon affective credo of turning lemons into lemonade, though one wonders if writing a memoir, becoming a national activist, speaking frequently on the college lecture circuit, and serving as a spokesperson for abducted children and on-air commentator for ABC News counts as inappropriately dwelling on her experience. The outcome of that question is between Elizabeth Smart and Happy Valley. Even so, I do find myself pondering when she was allowed to howl with rage and pain because she was kidnapped, raped, and tortured.

As a cultural meme, Elizabeth Smart has been made to serve a semiotic role as the very epitome of innocent victim, who triumphs over adversity by refusing to engage with it and later is rewarded with happiness and the restoration of the marriage plot. *People* magazine, arguably the U.S.’s most prominent and trustworthy tabloid, offers strong evidence. *People* put Elizabeth on its cover six times (see figures 5.5–5.9). There have been no features or cover considerations of Elizabeth since 2012. Apparently, marriage and motherhood assure us that Elizabeth is normal again, her story now simply a happy woman’s life that does not need featuring in the pages of *People*, so often committed to profiling celebrities and hard-luck stories.

In these articles, Smart’s innocence and victimization are heightened by her abduction while sleeping, spirited away in her pajamas, so she can’t be repurposed through blame-the-victim rhetoric that would discount the tragedy of her kidnapping by claiming she was in the wrong place at the wrong time or wearing provocative clothing. Her victimization is sealed by the brutal daily rapes and mental harassment she endured. She writes, “Before, I was just your average Mormon girl. And since everything I’ve gone through, there’s been a lot of learning and growing. I’ve learned to listen and not jump to conclusions. I’m not sorry this happened to me anymore, because it made
FIG. 5.7

SPECIAL ISSUE
OUR 35TH BIRTHDAY!
A CELEBRATION OF FASHION, FADS AND FAVORITE STARS

KIDNAP SURVIVOR
ELIZABETH SMART
HER FIGHT FOR JUSTICE
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
Testifying against her alleged kidnapper, she reveals new details about her terrible ordeal—and how she survived

FIG. 5.8

THE REAL STORY
INSIDE HER SAD SPLIT
HEIDI & SEAL TORN APART
After seven years of a "fairy-tale marriage and four children, the relationship crumbles..."
me grow up. It is important to remember that just because something bad happens to you, it doesn’t mean you are bad. You are still entitled to every possible happiness in life” (“Kidnap Victim Elizabeth Smart” 2006).

More broadly, the national rhetoric about Elizabeth Smart suggests that she might now only choose happiness precisely because she did not choose kidnap and rape, here the logic of choice relying on a trauma narrative that can be exploited but in the case of Elizabeth Smart will never be affectively expressed. Indeed, in a similar representational mode, Smart’s celebrity also puts her in a passive role. As she writes, “I never asked for or wanted this platform, but it is what it is, so I’m determined to use it to help others” (2018, xii). Unlike Warren Jeffs’s victims, we need never fear that she will show rage or indignation, that she will make hearing her story too difficult for the listener, that she will be anything but the good Mormon girl. Indeed, she is eerily cheerful and even funny as she recounts her experiences, even while, as in the A&E biography special, her mother’s howls of pain provide the emotional backdrop to her story.

In sum, the symbolic association of Elizabeth Smart as a figure of redemptive happiness very much requires this other story of sexual harm for
its anchor. Her story has ascended to national morality tale precisely because Smart chose to get over it. Blogger Carol Shaw Johnston (2008) praises Smart for her ability to “rise above” the kidnapping:

What impressed me most about Elizabeth Smart is that she has refused to be a “victim.” The first night she was home after her abduction, she insisted on sleeping in her own bed—the bed from which she had been abducted nine months earlier. She proved to others—and herself—that she would still be there in the morning. Many people would let that horrific experience scar them for life. They might move to get away from the bad memories and associations. Instead, Elizabeth has learned from it and resolved to make her life better. She has taken charge of her own life and has refused to let that experience define who she is. She is a brave and impressive young woman.

Based on a survey of Johnston's publicly available social media, she appears to be Christian but not Mormon. So the point is not that Mormons recognize Elizabeth's commitments to emotional self-regulation but that these qualities—to refuse to become a victim, to resolve to make her life better, to “refuse to let that experience define who she is”—are broadly recognizable within U.S. culture and articulate affective behaviors considered worthy of praise and admiration.

The Mormon economy of emotion here speaks to and makes legible a very specific nationally valued affect. Indeed, it may well be because the long story of Mormonism is itself so grounded in suffering—through nineteenth-century pogroms and hate crimes, dispossession and imprisonment, murder and war—that the faith now so fully is allowed to stand in for a temperament of happiness through an ethos of optimism and not-talking-about-it-ness. The Latter-day Saints are often referred to as the American Jews, largely because of the suffering and oppression they have experienced. But Judaism is very much dedicated to a world ethos of never forgetting atrocities and pogroms such as the Holocaust. There is power in saying its name. Mormonism, by contrast, articulates a different code of suffering—historical pain can be remembered and used as the impetus for celebrations (as in the annual Pioneer Day celebration), but individual, ongoing, and contemporary trauma is to be willed away. In this, Elizabeth Smart chooses the right, not just in how her choices underscore a mind-over-matter approach to violations of basic human decency, but in how her very function as a cultural meme—the Mormon virgin who was grievously wronged but doesn’t hold a grudge—reinforces how we understand and talk about both sexuality and sexual assault.
The obsequious demands of toxic femininity require placing oneself in a diminished role in relation to a more powerful partner, who uses physical, sexual, financial, emotional, or psychological actions or threats of actions to gain or maintain power over another person. As I note, this trained subservience makes it difficult to put up barriers to harassment, incest, and rape. As Marie Osmond describes her own experience of childhood sexual abuse, she felt she had “no right to personal boundaries” (Osmond, Wilkie, and Moore 2001, 20). In more general terms, Osmond had learned the double negative, not to say no, “because I [didn’t] want to seem uncaring. In my mind, taking care of myself by saying no to a request [meant] that someone else might have to go without” (97). Here Osmond epitomizes the good girl, who works to suppress her own needs so that others might have theirs met first.

When safety verges into and overlaps with desire and sexualized violence, these codes of the good girl become all the more problematic, since they are both internalized and systematized. The Mormon flagship university, BYU, for example, has a long-standing code of conduct that forbids students from engaging in sexual activities. One consequence that has stemmed from the school’s honor code has been a greater reticence for women about reporting sexual assault, since these women are frequently brought up on honor code violations related to modesty. It was only in 2016 that BYU began to consider shelter provisions that would protect students who report sexual assault from also being investigated for honor code violations (Brown 2016). In a similar way, Bonnie Ricks (2012) reflects in The Mormon Woman... Goddess or Second Class Citizen? that the enormous pressures for perfectionism put on LDS women make any potential flaw a major moral failure. If a woman is raped, the mandate for sexual purity erases her personal worth. Ricks relates a personal anecdote from an ex-Mormon: “She told me that her father refused to have anything to do with her after she was raped. The perpetrator was never caught. But her father was furious with her that she had fought to live and succeeded! He said she should have let the man kill her, because she was of no use now that she ‘had sinned and lost her virginity.’ This line of thinking is almost identical to Sharia law, under which a woman can be given the death penalty for surviving a rape” (2012, loc. 1970). It’s not by accident that Mormons are here explicitly linked with Muslims, the notion of godly law unjustly taking precedent over national legislation. More perplexingly, the unbending commitment to sexual chastity and affective pleasantness effectively works to rob the assault victim of his or her personhood.
With respect to modern values of consent and choice, then, female worthiness and sexual purity are made to be the discursive doula that birth personhood in the modern moment. The willingness of Mormon women to reference, even if not always to discuss, their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, sexual repression, and sexual knowledge gives voice and intelligibility to the connections between gender socialization, personhood, and freedom. Here the public interest in Mormon sex lives fulfills a broader feminist objective of giving women voice and the rights of resistance. For example, Rebecca Musser—once famous for being the witness who wore red to testify against FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs—now is a public advocate for human rights. In addition to her memoir about fleeing FLDS polygamy, Musser (2014) has produced a DVD called Red Flags for Girls, designed to teach girls and women how to fight toxic femininity at its root (see figure 5.10).
Important for this discussion, the Red Flags Creed asks girls to be mindful about self-protection, personal boundaries, personal worth, and individual choice. Adherents are asked to pledge, “I recognize that every choice has results and consequences. I choose wisely.” Even in its efforts to free women and girls from emotional manipulation, however, the Red Flags Creed sounds the tones of a spiritual neoliberalism, which suggest that those who do not “choose wisely” make themselves vulnerable to abuse. If a girl violates the creed’s rules for self-protection, she is to blame for her own victimization. The creed also echoes an ethos of self-determination that is critical to the American project. Musser declares, “Choose to be free!” Much as we saw in the case of Elizabeth Smart, woman-centered liberation here is positioned as the triumph of mind over matter. Yet Musser concedes, “If a girl didn’t even know she had a choice, she had no choice” (2014, 226). Choice and consent here unfold as puzzles rather than platitudes. Freedom and a happy life depend on free choice, except that “free” is a term with no stable referent, since a culture of sociality and emotional coercion eliminates choices before they can ever manifest.

It is because of these ambiguities around what counts as brainwashing and mind control that the powers of desire play such a large epistemological function. For many Mormons who have had a crisis of conscience and decided to leave either the fundamentalist or mainstream churches, it has often been the restrictive culture around sexuality that has caused the final rupture into knowing. This is particularly true for those whose sexuality is out of sync with the F/LDS Church’s edict on heterosexual identity. In To the One, for instance, Marnie Freeman writes of her emerging awareness of being a woman-loving woman in the context of a mainstream LDS culture that equated lesbianism with the gravest of sins. “If you were to be hung on a cross,” said her bishop when she sought guidance, “you would belong between a murderer and a pedophile” (Freeman 2014, 45). Like so many other memoirists, Freeman poignantly details her efforts to toe the Mormon line, continually pledging and repledging to the heteronormative code of eternal progression. Each failure left her feeling more and more worthless. Choosing her self required leaving a system that could not accommodate her personhood. “I sobbed through the night about the Mormon life I had to leave behind,” she recalls, “the people, my family, the clear lines, the caring community, the safety, the pre-set path. I had worked so hard to keep it together, but now I understood it was an impossible undertaking. Hope of being Mormon and gay moved out of my heart, and a haunting emptiness moved in. You don’t get to be a Mormon and a lesbian, even if you were born being both” (122).
While the F/LDS churches do explicitly forbid homosexuality, violation of sexuality mandates is not exclusively an LGBT+ concern. In Confessions of a Latter-day Virgin, for instance, Nicole Hardy offers what can only be understood as a feminist cri de coeur. She writes that girls were insistently told, “there is no role in life more essential and more eternal than that of motherhood” (2013, 34). While Hardy said she was willing to believe this edict, she also didn’t feel its truth. She wanted to be a writer. Desiring to break out of the stereotype of the Mormon woman who is obedient and enthusiastic about mothering, Hardy also speaks of craving intimacy, affection, and love. How condescending to be told that the time before marriage is a time of “preparing” or “creative waiting.” To be reminded that nothing I have done is good enough, nor will it be, to grant me access to the highest level of exaltation. To be told that my life has consisted of a series of placeholders.

How can [people] understand how frustrating it is: on the one hand, to want marriage—because it’s the vehicle to love, sex, and intimacy—and on the other to know that the word “wife” is defined so narrowly in our community that it can’t fit me. There is not room for what I feel, what I’m drawn to, what I’m good at. My leaders tell me what my gifts are, and they’re wrong. They tell me what my nature is, and they’re wrong. They tell me what my purpose is, and I feel nothing. (2013, 159)

Hardy remained in the church until her midthirties, working to reconcile her need for a rewarding professional and personal life with the church’s mandate for married motherhood. The “tortured strain of self-denial,” as Carlene Bauer (2013) termed it in a review for the New York Times, coupled with the increasingly unlikely possibility that Hardy could find an LDS man who was “wickedly funny, politically liberal, brighter than the average bear and uncommitted to 1950s gender roles” (not to mention a man who in his thirties was not already sealed to another woman) became too heavy a burden for her to bear. Ultimately, she found more soul-sustaining joy outside the church than within it.

Ordain Women: Feminist Throwdowns

I believe that many Mormon women—even those who have chosen very traditional roles and don’t ask many questions—have an uneasy feeling that when women’s minds and hearts and voices are peripheral and not central, everyone loses. Women have no power in our church, no voice and zero authority. No wonder there’s so much depression among my Mormon sisters.—Carol Lynn Pearson, The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy

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The good Mormon girl said, “I am fine.” . . . For too long we have been seduced into walking a path that did not lead us to ourselves. For far too long we have said yes when we wanted to say no. And for far too long we have said no when we desperately wanted to say yes. . . . I am growing beyond my own conditioning, breaking set with what was breaking me.—Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds*

On the HBO series *Big Love*, the tensions and passions of plural marriage play out in gloriously long-form serialization, as Bill Henrickson and his three wives, Barb, Nicki, and Margene, negotiate living independent fundamentalist polygamy in a modern enclave, the Salt Lake City suburb of Sandy. While much about this show is relevant to my overall conversation on mediated Mormonism, it is first wife Barb’s personal and spiritual journey that I want to focus on as a concluding meditation in this chapter. We are meant to understand that prior to the show’s diegetic open, Barb had been raised in a conventional LDS household, the mainstream church’s teachings and practices dear to her heart. As a teenager, Barb falls in love with Bill, a lost boy who had been forcibly ejected from a fundamentalist compound run by the prophet Roman Grant. Barb and Bill’s union represents a triumph of LDS over FLDS, of new world versus old. But when Barb faces a cancer scare and is unable to have more children than the three she has already borne, Bill receives a prophetic message from God commanding him to practice plural marriage, which, in turn, requires breaking from the Saints and, ultimately, forming his own church, the New Assembly of Mormon Pioneers.

The show begins in medias res, with Barb and Bill already united with Nicki and her two sons (by Bill), and babysitter Margene soon to become the third sister wife. Barb’s faith journey from mainstream Mormon to fundamentalist maverick is told in ways both compelling and sympathetic: she craves the assurances her childhood church provided for her; she misses the forever family promised to her through church covenants. But more, in the brave new world with Bill, their extended family, and his new church, Barb yearns for feminist selfhood. Throughout the series’s five years, she travels many roads toward her own self-identity, including higher education, alternative religious practices, and potentially breaking from the family and going it alone. Ultimately, she settles on priesthood authority as a way to be both true to her religious calling and respectful of her need for full selfhood. For his part, Bill is perplexed by Barb’s demands and adamant that he cannot allow her priesthood standing. Fighting in their bedroom, Bill asks in frustration, “What would the priesthood give you that you don’t already have?” Barb is both incredulous and upset as she answers: “The power to grant blessings,
to comfort through the laying on of hands, a powerful \textit{direct} connection to Heavenly Father and the generations of prophets of those who came before, to be saved and to be able to save others and to lead them into the Celestial Kingdom on my own.” In short, she wants everything.

Barb is guided in her quest for priesthood by an academic feminist Mormon studies character in the show named Renee Clayton, who tells Barb over tea—the semiotic marker of both her ex-Mormon and present-lesbian status—“You know, it was the practice of polygamy that emancipated Mormon women from the many constraints of Victorian family life. They were the first feminists.” Barb demurs: “Well, I don’t think of myself as a feminist.” Puzzled, the professor responds, “You feel you have a calling for the priesthood though?” Barb responds enthusiastically, “Yes, I do!” She wants to be Bill’s equal and reasons that if he can create a new church, he can just as easily agree to new rules that vest her with power. Although her character might deny it, the show’s logic is unequivocal: Barb’s desire, indeed her demand, for equal access to God is a feminist throwdown, a request that in the new imagining of the relation between the earthly and the divine, plurality might prevail. Priesthood also allows women to be more self-reliant with respect to their own salvation. Indeed, present F/LDS cosmogony dictates that women are allowed into the Celestial Kingdom only as wives to worthy priesthood holders and only when those men awaken their wives from their postdeath slumbers, calling them forward to paradise. Women are never admitted to the highest of heavens on their own terms. The threat of angering or insulting one’s husband and thus imperiling salvation serves as an effective cudgel compelling obedience and silence for many F/LDS women. But Barb refuses silence—instead telling Bill that if he cannot respect her need for equal priesthood standing, she cannot attend his church.

Barb’s conscientious journey and desire for equal access to not only a Heavenly Father but also a Heavenly Mother very much voices concerns felt by many others within mediated Mormonism. Although the insular nature of the FLDS church makes it difficult to discern where gendered divisions arise, it is possible to see feminist resistance in the outrage expressed on such shows as \textit{Escaping the Prophet} and \textit{Escaping Polygamy}, two reality programs I discuss at much greater length in chapter 4. Barb’s longing for priesthood authority can also be readily seen in the tensions exemplified by the Ordain Women campaign. Founded in 2013 (two years after \textit{Big Love’s} finale) by Kate Kelley, a Washington, DC, human rights attorney, Ordain Women describes itself as an organization dedicated to working for “equality and the ordination of Mormon women to the priesthood” (“Mission Statement”
They describe their mission thus: “Based on the principle of thoughtful, faith-affirming strategic action, Ordain Women aspires to create a space for Mormon women to articulate issues of gender inequality they may be hesitant to raise alone. As a group we intend to put ourselves in the public eye and call attention to the need for the ordination of Mormon women to the priesthood. We sincerely ask our leaders to take this matter to the Lord in prayer” (“Mission Statement” 2014). Ordain Women’s website is painstaking in laying out its reasons for being and its mandate for change:

Despite their gifts, talents, and aspirations, women are excluded from almost all positions of clerical, fiscal, ritual, and decision-making authority.

While women perform significant service in the Church’s auxiliaries, such as the Primary, Relief Society, Sunday School, and Young Women’s organizations, their contributions are always mediated and under the direction of male priesthood leaders. According to the Church’s Gospel Principles manual, “Men use priesthood authority to preside in the Church. . . . Women who hold positions in the Church. . . . work under the direction of the priesthood.” As such, Mormon women have many delegated responsibilities but lack the authority to define and oversee those responsibilities.

This lack of female authority does not stop at the church doors. The Church’s Proclamation on the Family declares that men preside over their wives and families, thus preserving an antiquated and unequal model in both the domestic and ecclesiastical realms. (“Frequently Asked Questions” 2015)

Ordain Women was and continues to be very savvy about the use of media in enacting political justice. The campaign deliberately cultivates public, and pointedly non-Mormon, attention to its cause for gender equality. To help faithful LDS adherents visualize a female priesthood practice, the campaign created a series of photographs of women healing the sick. Many images specifically merge nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century dress to make a bigger point about Joseph Smith’s early openness to women as priesthood holders and leaders within the Mormon Church (see figure 5.11). Perhaps not surprisingly, Kelly, as the leader and founder of Ordain Women, caused great consternation to the leaders of the mainstream church. In May 2014, she was placed on informal probation, which serves as an official sanction and serious warning. Kelly was told to remove what were perceived to be incendiary materials from the organization’s website. And yet, she persisted. In
June 2014, Kelly was called to a membership tribunal, called a court of love, and formally excommunicated for apostasy.\textsuperscript{15}

The stunned reaction to her excommunication was felt worldwide. In the U.S., outlets such as \textsc{nbc}, \textsc{cbs}, \textsc{cnn}, National Public Radio, and the \textit{New York Times} clamored to tell the story of a Mormon Church dangerously behind the gender curve. Her letter of excommunication, with its scolding tone, was excerpted by \textsc{nbc}: “The difficulty, Sister Kelly, is not that you say you have questions or even that you believe that women should receive the priesthood. The problem is that you have persisted in an aggressive effort to persuade other Church members to your point of view and that your course of action has threatened to erode the faith of others. You are entitled to your views, but you are not entitled to promote them and proselyte others to them while remaining in full fellowship in the Church” (“Mormon Women's Group Founder” 2014). Kelly’s crime was not of belief but of publicity. Her conscience dictated that to choose the right was to defy the church. Openly. She told \textsc{nbc} in response to her excommunication, “It’s not that I won’t abandon my cause. I can’t. The church that has excommunicated me has taught me to live with integrity. They’re asking me to go to church every Sunday and pretend I don’t think there are problems with gender equality.” She told the \textit{New York Times}, “I am not an apostate, unless every single person who has questions to ask out loud is an apostate. I am a faithful, active Mormon woman who has never spoken anything against the leaders of the church, and that’s not my definition of an apostate” (Goodstein 2014).

For the most part, public reaction supported Kelly. While the comment sections on various media sites such as YouTube skewed toward the misogynist
or chastised her for trying to change a church that was clearly committed to patriarchal governance, most people (particularly those outside of the church) championed Kelly as a modern warrior fighting an anachronistic system. Writing for the *Huffington Post* a year after Kelly’s excommunication, Peggy Fletcher Stack (2015b) commented, “Many Mormon feminists also experienced Kelly’s excommunication as a harsh slap felt around the world, not just to the activist, but to them all. They were shocked, horrified and discouraged that their carefully constructed building blocks of progressive LDS history seemed to have been toppled with a single blow.” Stack illustrates that Kelly’s dismissal struck many Mormon women at a deep emotional level. But Kelly’s experience and excommunication have also strengthened the resolve that many Mormon women feel to eliminate their secondary status, politicizing those who now proudly embrace the politics of feminism and further feeding the mediascape so fascinated by gender and Mormonism.

**Exiting Happy Valley**

This chapter has covered a good deal of ground: the prescriptive gender codes of the mythic Happy Valley, the idealistic trope of the Molly Mormon, the compulsory heteronormative logic of the glow, the commitment to body and beauty regulation, toxic femininity and modesty culture, and politicized feminism. The governing stereotype of the *F/LDS* woman claims she is a selfless, smiling, long-suffering giver, committed to the patriarchal authority of husband and church. Her most political act is to (try to) wear pants to church on Sundays. And this stereotype clearly carries some truth. But what I hope this chapter makes equally evident is the degree to which the truth of Mormon womanhood disallows the complexity of personhood, experience, and feeling that is very much a part of the lives of actual women within Mormonism—also part of the narrative grist that fuels the larger mill of mediated Mormonism.

Indeed, largely because the idea of women’s absolute submissiveness to men strikes a larger culture as both archaic and unjust, these mediated stories about Mormon women coming to terms with the gendered expectations of their church joins a cultural discussion infused by a common theme of gender justice. It is by and through these contested conversations on the meanings of justice, fair play, self-regulation, free choice, and rights of individuals that a larger culture debates with itself the definitional and gendered boundaries of democracy, egalitarianism, and personhood.