

6. “Pray (and Obey) the Gay Away”

CONSCIENCE AND THE QUEER POLITICS OF DESIRE

While my family and I would prefer to be left alone by LDS church leadership at this time, I would much rather face excommunication than disavow my moral convictions.

—John Dehlin, “Disciplinary Council,” *Mormon Stories*

Simply asking questions has never constituted apostasy. Apostasy is repeatedly acting in clear, open, and deliberate public opposition to the Church or its faithful leaders, or persisting, after receiving counsel, in teaching false doctrine.

—Kathryn Joyce, “The Coming Crackdown on Mormon Liberals”

It’s the eleventh commandment. The most important one to the brethren. Thou shalt not commit publicity.

—Martha Beck, *Leaving the Saints*

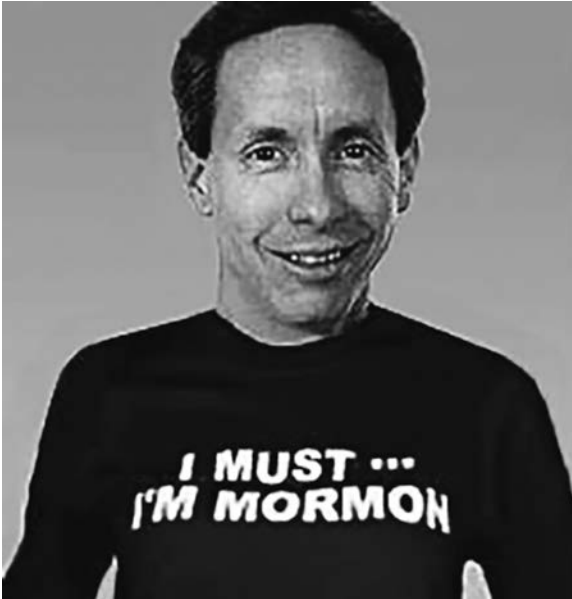
In chapter 5, I discussed women’s rights and the feminist movement in relation to mediated Mormonism, seeking to establish how cultural production about both mainstream and fundamentalist communities negotiate doctrinal demands for perfectionism and obedience in the context of self-making and social justice. In this chapter, I stay with the theme of progressive politics, subjectivity, and gender, turning ever so slightly to the mediated Mormon stories that put queer life and politics in the spotlight. As the epigraphs that start this chapter indicate, there is something very particular about the public announcement of one’s individual conscience that stands as central both to self-making and to Mormonism itself. Self-improvement and personal moral conviction are critical to the Mormon project, and so is publicly

sharing one's belief, or testimony, in personal statements. For True Believing Mormons (TBM's), this personal truth is often about the One True Church. For those who have left or been excommunicated, or X'd, from the church, personal truth often morphs into exposing the wrongs of an authoritarian system. Whether one stands within or outside the faith, conscience and shared narrative carry forth as sustaining values.

As it concerns personal truth-made-public stories, this chapter centers very specifically on queer identities and desires. Mormonism maintains that heterosexuality is God's plan. This maxim also applies to transgender identity, since in F/LDS doctrine the "perversions of desire" are often cemented to the challenges of sexed and gendered identity. Since the conventional LDS thinking holds that God would never hardwire same-sex desire or gender dysmorphia into his otherwise perfect creations, those expressing such feelings are perceived as having chosen non-normativity or of having been duped by Satanic forces. This attitude puts most (though not all) Mormons in league with other conservative religions that expect sinners to pray the gay away.

Given that being out and proud is so much a factor of modern LGBT+ initiatives, the central tension at the heart of these F/LDS stories about LGBT+ lives hinges on a basic dilemma: if self-worth, life-after-death salvation, and familial connection are contingent on a truth ethic whereby one's personal conviction supports the church's structure, then how does a Saint manage if self and system are in conflict? In this chapter, I thus examine a range of mediated texts that place Mormonism and queer practices in tension with one another. As I will elaborate more fully, by "queer practices" I mean not only those marked by same-sex desire, but those clustered under the banner of sexuality and sexed identity that establish tight regulation of the body and its desires as the sine qua non of Mormon belief. Indeed, it is the perceived economy of F/LDS sexuality that marks mediated Mormonism as simultaneously prudish and lascivious, thus reinforcing F/LDS identity as not only peculiar but also queer (see figures 6.1 and 6.2).

The meme of Mormonism signifies a series of interchangeable sexual oddities, which explicitly link suppressed sexuality to other forms of non-normative intimacy, expressly Mormon polygamy. This trope also aligns the sexual "perversions" of queer love and polygamy. In both the novel and film version of *Latter Days*, for example, a scene depicts the protagonist Aaron's disciplinary council, or court of love, for potential excommunication due to kissing another man. The church authority, who is also Aaron's father, states: "This isn't easy for me, Aaron. But in light of your abnormal and



FIGS. 6.1–6.2 From prudish to lascivious: the representational extremes of Mormon sexuality.

abominable state, and your refusal to see that you've been duped into some hogwash alternative lifestyle, I wish my shame was enough for the both of us—not to mention the shame you've brought to our church, our family, our ancestors . . .”

Aaron interrupts. “Our ancestors?” he adds incredulously. “Dad, your grandfather had at least a half-dozen wives, and the same goes for every single person in this room. I'd say we were the original definition of ‘alternative lifestyle.’ But now that we've conveniently erased that episode from our theology, that gives our church the right to define normal for everybody else? Do you see what a contradiction that is?” (Fabris and Cox 2004, 186). Polygamy and same-sex desire are here lumped together as queer bedfellows, any form of non-normative sex and sexuality coming to represent all forms of alternative. In this, we see the truth of Peter Coviello's (2014) claim that normativity entails a specific way of living in relation to race, to gender, to sex. Thus to reside outside of normativity is always a racialized and queer experience.

The Siren's Song of Self-Improvement: Work, Pray, Smile

Given the idea that individuals hold the key to their own salvation and that perfect obedience to the codes fostered by the faith (even more than faith itself) yields eternal rewards, Mormonism contends that suffering Saints can work their way straight by engaging in prayer, fasting, obedience, temple ordinances, and tithing. Those who are not saved by and through these rituals are not working hard enough. If obedience to such mandates offers salvation, disobedience yields eternal punishment or banishment to an endless darkness adrift from affective connection and familial belonging. In this rubber-meets-the-road philosophy, sin is not about feeling but about action, and the moral mandate indicates there are distinct and meaningful differences between affect and behavior. This template in turn requires that individuals deploy exacting self-monitoring and behavior/emotion modification technologies in order to curb wayward desire into acceptable (in) action. As such, the prescriptive code of the faith creates what Foucault has termed the “docile body,” or one that might be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (1991, 136). In this case, those bodies also follow a Foucauldian model of panoptic surveillance, in which individuals willingly subject themselves to a culture of surveillance organized around compulsory norms. The joking way to put this about the church is plainly evident in

Meghan McCain and Michael Ian Black's reflections on Salt Lake City and its mostly LDS population: "Mormons have a lot of rules. No caffeine, no alcohol, no premarital sex, have lots of babies once you do get married, work hard, be self-sufficient. These are all pretty good rules, and maybe if you are able to live by them you can be happy. Of course, people are still people and a common joke about Mormons is, 'How do you keep a Mormon from drinking all your beer? Invite another Mormon'" (2012, 63).

The less funny way to understand this totalitarian code of personal and social surveillance, however, is plainly demonstrated in the tactics of the Strengthening Church Members Committee (SCMC). The SCMC is a body composed of members of the general authority, or ecclesiastical leaders often called the Brethren. The charge of the SCMC is to serve as a repository for church members to report concerns about other members' perceived violations of church codes. In an age before social media, the SCMC worked through stealth, gathering gossip and other forms of damning testimony, often clandestinely. In the present climate, the SCMC often lurks on members' Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter feeds, and other social media platforms.

This combination of surveillance and self-monitoring is a technology of regulation remarkably in tandem with the modern project of selfhood. For instance, Joseph P. Forgas, Roy F. Baumeister, and Dianne M. Tice characterize "the ability to control our actions" as not only the "quintessential characteristic of human beings" but also a specific feature of modern mass societies in which "most of the people we encounter are strangers, personal anonymity is widespread, and mobility is high" (2009, 1, 4). The authors propose a form of dispersed knowing, or what we might also refer to as a mediated intimacy, as a primary reason for "more sophisticated self-regulatory processes" (4). These processes can take many forms, largely authorized through a secular metric of measurement and calculation—such as the rise of psychology, the quantification of the body through weight loss and other forms of corporeal modification, or the calculus of social relationships and self-actualization through self-reflexivity. Management of the self is not only big business, it is important and painstaking work and a high-stakes affair. Write Forgas, Baumeister, and Tice: "Most major social and personal problems that afflict people in modern, Western cultures have some degree of self-regulation failure as a core part of the problem. Inadequate or misguided self-regulation is involved in drug and alcohol addiction, eating disorders, obesity, crime and violence, prejudice and stereotyping, cigarette smoking, underachievement at school and work, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases,

debt, failure to save money, gambling, domestic abuse, and many more. The solving of many social problems thus assumes that individuals are capable and willing to self-regulate” (5).

By contrast, the authors contend, self-regulation yields the “positive value” of “health, happiness, and optimal human functioning. The ability to self-regulate, and in particular, to regulate affective states, also lies at the core of blossoming research on emotional intelligence phenomena” (Forgas, Baumeister, and Tice 2009, 5).¹ These capacities for control of the mind, emotions, and body yield highly prized outcomes: “getting better grades, avoiding trouble and pathology, having better relationships with others, doing better at sports, and a host of other benefits” (5). At some level, the authors might be guilty of slightly overstating the case a bit to solidify the contribution of their volume. Indeed, I might modify these psychologists’ claims to argue that it is not a failure of self-regulation so much as the perceived failure of such that gives the notion of self-control such cachet. But by and large, Forgas, Baumeister, and Tice give voice to a governing *Zeitgeist* of secular modernity: the well-regulated self is the key to wellness, happiness, and success. Perception is key in this regard, since the notion of self-regulation provides a revised godly assurance—the promise of everlasting peace if one can simply get the self under control.

Given what is at stake in these major agonistics, it is no wonder that a larger world is fascinated by stories that center Mormons and their complex relation to self, control, and sexuality. The viewing public looks at Mormonism in fascination, with equal parts shock (at its demands for strict personal regulation, its iron-clenched jaw behind the milky-white smile, its historical commitments to polygamy, its banning of black people until God changed his mind in 1978, its intolerance of homosexuality) and amazement (at its worldwide growth in membership and its believers’ work ethic, its high degree of financial success, its ceaseless happiness, and its stable families). Here is a people who sing the siren’s song of self-improvement through an American affective entitlement of optimism, confidence, and exuberance. Here is a people for whom meritocracy is not a myth—hard work might still pay off in dividends both material and spiritual. But here is also a people, we are told by mediated accounts, who believe in their faith so unbendingly that they will cast out their own brothers and sisters if those people fail to believe (and act) as mandated. There is a broader public sense that the Janus face of Mormonism is both appealing and not to be trusted. In turn, mediation by and about Mormons serves as an educational tool for a discursive public culture devoted to debating the meanings of fairness. Nowhere is this more evident

than in conversations about LGBT+ peoples within the church, people who have been taught that their same-sex desires or transsexual fixations are the lures of Satan, and they might still choose righteousness and live the promises of eternity if they only work hard enough to be straight.² Indeed, the notion of hard work is critical here, since, as I discuss further in this chapter, the Mormon work ethic puts its paler Protestant cousin to shame. Indeed, Bloom contends that in its resistance of Protestantism, Mormons are “perhaps the most work-addicted culture in religious history” (1992, 103). But first, let us think more about sexuality, self-regulation, and emotion, and their combined relation to both Mormonism and the modern subject.

Conscientious Objectors: Sexuality and Self

Michel Foucault and many other sexuality scholars have made clear that the calibrated and discursive sexualized self is very much the modern self, and it is not just sexual desire but talking about desire and understanding desire as the foundation of identity that constitutes the foundation of modern norms of identity (see Foucault 1978). While Foucault famously argued in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* that same-sex desire offers the crux of modern sexology, other scholars have more recently made a similar argument about heterosexuality. In *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, for example, Jonathan Ned Katz (2005) argues that heterosexuality has often been positioned as an assumptive universal, and gender scholars must subject its construction to critical scrutiny in order to interrogate its hegemonic content and contours. Kim Phillips and Barry Reay argue in a similar vein in *Sex before Sexuality* that “the power of heterosexuality resides in a strange combination of ubiquity and invisibility” (2011, 40), and their book offers an important challenge to gender and sexuality scholars to take up heterosexuality as a constructed category of identity, since power and desire (over and above behavior) have so often marked the emergence of heterosexuality as a category. Heterosexuality thus functions, as does whiteness, to reinforce its own privilege and operation through absence. Indeed, Richard Dyer (1997) contends in *White* that whiteness and homophobia are insidious bedfellows (and I use that sexy word deliberately).

These debates are all the more complex when we consider that the T under the LGBT+ umbrella does not, by itself, reference a sexual orientation, whereas lesbian, gay, and bisexual all mark sexual desire as consonant with identity. I want to allow for this distinction but follow a larger trend in the field of gender studies that positions these identity locations as necessarily

intertwined, largely because all who reside within the broad identity label of LGBT+ contend with similar forms of oppression and related, though not identical, social punishments that include banishment, shame, and seclusion.³ In this, then, I join other scholars, such as David Valentine (2007) and Susan Stryker (2017), who consider transgender identity an indispensable contribution to the contemporary discourses on sexuality.

As such, we might say that a fraught sexuality in all of its many forms emerges as a category of invention and fascination in the modern moment.⁴ For these reasons, I use the broad rubrics of sexuality and sexual identities, regardless of their particular orientation/s, as an analytic for thinking through modes of normativity and regulation in relation to gender and mediated Mormonism. But I also very specifically hone in on non-normative, gender nonconforming, and queer practices as a way of locating these conversations about sexuality and normativity.

There is no shortage of sexuality stories in the Mormon mediascape. These tales of Saints and sexual identity reveal complicated narratives about desire and selfhood that cut across and through the labels of sexual orientation. Whether the focus is on latter-day virgins trying valiantly to find their Mr. (Mormon) Right while staying pure along the way, semi-celibate gay and straight, sane and manic missionaries recruiting (or seducing) in the name of the church, same-sex-desiring husbands in heterosexual marriages, LGBT+ youth who are also F/LDS, transgender teens and adults committed to finding the true self Heavenly Father created, or polygamous patriarchs who run the sexual-desire gamut from virile to vile to Viagra addicted, mediated Mormonism is fully saturated by this notion of the sexualized self as the quintessential modern subject.

The mainstream LDS Church puts strong bodily injunctions on its members in the form of overt rules and more tacit (but equally coercive) codes of conduct, related to the broad gamut of expressions through which a soul might be wayward. These regulations very specifically include curbing sexual expression, but they also extend into the bodily habitus of dress, food, beverage, and stimulant consumption (no hot beverages, no alcohol, no caffeine, no cigarettes), and the strict management of media, money, and time. Mormonism as a mediated meme is fully aware of these mandates for bodily regulation, and so often to speak the word “Mormon” is also to import a wide set of expectations (some admiring, others amused) about disciplining the body and its desires.

Mormonism’s emphasis on behavior suggests that Saints are allowed to feel prohibited desire; they just can’t act on it. According to this logic, Mor-

mons are technically allowed to believe themselves attracted to others of the same sex (a seemingly temporary condition of defiance or delusion), but they aren't allowed to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual (a permanent position of orientation and identity). Neither are they permitted to proclaim publicly their homosexuality. Similarly, while transgender Mormons might not be excommunicated for cross-dressing or hormone use (perceived as temporary and private), they will almost certainly be X'd for transition surgeries (perceived as permanent and harder to keep secret) (Petrey 2015). The eleventh commandment that Mormons shall not commit publicity thus reinforces an epistemology of the closet whereby non-normative desires and bodies must stay shrouded in shame and darkness.⁵

The appeal of normative continuity is strong. The 2014 independent documentary *Transmormon* features a poignant scene in which Ed Hayward, father of the subject's protagonist Eri, says,

We believe that the church leaders are receiving revelation that helps them to be able to better serve in the callings we are receiving in the priesthood. We have the Proclamation of the Word on the Family, which states clearly that a marriage is between a man and a woman. In my opinion, Eri is a woman, so I don't see a problem with that. And I'm hoping that the leaders of the church are going to see it that way. And that she will be able to get married. She won't be able to have children, but she can hopefully adopt children.

The comments on the YouTube posting for *Transmormon* are noteworthy for the degree they praise Eri's father for his acceptance and love of his daughter. Writes "Jimmy Lindberg": "That dad deserves an award for his awesomeness." Of course, this being YouTube, the post has generated a good amount of trolling that is hateful and extremely transphobic. But the overall celebration of Eri and appreciation of Ed allows for a remarkable takeaway whereby conservative Mormonism as juxtaposed against LGBT+ lives might be used as the motivating reason for mediation, and mediation of this type might, in turn, foster transgender acceptance.

Postdocumentary interviews with Eri, for instance, note that she is still on the outs with the church, but now the reprimanding letters she receives from her bishop are because she and her boyfriend are "living in sin." Eri told the *Daily Beast* with a laugh, "I was having to deal with all these things that were trans related . . . now it's related to being a regular skank making bad choices kind of things" (Shire 2014). Here Eri shares a joke with a non-Mormon world about the restrictive, even prudish, policies of a church that

can overlook her transition but cannot forgive the sin of living together outside wedlock. As a fully realized self, Eri is heralded as a triumphant gender warrior, in contrast to the restrictive regime that worked to suppress her true personhood. Eri's true self and personal conviction—two elements so critical to Mormonism—thus emerge in specific counter to the religion.

Keep Sweet: Mediated Mormonism's Economy of Emotions

Mormonism puts a high premium on rules and regulations that establish normativity and perpetuate its own hegemony, through the self-discipline of emotions, sexual desire, and pleasure. Indeed, the Mormon flagship university BYU runs a public-access website through its library called *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Included within this encyclopedia are roughly three hundred explanations, edicts, and expectations, many of which include the regulation of the body through the governance of sexuality. Under “Dating and Courtship,” the entry reinforces Mormon norms of separation from a broader Gentile culture largely through a governing code of commitment and premarital celibacy. It states:

It is expected that LDS youth will not begin dating until the age of sixteen. Serious, steady dating and marriage-oriented courtship are expected to be delayed longer, perhaps until after a mission for males and after completing high school for females. A chaste courtship is expected to lead to a temple marriage, in which a couple make binding commitments to each other for all time and eternity.

Two doctrinally based principles guide the dating and courtship of LDS youth: first, because of the religious significance of marriage, virtually everyone who can is expected to marry; second, because of the spiritual and social importance of chastity, sexual relations must wait until after marriage. (Miller and Goddard 2017)

The entry on sex education clearly notes the critical role that control of emotions and the body plays in the governing codes of chastity that stand over both mainstream and fundamentalist Mormonism: “Parents are counseled to help their adolescent and older children understand the need to stay in control of their emotions and behaviors relative to physical desire and to teach them how to make personal decisions about sexual behavior based on moral awareness, with the realization that virtue and moral cleanliness lead to strength of character, peace of mind, lifelong happiness, and a fulness of

love. LDS scriptures counsel, ‘See that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love’ (Alma 38:12)” (Hutchison 1992).

In parallel, the FLDS injunction to keep sweet refers both to adolescent girls retaining their sexual purity and to the expectation that everyone (man, woman, boy, girl) regulate emotions in the face of crisis, catastrophe, and stress—Britain’s “keep calm and carry on” aphorism in an American key, suffused with sexualized meaning. According to FLDS 101, a blog devoted to the doctrine and covenants of the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints Church, Warren Jeffs has taken the

phrase [keep sweet] a step further, making it into a commandment, a mantra to keep your feelings under control. . . . “To be loyal to Heavenly Father, to truly love Him and obey Him, you must keep sweet no matter what. If your feelings can be disturbed and you simply need more of the spirit of God to have and earn more of that sweet spirit, you must pay the price. The price is sacrifice. Set aside any feeling or thought that disturbs the spirit of God.” (WSJ 1/28/2003) “Keeping sweet means saying your prayers and obeying the priesthood over you” (WSJ 3/6/96). (Knoll 2009a)

As I note in chapter 4, Jeffs is probably the poster child for bad polygamy due to his reckless abuses, ranging from rape to pedophilia to sex trafficking. But in the mediated spheres of political opinion, it is often this insistence on keeping sweet that lifts Jeffs from a figure of derision to one of evil, because to suppress the emotions means also suppressing one’s inner conscience. This repression obliterates the tie to selfhood that is the lifeline of free agency and democratic citizenry.

The FLDS commandment to keep sweet has very much to do with the mainstream LDS ambition of “perfect obedience” and to “fast, pray, read the Scriptures, and never give in to your feelings” (Freeman 2014, 11) that speak both to a gendered tension between autonomy of the self and obedience to authority resonating through mediated stories about Mormons, sexuality, and the regulation of desire. As former Mormon and present “fabulous gay man” Steven Fales (2006) writes, “The Church taught us from a very early age to deny the pain and smile anyway.”

It is not a coincidence that a key number in *The Book of Mormon* musical is called “Turn It Off!” Clark Johnsen, himself an original cast member of the Broadway production of the musical and a man who left the faith because it could not support his same-sex orientation, chuckles, “That number is just so

crazy accurate. . . . The one thing . . . a Mormon wouldn't say, 'Oh, I just turn off my feelings.' But you know, the concept is 'I'm having improper thoughts so instead I will hum my favorite hymn.' I don't think a Mormon would say 'I'm going to turn it off,' but it's exactly what we do" (Dehlin 2015a). Of course, the broader hilarity of this campy number stems from a kind of sweet incredulosity attached to the fact that the impeccably conscientious Mormon missionaries depicted in the musical are as consumed with guilt over their desire for a donut as they are over their lust for other men. As well, the bright-sequined pink vests the missionaries don for a high-energy tap dance finale solidifies the camp aesthetic the overall lyrics pretend to suppress.

"A Mormon Just Believes": Not-Knowingness Made Known

Whether large or small, serious or silly, mediated Mormonism makes clear that the F/LDS economy of emotions requires a form of belief bred through an absolute obedience that is often fostered through lack of thinking critically, or what I am calling here not-knowingness. Noted fashion photographer Brian Shumway tells of his own struggles with his Mormon upbringing in *Time*: "Most people may not know or realize, but Mormonism, if lived as it's supposed to be lived, is an orthodox religion. As an orthodox religion, anything that waivers from the orthodoxy set by Mormon authorities isn't tolerated" (McClelland 2011). Shumway remembers at age sixteen beginning to read the works of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Erich Fromm, thinkers who gave voice to his own sense of doubt. "Eventually," Shumway reflects, "it became obvious I was going down another path and I had to 'come out' to my family" (McClelland 2011). It isn't obvious, however, if to "come out" for Shumway meant revealing himself as a non-believer, a gay man, or both.

In *The Mormon People*, historian Matthew Bowman traces a historical movement starting in 1953 during which the church worked to underscore not-knowingness as a desired mode of being. To wit: Bowman notes that education at Brigham Young University and the Church Educational System began "eliminating outside influence in favor of faculty trained in education rather than in religion" (2012, 206). In turn, argues Bowman, this pedagogical refocus reinforced a broader exhortation among the LDS faithful "to live the moral code of their faith rather than to encourage intellectual inquiry" (207). In other words, good Mormons don't ask too many questions; a Mormon just believes. Rather than only being a tool for compartmentalization, however, not-knowingness restricts information in a world overflowing

with it. Not-knowingness requires an active effort, worthy of the suffering of Mormon pioneers, to police the mind into a state of obedient belief. One does not ask questions; one does not break the rules. The will creates the willingness. In not-knowingness there exists a powerful refusal to see or acknowledge what is already known, a refusal that ricochets across the screens of mediated Mormonism. As a consequence, many stories of those who grew up in the faith depict the very painful tearing away of the veils of not-knowingness in the name of personal conscience. Similarly, memoirs often talk of the shame of thinking in critical ways about God, the church, the rules.

For many ex-Mormons who tell their stories in published form and circulate them through vanity presses, blogs, amateur video, and even major publishing houses, breaking from the church and its totalitarian mandate for perfect obedience is like escaping an abusive father hell-bent on his own authority. Consider, for instance, the advertising copy for Emily Pearson's (2012) memoir, *Dancing with Crazy*:

[This] is the true story of her personal derailment, both horrifically and humorously demonstrating what happens when mindless obedience to religious authority supersedes plain old common sense. As a young Mormon girl Emily gave up her own personal power, relinquished the ability to think for herself and allowed herself to blow with a wind that carried her from studying scriptures in the Sunday School classes of correctly clothed, righteous descendants of Mormon pioneers, to studying porn on San Francisco's Castro Street with her gay father and half naked drag queens, to drowning in depression in a stinky apartment in Hollywood, to puking in the toilet of a courting polygamist, to marrying her very own gay man in a Mormon Temple. After nearly losing her mind several times over, Emily disentangled herself from toxic and narcissistic personalities, walked away from a crippling religion and finally learned to think, act and live for herself.

While it may seem contradictory to position the self as the antidote to toxic systemic narcissism, the advertising copy here reinforces a theme found throughout Pearson's memoir: sacrificing personal need creates powerlessness and silence. Pearson calls on the gumption of her preteen self: "I desperately needed that fearless girl to pound on the door of whoever was holding [my light, my courage, my soul] hostage" (2012, loc. 7896). She felt invisible and voiceless because of the incessant demand for her obedience. Hers is a feminist outrage.

By and large, Mormon not-knowingness resonates in the larger mediascape as both sinister and frightening. But sometimes it is played for laughs. Sings the lead Elder Price in *The Book of Mormon*'s major ballad, so enthusiastically earnest and high energy that it reads as farce, "I believe! I am a Mormon, and a Mormon just believes." If there are stumbles along the way in the quest for a goodness that borders on perfection, the stalwart Saint doubles down on devotion, praying harder, fasting more often, increasing devotions of time, becoming ever more invested in the workings of the church as a means of achieving perfection and thus feeling accepted by that church.

The Mormon iteration of the demand to will oneself straight is slightly different than the "pray the gay away" gospels of conservative faith groups, in that the larger culture of LDS perfectionism and exceptionalism reinforces a simultaneous feeling of inadequacy and superiority among the majority of Mormon peoples (regardless of sex or orientation). As I discussed in chapter 5, the concentrated conversation of Mormon mommy blogs hints at feeling overwhelmed and unable to meet high expectations for constant happiness and overall domestic superiority—all while F/LDS Mormons are encouraged to perceive themselves as chosen and special. *We should feel sorry for the Gentile*. Many Mormon missionaries speak of their cocksure assurance that their time in the missionary field will be a holy crusade of Truth against worldly values. Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of *The Book of Mormon* musical, get it right when they have their egocentric missionary characters enthusiastically vow, "I will do something that blows God's fricking mind!" But even for men, living up to high Mormon expectations is no easy task. As Steven Fales sardonically states in *Confessions of a Mormon Boy*, his one-man play about growing up gay and LDS, when he was married to a woman (Emily Pearson), "Being perfect is exhausting." But being gay and perfect is an oxymoron or, as Fales terms it, an "oxy Mormon" that, within the tautology of church doctrine, might be ameliorated only through more work. "God made no man a pervert," Fales reminds his audience in the mimicked voice of authority. "Remember, homosexuality can be cured. You may totally recover from its tentacles. Don't be selfish, lazy, and weak. How can you know you cannot change until your knees are sore from praying and your knuckles bloody from knocking on the Lord's door for help?" (Fales 2003, 44).⁶

Ancestral Mormons, such as Fales, labor under a further psychological hurdle: the knowledge that the church's nineteenth-century pioneers faced dire circumstances—persecution, starvation, privation—without complaint, without giving up. These first Saints literally walked across North America, forming what is now referred to as the Mormon Trail, all enduring great

suffering and adversity, many of them dying along the way. As Fales writes, “Our hardships [as contemporary Mormons] were nothing like what the early Mormon pioneers had to endure: house burnings, tar and featherings, sweating and freezing across the plains, crickets! Grit was in our genes” (2003, 45). The hardships experienced by those first Mormons have set the bar high for the ensuing generations of Saints whose adversity, the thinking goes, can never be as bad as that already bested by their ancestors. The good Mormon thus works hard with an internalized sense of greater suffering that has come before her. If she does not achieve the desired outcome, the only solution is to work yet harder.

Conscientious objection, personal testimony, and exacting effort all factor in a *Mormon Stories* podcast from 2006 that features a two-part interview with Buckley Jeppson, a lifelong ancestral, or what is sometimes referred to as DNA, Mormon, who realized after he had been married to a woman for nearly two decades that he was gay. Jeppson’s nineteenth-century Mormon ancestors were from England on one side and Scandinavia on the other, giving him the Mayflower bloodline of the first Saints, who were converted in their homelands and conveyed to Joseph’s Zion in Nauvoo, Illinois, and later Salt Lake City, Utah. As a multigenerational Mormon, Jeppson’s public life as a gay man required not only severing himself from a faith system he believed in but cutting himself from all familial ties, past, present, and future. His story of coming to sexual consciousness reinforces the notion of a cultivated not-knowingness that fosters mandates for emotional control and sexual naïveté. In Jeppson’s words:

I didn’t know when I first got married that I was gay. I guess I’m at that age where it didn’t even occur to me that such a thing was an option. . . . The only gay person I knew in high school was this strange young man who wore makeup, and I thought that was very peculiar. . . .

As a youth growing up in the church, any feelings you have for anybody (male or female), you don’t talk about them much. So I didn’t. I just assumed the older I got, that everybody has these trials and feelings they have to go through, and if I worked hard enough and excelled and studied and prayed and fasted and all of those things, I would get over it, just like everyone else around me had gone through it and gotten over it. (Dehlin 2006a)

Jeppson speaks of a “don’t talk, don’t feel” culture, where a pervasive logic of silence, or not-knowingness, seems to keep all forms of “deviance” perpetually off the radar. Similarly, Mormon poet and playwright Carol Lynn

Pearson writes about her sheltered homogeneous LDS life in *Goodbye, I Love You*, her own memoir about coming to terms with a gay husband: “We didn’t know there was any such thing as homosexuals. We hardly knew there was such a thing as Democrats. We’d heard of blacks, but many of us had never seen one in person. I attended BYU high school, a laboratory school run by the university. As a takeoff on a television show of the day we nicknamed ourselves Purity Playhouse. Attending school at Purity Playhouse in the confines of Happy Valley made for a lot of insulation” (1986, 28).

Not-knowingness works as a prescriptive epistemology for the fabled True Believing Mormon. Coming into consciousness largely involves emerging through the sheltering veil of obligatory affect and action that is part of not-knowingness. Emily Pearson’s memoir again offers a poignant rendition of not-knowingness in her combined relation between the paternal presence of her father (Gerald Pearson) and the patriarchal authority of her church. She writes, “In Gerald’s kitchen I learned to sit quietly, not think, and nod. I had to. I alone had been issued a special invitation into his world. My mom didn’t get to be there, my brothers and sister didn’t get to be there. Only me. It was just Gerald and me, and I would do whatever I had to do to keep it that way. So I erased myself. I became a blank movie screen upon which he could project anything and everything he wanted. A small price to pay for feeling loved the way he had once loved me” (Pearson 2012, loc. 773).

Emily perceives this erasure as parallel to the tacit agreement she has made with the church: “The other place I learned to sit quietly, not think and nod, was at church. I was never overtly taught to not think, but I was taught to have unwavering faith and unquestioning devotion to the Lord and the leaders of His kingdom here on earth” (Pearson 2012, loc. 773). “It became clear to me that if I didn’t do everything perfectly, keep every commandment and agree with everything said over the pulpit, then Heavenly Father could stop loving me just as easily as Gerald might” (loc. 782). It is precisely in relation to one’s personal truth, or testimony, that these tacit forms of coercion rise up most strongly. Emily notes,

[I] learned to recognize and trust the burning “confirmation” feeling in my chest. When my heart raced and I felt excited, or when I was filled with warmth, joy and peace, I knew it was The Spirit of God, through the Holy Ghost, speaking to me. And I was told I could trust that feeling—unless, of course, what I received through personal revelation went against the decrees of those in authority over me which,

to me, was everyone in line from my Sunday School teacher right up to the prophet himself. If that was the case I was taught to get back on my knees until I had received the right answer. Until I had the right feeling. So, I guess more accurately, I learned to submit my will to what I was told by others was God's will for me. (loc. 779–807)

Personal choice, in this regard, functions as an individual guessing game for which the rules are established by a loved authority one must, and indeed wants to, please and obey. Personal testimony reinforces the truth of that dynamic.

These operations are not, of course, limited to the Mormon Church—they constitute the very workings of hegemony that scholars have long critiqued. As illustrated here, the terms of oppression become desirable, indeed pleasurable, to the oppressed, even while the terms of that oppression largely operate without detection. “I learned to submit my will to what I was told by others was God's will for me.” In Emily Pearson's case as for so many others, she notes that her own personal testimony isn't fully to be trusted, the technologies of choice subject to the toxic sway of hegemony. In their complex interweaving of knowing and not-knowing, these tales within mediated Mormonism thus provide a very precise latter-day screen on which to view the usually invisible technologies of hegemony. Indeed, in the broader mediascape I would argue that it is the juxtaposition between these two strong impressions—clean-cut sparkle-smiled happy goodness and strong-willed draconian disciplinarians—that secure a broader fascination with Mormons and Mormonism. But it may well be the governing culture of not-knowingness that most fascinates and frightens a population that is riveted by stories about the Saints.

“The Mormon Sex Thing”

In a 2017 special for TLC's reality program *Sister Wives*, the Browns (Kody and his four wives, Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn) gather to watch video footage culled since the program began in 2010 organized around the thoughts and experiences of third wife Christine. Going back to an early episode, Meri notes that a wife's individual relationship with Kody is very much influenced by the larger marital ecosystem. “When he's ornery with another one, he gets weird with me. And I don't want that. So it's very important for him to have a good relationship, and the sexual nature of it is definitely a

part of that good relationship.” A very pregnant Christine chimes in, referring to sex, “And we know that that’s required in each relationship, so some people think, ‘How do you feel when he’s off with another woman, sleeping with her and you know they’re having sex?’” Christine rolls her eyes and gestures into the air: “Well, gosh darn it, they better!” Watching the footage seven years later, Christine yells out, “So painful!” Laughing and a bit truculent, Kody explains the family’s pain is due to the fact that producers ran and reran Christine’s statements about sex as a “teaser for our show” as it was just debuting. Says Kody, “We’re polygamists coming out of the closet, freaking out about the fact that we were coming out. And our church leaders had a fit, rightfully so, because [in a high voice] *we’re discussing sex!* Which is kind of the rule, we don’t ever do that. It just got so dang ugly, right out of the starting blocks.” Says Meri, “That conversation was a conversation I never wanted to have, in public.”

As it concerns the public interest in the sex lives of polygamists or in their reticence with respect to it, the Browns aren’t alone. Indeed, as I discuss at greater length in both chapters 3 and 4, mediated Mormon polygamy stories have long held a front-page fascination for U.S. and international viewers, who are intrigued by the complicated sexual dynamics at the heart of what could otherwise be considered serial monogamy lived in a simultaneous temporal frame. I would go so far as to venture that no public tell-all about polygamy exists without some speaking about that which is not to be spoken—sex. Indeed, sex is such a forbidden topic within mediated Mormonism that the word itself is sometimes not intelligible. Rebecca Musser notes with particular respect to the FBI raid on Warren Jeffs’s Yearning for Zion Compound, FLDS cultures speak a different language when it comes not only to sex but also to consent. For instance, when government agents questioned teenagers who were either pregnant or young mothers, the women consistently denied ever having had sex at all. The FBI considered this willful deceit, and began to treat the women as hostile informants. Musser realized that the women had probably never heard the word “sex” and certainly never used it. She writes, “We had to repeatedly remind hundreds of different investigators and workers to use the term ‘marital relations’ instead of ‘sex,’ as well as explaining Warren’s peculiar indoctrination so they could understand our people better, without judgment” (Musser and Cook 2014, 273).

While the Browns represent a more open version of fundamentalist practice, and mainstream LDS culture is yet another level removed from

more extreme versions of the faith, the injunction on sex talk is a binding thread that runs throughout the broad quilt of Mormonism. Mediated Mormonism makes much of this tension between what can be discussed and what cannot, sounding the string of erotic suppression with insistence and agility. Mormonism is a culture very much predicated on puritanical commitments to regulation of the appetites and preservation of the virginal body. As I've noted, for both men and women, sexual relations and heavy foreplay are forbidden outside of heterosexual marriage, as are other forms of nonprocreative sex such as masturbation. This, however, does not prevent F/LDS adherents from devising clever work-arounds (at least in media representation)—sexual activity that doesn't count as sex. For instance, the Amazon series *Alpha House*, otherwise a political comedy about four Republican senators who share a single house in Washington, DC, made much of Mormon soaking, an alternative sex practice engaged in by two LDS characters on the show. Soaking basically allows for penis-vagina penetration but absolutely no friction. Insertion is OK; pumping will send you to hell. A web search suggests this practice is not something concocted by the show. Similarly, as I mention in the introduction, Jodi Arias spoke of oral and anal sex between herself and her boyfriend, Travis Alexander, whom she later murdered. While both were Mormon and pledged to chastity outside of marriage, they reasoned that the nonprocreative nature of their sex practice removed it from the category of sexual sin.

At very young ages, F/LDS children are sex segregated from one another, encouraged to idealize the opposite sex and to search for an eternal companion, but admonished to refrain from any form of intimate touch, sexual experimentation, heavy petting, or passionate kissing. Adherents to the mainstream faith are encouraged to wear CTR (Choose the Right) rings from as young as age four as a reminder of the necessity for making good daily choices that might eventually yield heavenly rewards. While other personal effects—like necklaces, key chains, zipper pulls, tie clips, and oil vials—are available through online retailers such as CTR Ring Shop, it is the CTR ring that predominates, the signet an ever-present reminder of the significance of choice.

Choosing the right encompasses a set of choices bigger than sexual activity, yet it is clear from the CTR mode of public address that the most important choices individuals make correlate to sexual temptations. In January 2017, for instance, CTR Ring Shop offered a free gift that perfectly emblemizes the fusion between latter-day screens, gendered morality, and

choice: a green crest emblazoned with CTR, to be used as computer wall-paper. Writes the company:

We are aware of the blessings that information and technology can be in our lives in our modern day. . . . We are also aware of the tremendous risk that individuals and families take by having computers and the internet in our homes. Pornography, chat rooms, and anti-Mormon literature are easily accessible and can destroy the soul. . . . In an effort to make 2017 a great year full of spiritual progression and faith-building experiences, we want to do what we can to help resist temptation. CTR Ring Shop has teamed up with Elvtech, a Utah web design company and created a FREE, eye-catching CTR wallpaper background for your computer! We believe that having CTR on our fingers and our computers will help us choose the right. (“We Have a Free Gift for You . . .” 2015)

As this free gift demonstrates, constant on-screen reminders are meant to provide a perpetual internalized mandate to choose the right, which is to say to avoid “pornography, chat rooms, and anti-Mormon literature”—forms of polymorphous perversity here rather deliciously conflated with media.

Similarly, Emily Pearson writes that as soon as teenagers hit puberty, “they, in turn, are bombarded with endless lessons and lectures on the Law of Chastity. We were expected to grow up never touching the opposite sex, or ourselves, in ‘inappropriate ways.’” She continues, “Until we got married in the temple, we were to do everything we could to keep ourselves morally clean. Sex or ‘anything like unto it,’ before or outside of marriage, was simply not an option and was the ‘gravest of sins, second only to murder’” (2012, loc. 1224). As with many conservative faith-based groups, compulsory purity is part of the moral instruction, doled out in weekly sessions. Writes Pearson of these chastity lessons, “If we had sex before marriage we were a squeezed out orange rind, or a chewed up piece of gum, or a squished Twinkie, or a board hammered full of nails. The boys’ class had these lessons too. One was even rumored to involve a destroyed banana, stressing the vital importance of refraining from ‘self-abuse. And not stoking their little factories.’ Some were even told not to look at their naked bodies too long after getting out of the shower or to tie their hands to the bedposts, if necessary, to keep from masturbating” (loc. 1225).

Other writers also reinforce Pearson’s descriptions. In *Breaking Free*, Katherine Jean Denton reminisces, “Sex is forbidden in the Mormon Church

before marriage and, I hear, not very exciting after marriage either because of the sex guidelines and rules governing temple recommends (special permission required to enter the temple). We were taught that the main purpose—the only purpose—of sex was to have children and replenish the earth” (2015, loc. 156). Joanna Brooks (2012, 102) similarly reflects, “So important it was to keep our virtue about us that our church leaders reserved entire weeknight meetings to offer us strict how-to instructions” (or, in this case, how-not-to instructions). Brooks paints a picture of Standards Nights, during which early pubescent girls wore their “Sunday dresses,” while leaders covered tables in the church classrooms with lace tablecloths, lights dimmed, “a vase of white long-stemmed roses before us” (2012, 102). The girls were asked to take a rose and “smell its fragrance, feel the soft petals” (103). They each did so, passing the flower from person to person. By the time the rose had traveled through the teenage hands of each of the girls, “it was a different creature: its tight inner bud pried open, petals missing, others crimped and browning” (103). The object lesson, states Brooks, wasn’t hard to understand. The virginal unhandled rose was much more desirable than its brown and bruised counterpart.⁷

For FLDS girls-into-women, the indoctrination is even more extreme. Girls are told to avert their eyes even when changing their younger brothers’ diapers. They are not to touch boys, who can be expelled from the community for offenses such as holding hands. The obligations of the fertile female body—to bring as many spirit children into mortal bodies as possible—begin sooner, creating a binaried zone between not-knowing and sexual action. Writes Elissa Wall, who was married at age fourteen, “No matter the age of either party, a couple would spend their entire lives pre marriage with no romantic or sexual contact with anyone. After the union, there was a drastic change, just as I had experienced. Suddenly, within as little as a few hours, a child would go from having absolutely no sexual understanding, experience, or basis of discussion to being told that it was time to lie down and make a baby” (Wall and Pulitzer 2012, 587).

Because of the high premium put on priesthood authority and female obedience as coupled with an overall culture of reticence and repression with respect to sexuality, mediated Mormonism clearly illustrates that the insistent politics of purity can also create a toxic breeding ground for sexual assault. The angel makes the good girl exceedingly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Toxic femininity puts those who experience it at greater risk for relationship violence—and here it is important to be reminded that toxic

femininity is about a gendered state of being that any sexed body might experience, so it is not so much a man/woman dynamic as a dominant/submissive paradigm.

Given this, Mya Grey's secret memoir *Mormon Girl to Sex Slave* depicts a dynamic that maps onto a broader F/LDS culture with remarkable ease. "Very early on, probably from birth," writes Grey, "young Mormon girls are taught, or more accurately brainwashed into being submissive to men" (2013, loc. 158). While Mormon men must also follow an exacting set of rules, Grey argues—in line with many other memoirists—the submissive dynamic is more demanding for women. "The woman's job is to submit and obey her husband at all times and in all things. The females aren't capable of thinking for themselves and making large decisions" (loc. 161). Without irony, Grey notes that her childhood lived in Mormonism made her uniquely suited to the role of submissive in a BDSM (bondage domination sadism masochism) master/slave relationship. "It's funny now that I think about it. From the time I was born and even today, I live and have lived my life by strict rules and guidelines. The ones from when I was Mormon, and now the ones my Master has given me to live by . . . I wonder if having been born and raised living with all these rules and being accustomed to being told what I can and can't do, has helped shaped me into a better slave" (loc. 173, 175). Although Grey speaks of being a sex slave as a choice she has made, and I have no desire to undermine BDSM as a legitimate sexual subculture, it is clear that we are meant to answer "yes" to her questions. Mormonism trained her nicely for subservience, sexual and otherwise.

Indeed, Grey uses the word "brainwashed" to suggest she was incapable of making an autonomous choice within her Mormon upbringing. Whether we agree that Grey's use of brainwashed is warranted or not, a larger culture considers it unfair to hamper free choice and individual consent through psychologically and emotionally coercive practices. It's un-American to use propaganda to influence people and otherwise deny them the capacity for rational choice. In other words, brainwashing is cheating. Mediated Mormonism's insistent reminders of the tight rules that psychologically bind the faithful in turn create a resonant discussion articulating freedom, justice, and Americanness as concepts that require the capacity for free choice. While Mormon scriptures underscore the importance of what is termed free agency, or the "ability and privilege . . . to choose and act for ourselves," mediated Mormonism equally makes clear that one common travesty of church membership is the withholding of the conditions that allow free agency to express itself ("Agency" 2018).

SSA the Gay Away: My Husband's Not Gay

Reality television offers an excellent domain for analyzing one such story about Mormonism, sexuality, and self-knowledge. On January 11, 2015, the reality network TLC announced a one-hour TV special called *My Husband's Not Gay* that would profile the lives of men in the mainstream LDS Church contending with same-sex attraction (SSA). While freely acknowledging their sexual attraction to other men, the subjects of this docu-reality program (and broader sociological phenomenon) marry women and father children with them. In so doing, these men abide by a central mainstream and fundamentalist mandate that heterosexual marriage and the propagation of children are mandatory prerequisites for entrance into the Celestial Kingdom. As a state of being and a descriptor of sexual desire, SSA has considerable saliency, primarily for those in conservative religious cultures that consider homosexual behavior immoral. The church website's entry on SSA articulates a similar ideology, with just a touch of characteristic Mormon friendliness: "The Church's doctrinal position is clear: Sexual activity should only occur between a man and a woman who are married. However, that should never be used as justification for unkindness" ("Same-Sex Attraction" 2016).

As is the way with much on reality TV, the pointed profile of men who desire men but don't act on it in the name of religion provided the kind of controversial narrative grist that draws attention. The announcement of the special drew fire from popular journalism, including *Rolling Stone* and *The Atlantic*, while the mainstream Mormon Church praised the couples featured on the show as "true to their religious convictions," a theme picked up and broadcast internationally through Britain's *Daily Mail* online and other global news sites ("Mormon Church Applauds" 2015). Progressive advocacy groups such as GLAAD charged the show with setting a dangerous precedent for the advocacy of antigay conversion therapy, something the mainstream LDS Church had been advocating and supporting with various degrees of transparency for at least thirty years.⁸ Change.org circulated a petition that drew over 130,000 signatures, demanding the cancellation of the program (Sanders 2017). While Hotsnakes Media, the production company behind the one-hour special, had taped enough footage to build an entire series, TLC has of this writing in 2019 declined to air more than the initial program. This may be due more to market share than to politics, however. The lead-in show for *My Husband's Not Gay* was more Mormon fare, *Sister Wives*, which, as I've noted, follows the polygamous Brown family. *My Husband's Not Gay*

drew roughly 24 percent fewer viewers (1 million as opposed to 1.4 million) than *Sister Wives*, ranking the special sixty-ninth among its competitors in cable offerings. *Sister Wives* averages between 1.5 and 2.7 million viewers, according to TLC, so the discrepancy between the two shows was quite marked for network officials (“Sister Wives” 2017). Indeed, *My Husband’s Not Gay’s* relatively weak ratings led Hal Boedecker (2015) of the *Orlando Sentinel* to quip, “Your husband may not be gay, but he’s not that interesting, either.”

I’d beg to differ on that point. Not only is the program and the phenomenon that it is designed to showcase/exploit interesting, the dialogue it sparked through both mainstream and new media sites (including major news outlets such as ABC, NBC, and FOX and social media mechanisms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) makes visible the complex nexus of identity, choice, and desire that are critical to my discussion on the gender politics of mediated Mormonism. Indeed, the mediated conversation functions as a flashpoint for other discussions around the nature of gender justice in a modern moment. To understand why, it’s important to know more about the program.

My Husband’s Not Gay profiles a series of white, middle-class Mormon couples living in Salt Lake City who, according to a title broadly displayed in white letters across a black screen, “live their lives a little . . . differently.” In these families, the men are openly attracted to other men while being married to women and having children with those women (fertility through what my friend Judith Wenger calls “the direct deposit method,” which is to say through heterosexual intercourse rather than through reproductive technologies or other assistance devices like turkey basters). The men and their wives use diagnostic terms to describe their sexuality. “I experience ssa (same-sex attraction),” says Jeff. This, we are quickly meant to understand by the title and the men’s ensuing comments, differs greatly from being gay, not for lifestyle or political reasons necessarily but strictly in terms of behavior. Because they admit, both privately and publicly, their same-sex desire but do not act on it, these men claim the description ssa, not the identity gay. In this respect, the men of *My Husband’s Not Gay* share residency in an increasingly recognized sexual subculture, in which, much like MSM (men who have sex with men) or those on the DL (down low) in which heterosexual men have sex with other men but nonetheless consider themselves straight, the label “gay” does not work as an adequate descriptor of sexual practice, desire, and/or identity.

While other faith groups have injunctions against homosexuality and thus could likely offer their own cast of closeted same-sex-attracted men

married to women, the Mormon element here is critical for several reasons. Notes one of the subjects of the show, Curtis, “When it comes to our faith and our belief, what matters is how we act.” As we have seen, these mainstream Mormons live in a world where outward action trumps interior emotion. Rather than feeling that one has sinned if he has contemplated sinful behavior, these men give free rein to their desires, even taking their wives along occasionally to rate good-looking men, whom they all call “eye candy.” Indeed, the men do not hide their desire for other men, joking among themselves of a four-point danger scale that ranges from looking, to staring, to needing restraint. According to the logic of the program, this openness with other SSA men and with their wives creates the terms for happiness, healthiness, and, somewhat ironically, increased intimacy with women, both sexually and emotionally. It’s a logic that posits both emotional and heterosexual intimacy as the consequence of conversation-sustained honesty over body-determined orientation. Mind over matter; if you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.

Further, as with many conservative religions, sexuality is approved as a means toward procreation, not pleasure. Toward this end, the church has become somewhat notorious for its summer youth retreats where troubled teen boys are sent to curb their masturbatory tendencies. An anti-addiction video released in 2015 by BYU-Idaho went viral for its über-serious comparison of those who are addicted to pornography and/or who masturbate as “spiritually wounded on the battlefield of the great war,” followed by a 100-second intradiegetic narrative featuring a wounded soldier on what appears to be a World War I battlefield. In a scene that is a bit of a dream sequence focalized through a porn addict’s consciousness, the soldier/addict chooses his last moment of injury and pain to masturbate, while his battalion looks on in embarrassment and discomfort (Secular Talk 2014).⁹ The purpose of these hilariously unsubtle documentaries and extended PSAs is to foment social pressure around the topic of errant sexuality. Friends don’t let friends jack off, apparently, and thus the lost soldier must not be left behind on the battleground of self-pleasure.

It makes sense, given these injunctions, that pornography (both gay and not) is so central to the Mormon mediascape. Bodies distinctly marked as Mormon are central to the broader network of internet porn that fetishizes garments (Mormon underwear) and secret temple endowment ceremonies as the setup for eroticized viewing. It is difficult to determine the demographics of pornography consumption, but LeGrand Wolf (not his real name), founder of the gay porn site MormonBoyz, speculates that the “audience ranges from ex-Mormons who are living out their own past desires

to current Mormons who feel super guilty about ‘sinning’ to folks who are barely familiar with the Mormon church but sure enjoy watching the tainting of innocence that happens with and without those fancy underpants” (Aran 2015). The companion site MormonGirlz eroticizes the life of LDS and FLDS women—sisters and sister wives in full sexualized fantasy mode. Yet Mormons as memes are not only the subjects of pornography, they are often its consumers. The dirty little secret of LDS living is that pornography is considered by church leaders to be a public health crisis, particularly in Utah, where search histories show a predominance of people wanting to see scenes of pornography, threesomes, and anal sex. Internet technology has only heightened the brethren’s concerns. Writes Sarah K. Burris (2016), “Anyone with a smartphone can excuse themselves to the men’s room for a self-satisfying afternoon delight. Leaders in the LDS church are paralyzed in the face of First Amendment law and the ease of privacy. All a Mormon masturbator must shoulder is his or her own guilt, and the church plays up the shaming to the extreme.”

The mainstream LDS Church compels adherence to its marriage-as-salvation scheme by indicating that those who defy its rules will be excommunicated and thus blocked from a shared eternity with family members—present, past, and future. For many Mormons who claim multigenerational membership within the church, Mormonism functions not just as a faith system but as an ethnicity, making it impossible from the point of view of those who live it to defy its principles, since doing so would mean alienation from family, both historically and in futurity. The church and its teaching, then, begin to operate as inalienable from the self. As Jeff Bennion, one of the subjects on *My Husband’s Not Gay*, told ABC’s *Nightline* (2015), “My sexuality is not a choice, I agree with that; my faith isn’t a choice either. This is a deep, deep part of me that’s very important to me. So my challenge is to reconcile this, and I feel that I’ve been able to do that.” Jeff and all of the men on the show—and in the broader LDS SSA network—contend that they in no way mean for their stories to be imperatives for the way that all same-sex-desiring people should live. Some of them have tried reparative therapy, and all of them are against it. Sounding the neoliberal creed of individualism and the American ethos of rights to free expression, the subjects of this show claim their realities as male-desiring men married to women is a personal choice based on the needs to balance conscience and creed.

At one level, *My Husband’s Not Gay* could thus be perceived as presenting a realistic work-around for a very specific group of people. The show could be understood as a way to reconcile dogmatic restriction with personal

truth, were it not on television and remediated through news outlets and social media—and if it seriously addressed homophobia rather than papering it over with a smile and a can-do attitude. Indeed, I would argue that the amplification provided by mediation and remediation—through these various latter-day screens—alters the very notion of individual choice, particularly in this context where conservative groups have so often sought to find a holy grail of behavior modification that might pray the gay away.

It is not only this program's relation to conversion therapy that tears at the heart of *My Husband's Not Gay*; gender justice is also at its core. Writing for *The Atlantic* the morning after the program's airing, for instance, Emma Green (2015) noted that the show had started a controversy that "reveals a lot about cultural tensions in America." Not only does the premise of the show position a "woman's identity [as] less important than her husband's—she's defining herself in terms of his sexuality," writes Green. "If she has to explain that her husband's not gay, she's already admitted that his attraction to her is less than self-evident." As feminist-friendly as Green's critique might have been, it also positioned a "self-evident" economy of desire as the hallmark of heterosexual female self-worth, suggesting that a woman shouldn't be defined by her husband's sexual drives (yes!), but also bemoaning the sadness of the poor woman in a mixed-orientation marriage, who knows she is not the one her husband ogles on the basketball court. This in turn repositions a woman's self-worth as being the object of her husband's desire, putting Green right back into the very critique she lobes at the program. But Green is not alone in this regard. Indeed, in a roundtable discussion on the YouTube channel *RoyalzFamily*, a panel of African American young people who discuss issues related to the LGBTQ+ community, panelists insightfully discussed the ethics of *My Husband's Not Gay* but agreed that any woman willing to enter into marriage with a man open about his sexual desires for another man was lacking in self-esteem.

By contrast and rather remarkably, all of the subjects featured on *My Husband's Not Gay* and the overall logic of the text position the wives as agentive, knowledgeable, and the epitome of satisfied, although nowhere is there a sense that SSA might as easily apply to women as to men. As another important measure of agency and self-satisfaction, none of the wives are depicted as working outside of the home or otherwise explode the frame of domestic contentment. The husbands are depicted as playful, caring, and loyal, if somewhat naive, as in a moment when Jeff excitedly pitches the idea of going on a men-only camping trip, only to be rebuked by his wife's eye rolling and reminders for caution in the face of temptation. While scenes such

as these suggest there is more tension around the mixed-orientation pairing than the couples or the show acknowledge, moments of tension also reinforce avenues for recognition of a normal state of relations between spouses in a logic that all couples have differences to negotiate.

Indeed, I believe that public reaction and criticism have largely been trying to work through this issue of how one understands the normal and the normative and, through this, how one negotiates a relation between obligation and choice, between natural and learned, and between affected and authentic. Many critics of the show are torn by the semantic distinction these men make between gay and SSA, feeling that to claim oneself same-sex attracted but not gay is to be unaccepting of one's truth.¹⁰ Reactions indicate a critical mass of people committed to notions of what it means to inhabit an authentic sexuality to such a degree that critics of the show cannot allow for the ways that mediated accounts such as these further a heterosexual agenda that is anything but normative.

Much as with polyamory, kink, or modern FLDS polygamy, these couples contend that love, families, and sexual economies are about choices and consent. If you are honest and clear about the rules, they say, then unconventional arrangements are not only permissible but pleasurable. Indeed, the logic goes that due to the high level of cognitive rationality and discursive clarity needed to make an unusual intimate relation work, non-normative unions are superior to outmoded relationships.

Overall, then, *My Husband's Not Gay* takes a distinctive page out of a modern sexuality handbook, which is to say it allows for self-determination and thus flexibility in how one might create and adopt identity labels, choosing to alter codes governing humans as sexual beings rather than capitulating to traditional binaries, particularly those imposed by the Mormon Church. And though the men and women of *My Husband's Not Gay* refute a tie to gayness, the discursive public culture that has arisen in response to this show clearly opens a dialogue intent on negotiating the meanings of queer-friendly gender justice. In this regard, even the most conservative and/or closeted of behaviors can give rise to a discursive public culture where queerness is not only central to the conversation but highly valued as critical to the meanings of the self.

Joseph and His Forty Wives

Learn to do as you are told. . . . If you are told by your leader to do a thing, do it. *None of your business whether it is right or wrong.*—Heber C. Kimball, “Faith and Works”

I bring this chapter on the mediated discourses surrounding F/LDS conscience, queer identity, and sexuality to a close by revisiting the sexual economy of the church's beginning. One of the primary topics about which the mainstream church has asked its members to engage in not-knowingness is polygyny, the marriage of one man to several wives. Within F/LDS culture, the practice is more commonly called polygamy, plural marriage, or simply "the principle." I discuss the long and complicated intertwined history of polygamy in LDS and FLDS communities in much greater detail in chapters 3 and 4. But here I want to think more about the open secret of Joseph Smith's involvement in, indeed, his particular innovation of, non-normative marriage in an American and Christian frame.

While Smith drew precedent for the principle of plural marriage from Old Testament accounts of Solomon and David, his nineteenth-century revitalization of the practice in the American heartlands marked the early church as both exotic and, to many, threatening. For many years, Joseph was quiet about the principle, practicing it clandestinely himself and urging his small oligarchic circle of leaders to do the same. It was not until 1843 that he received a revelation from God mandating that plural marriage was a heavenly edict and no man might pass to celestial paradise absent multiple wives (and their combined children). "For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory" (*Doctrine and Covenants* 2018, 132.4). For good measure, Revelation 132 also threatened Emma Smith, Joseph's legal wife, with divine retribution should she fail to support plural marriage. She had resisted earlier attempts to canonize polygamy, threatening Joseph that what was good for the gander was good for the goose, and she would take plural husbands. God's prophetic words to Joseph clearly barred her the option of polyandry. It's worth noting that this same prophecy dissolved the legitimacy of marriages performed by the state or within other faith systems, requiring that all Saints had to be sealed in marriage through temple ceremonies and conveniently exonerating early practitioners of polygamy from charges of adultery if they took otherwise-married women as plural wives. Though fairly recent in historical terms, the hazy workings of disremembering have watercolored away most contemporary Mormons' awareness of their church's polygamous past. The rise of mediated FLDS polygamy—in the form of *Big Love* or *Sister Wives* or other television fare—simply serves as another opportunity for not-knowingness, since TBMS argue these forms of popular culture depict the ideas of wayward apostates, not of true believers.

But, as I have noted, in 2014 social media forced the church's hand about Joseph's polygamous activities, compelling an admission 124 years in the making when the mainstream Mormon Church acknowledged through its website that church founder and prophet Joseph Smith had indeed married up to forty women, ten of whom were teenagers and eleven of the forty already married to other men. While the church had never denied its nineteenth-century polygamist roots, it had also not advertised these connections, preferring to let the faithful and the inquiring public assume that plural marriage rose up with Brigham Young and died out in the 1890s. Indeed, Joseph Smith himself publicly denounced plural marriage and denied his involvement in the practice, writing into the church's *Doctrine and Covenants*, "Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy; we declare that we believe that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in the case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again" (2018, 101.4).

Though any student of history or reader of a particular set of LDS-inspired novels, like for instance Orson Scott Card's romantic fictionalization in *Saints*, would have immediately known of Joseph's many wives, more than one Mormon scholar has been excommunicated from the church for publicly refuting Smith's claims to monogamy.¹¹ Indeed, given the persecution that early Mormons endured and the fact that Mormon cosmogony requires marriage and the propagation of children in order to pass into the highest of its three heavens, polygamy makes sense as a religious and political system. But Joseph Smith's code of sexual relations with plural partners has been hard for the church to manage, particularly since, in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century context, having sex with twenty-one of his wives was fraught with social taboos about pedophilia and polyamory. Many within the church have called Joseph's girls and women "spiritual wives," indicating that Joseph acted benevolently and asexually to secure their eternal fate. Perhaps the more explosive admission on the part of the church, then, was the concession of a strong "possibility of sexual relations" ("Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo" 2014) between Joseph and his (underage or already married) wives, lending a perverse spin to this resolutely heterosexual faith. I might add that the dispersed spermatocidal network between Joseph and his wives was something already fully experienced by a number of generational Mormon families, many of whom could trace their lineage back to the church's founders but could not decisively determine if their patriarch were a great-great-grandmother's legal husband or the prophet Joseph. For example, the blog *Feminist Mormon Housewives* has an ongoing series called

“Remembering the Forgotten Wives of Joseph Smith,” in which commentators write of their own indeterminate bloodlines.

What is perhaps most surprising about the shocking announcement in 2014, then, is that so many people were actually surprised by the news of Joseph and his forty wives. Notes fifth-generation Saint Leslie O. Peterson, when church leaders broke the news, “At first, I was angry. Why the heck have I not known this? These women have become like ghosts in our history, and we don’t teach or talk about their lives” (Dobner 2015). She had been taught about Joseph’s legal wife, Emma, but no others. And while Peterson was less bothered by the disremembering of Joseph’s practice of polygamy, she was troubled by the consequent forgetting of his forty wives. Peterson’s response: paint the women into being through a series of watercolor portraits titled *The Forgotten Wives of Joseph Smith* (figure 6.3). Her act generated international attention, from the *New York Times* to the *Huffington Post*. “I just felt the need to get these women out of the closet and let people hear about them and celebrate them,” said Peterson (Dobner 2015).

As we have seen throughout this book, Peterson is not the only person who invokes the closet metaphor when it comes to things Mormon, and though I resist the use of the idiom of the closet in my discussion about progressive polygamy in chapter 3, here the metaphor seems apt. Peterson does not accept the non-normative erotics in Joseph’s closet, but she does work to dismantle not-knowingness by pointing to the shame and darkness that attend to suppression. Her portraits lend the women character, depth, backstories. Fourteen-year-old Helen Mar Kimball is depicted in pigtails, with tears running down her cheeks. Emma Smith grounds the collection from its center, her dark hair in a long bob like a modern-day Sylvia Plath. Each woman is unsmiling, with red (even lipsticked) mouths. They all make direct eye contact, erasing the distance between their world and ours. *They will not be forgotten—again*.

Yet even in this new moment of openness in which the Church is now willing to acknowledge what it has heretofore denied, what constitutes transparency is negotiable precisely because this history-making admission is extremely hard to find. While media outlets like CNN and NPR reported on the news, the essay itself, named with the decidedly untillating title, “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” cannot be found on the church’s website through obvious search terms like “plural marriage,” “polygamy,” or “Joseph Smith wives” (to arrive at the article through LDS.org, one must input the full title or URL from the home page; a search through the frequently asked questions link does not connect to the essay). An editor for the blog *Mormon*

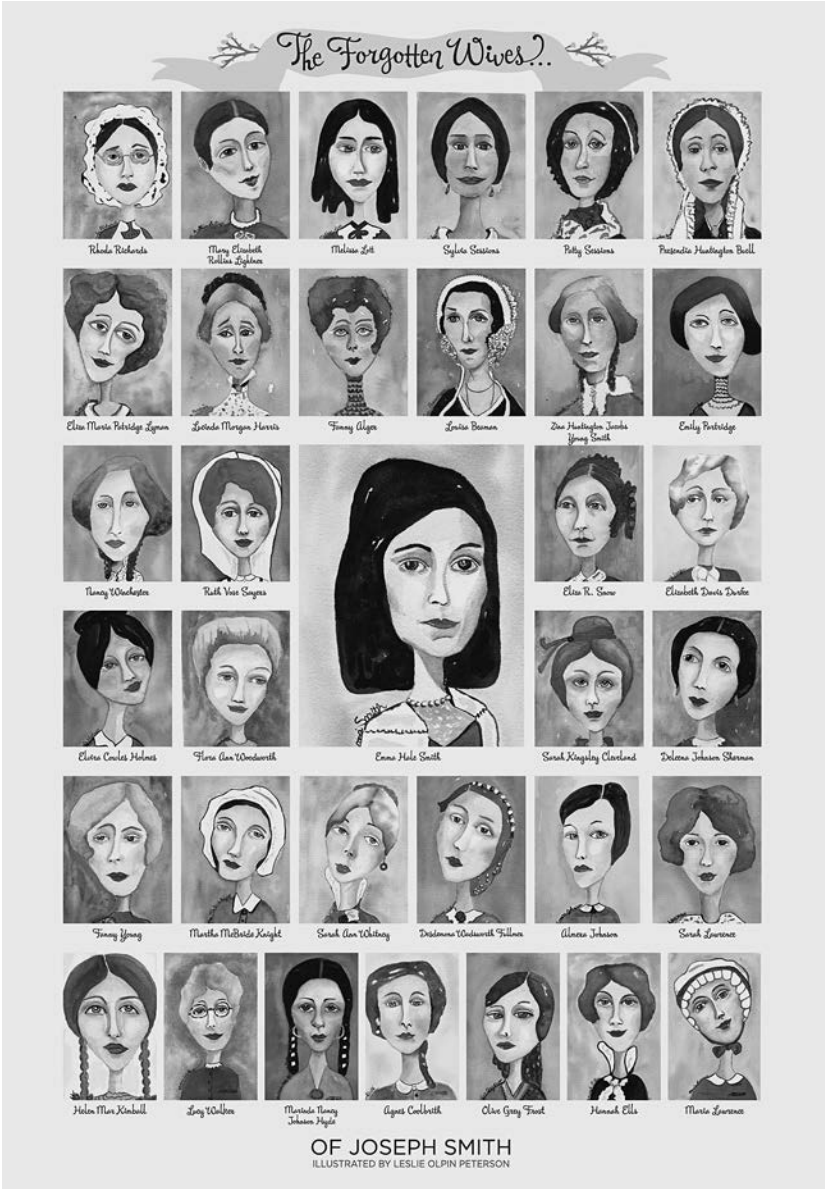


FIG. 6.3 *The Forgotten Wives of Joseph Smith*. Courtesy of Leslie Peterson.

Think observed that the essay was not included in the table of contents for Gospel Topics, which also addresses controversial social issues related to the church such as the ordination of women and the church's historical refusal to grant black men leadership roles. Wondering why the church might make this announcement and then block its availability, the author of the post contends, "The Church doesn't really want all of its members to read the essays. The Church appears to only want members that already know about these issues to read these essays" ("Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo—Response to LDS.org" 2015).

Here we see a moment when knowledge is ostensibly made available to people who inquire, but an undergirding obedience culture has already suppressed open discussion and active inquiry. The hegemonic system asks believers to tacitly agree to a condition of not-knowingness, whereby subjects don't realize what they already know. This situation is made all the more tenuous due to the church's history of arduously guarding information; the church has excommunicated several dozen people for allegations it now openly acknowledges. Not only did early church members like Smith and Young publicly deny polygamy even as they privately lived it, the practice of polygamy functioned as an epistemological rite of passage that marked believers as distinct from Gentiles. Just as to spill the blood of the innocent in the logic of blood atonement might not be murder, to know and profess not-knowingness was a token of identity, not falsehood.

Conclusion: Latter-day Screens

Even while the church has gone public about some previously highly protected elements of its past, it has also worked to demonize media, discrediting it as a viable source of learning and information for its members.

Satan uses media to deceive you by making what is wrong and evil look normal, humorous, or exciting. He tries to mislead you into thinking that breaking God's commandments is acceptable and has no negative consequences for you or others. Do not attend, view, or participate in anything that is vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way. Do not participate in anything that presents immorality or violence as acceptable. Have the courage to walk out of a movie, change your music, or turn off a computer, television, or mobile device if what you see or hear drives away the Spirit. ("Entertainment and Media" 2018)

Seemingly, the delicious irony of this warning about the dangers of media being located on and spread through the church's own public relations campaign is lost on the brethren.

Yet for those who recognize themselves as both LDS and LGBT+, media offer a path to the light. One major consequence of the church's seeming (if not actual) new tolerance of LGBT+ Mormons is that it has taken place amid a larger cultural move toward queer visibility. Support groups have sprouted and begun to grow rapidly in the post-Stonewall United States and the fertile soils of the internet. Mormon LGBT+ youth, adults, and allies now have the growing resources of *Sunstone*, a liberal-leaning magazine that supports the idea of many Mormonisms. Progressive Mormons also have Affirmation, a website and social organizing consortium dedicated to encouraging spirituality and empowering LGBT+/SSA Mormons so that they might "make valuable contributions within and outside of the Church" ("Who We Are" 2015). And while parents whose children are gay may still turn to conversion and extreme behavior modification therapies, many more are joining groups such as Mama Dragons, composed of Mormon mothers on Facebook who are united on behalf of understanding and acceptance for their gay children.

New media and old media alike are thus giving voice to the experiences of LGBT+ Saints, making visible the labor of self-governance and the agony of self-recognition. Marnie Freeman writes in her poignant account of growing up both Mormon and lesbian:

I clung to a guarantee a leader in the church from Salt Lake City had made to our youth group. . . . "If you attend early morning seminary, and fast and pray, I *guarantee* you will grow up and be married in the temple, every single one of you." I believed his promise included me . . . so I worked even harder, but my feelings for girls remained. I assured myself it couldn't be true. I was Marnie Freeman. I loved God. I obeyed the rules of God and the church. I was an obedient child, who took good care of my brothers and sisters, and I was a loyal friend. How could God let me be a homosexual? He wouldn't. I would pray and obey it away. (Freeman 2014, 26)

Freeman's memoir joins that of many other LDS LGBT+ people, who have chosen to go public with their orientation and identity, in defiance of their church's mandate for silence. As Freeman describes her plight, it was either obedience to self or suicide. She chose the former, though not without considerable anguish and serious suicidal ideation. She, like many others, was later X'd by the church not for her homosexuality per se, but for her refusal to

live a closeted celibate life. Just as the camera-loving reality TV Kody Brown family speaks of going public as a matter of principle and equal rights, Freeman broadcasts her public voice as a free woman, choosing fealty to self in defiance of a system that tells her never to stop trying to obey.

But, in the flowing streams of hegemony, honoring one's personal moral convictions is not such an easy task. Even as LDS dogma encourages members to cultivate the self and make principled decisions based on conscience, that same belief system undermines the very terms under which autonomy might be established. Being good, doing right, standing in the light of one's personal truth—all are filtered through a larger church authority that has predetermined the meanings of these positions and mandated obedience. As Johnsen notes about one's affective interiority: "As a Mormon, it's really hard to trust your emotions because your emotions have been so manipulated by what you *should* be feeling" (Dehlin 2015a). Johnsen suggests that the LDS faithful are "used to being guided by people who have answers. . . . The path is clear; the path is straight." And for those like Johnsen who realize the path is anything but straight, the culture of Mormonism creates a "violent atmosphere" of intolerance and communal loathing, all sheathed behind a bright smile of purported friendliness (Dehlin 2015a). Says Fales, "I found it [his court of love] fantastical and barbaric. . . . Mormons excommunicate you with a smile!" (Edwards-Stout 2012).

It is some measure of the threat that twenty-first-century media poses that the church must continually reposition itself and its history across a multiplicity of latter-day screens. In the cluster of platforms that broadcast these stories about sexuality, sexed identity, and the Saints, we also encounter a brave new world of social media, post-network cable, vanity publishing, and blockbusters, working collectively to change the very meanings of publicity and information gatekeeping. So here's the irony: in using media's many platforms to openly defy Mormonism and honor their personal convictions, Freeman, Johnsen, Jones, Pearson, Fales, Jeppson, and a host of brave others actually enact Mormonism's most sacred codes: work hard and suffer, obey one's conscience, share one's truth. They trump Mormonism's mandate by out-Mormoning the church through a gospel of the self. Talk about oxy-Mormonic.