

CONCLUSION

Afterthoughts and Latter Days

In a speech in 1993, [Boyd K. Packer, then an elder in the LDS Church and later the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,] warned that three groups—feminists, homosexuals and intellectuals—posed the greatest threat to the church. In 2010, he condemned same-sex attraction as unnatural and immoral, making him a prominent target of gay rights advocates in Utah and elsewhere. . . .

Mr. Packer also warned against “the disease of profanity,” “bad music,” and substances that “interfere with the delicate feelings of spiritual communication,” namely coffee, tobacco, liquor and drugs. . . .

Mr. Packer will be remembered “for an unyielding resistance to the secular, social world, especially as that world evolved during his lifetime,” Armand L. Mauss, a Mormon scholar and retired professor of sociology and religious studies at Washington State University, told *The Associated Press*.

—David Stout, “Boyd K. Packer, Advocate of Conservative Mormonism, Dies at 90”

Why end this book with an obituary for one of the mainstream Mormon Church’s highest leaders? Am I suggesting that Mormonism is dead—or should be? Is this obituary a nostalgic retelling, a strategic denunciation, or some kind of clever metaphor about the nature of the Mormon Church? None of the above. Instead, it offers a ready portal into the book itself, illustrating the way that gender, sexuality, and media play critical roles in relation to the idea of Mormonism. I hope that the consideration of religion, identity, and mediation I offer in this book has plausibly made the case for how Mormonism reveals something quite intriguing about gender, sexual-

ity, and modern identity as projected upon and dispersed throughout our latter-day screens.

In this book, I invoke many terms—spiritual neoliberalism, the Mormon Glow, not-knowingness, Mormonism as a meme and analytic, toxic femininity—to make an argument that mediated Mormonism fosters a discursive culture that hews more toward the queer left than the heteronormative right. As I acknowledge in the introduction, my claim is less about actual Mormons in the world and whatever their political, racial, and sexual sensibilities might be than about an idea of Mormons fostered across every conceivable sort of screen, from the Cineplex to the iPhone. But just as working in genres of the real—like reality television or celebrity studies—obligates the scholar to engage with people and ideas as simultaneously natural and created, as living, breathing people and as fictional characters, this project has required that I consider both the practices and belief principles of the F/LDS church as well as the many mediated stories that populate the mediascape.

Boyd Packer and his denunciations of the enemies of the church—“feminists, homosexuals, and intellectuals”—demonstrate the conservative mind-set that leads this religion. Yet Packer’s war on liberals and liberalism has become a meme in itself, quoted and requoted, bandied about in the public sphere of social media, published memoir, and, as my epigraph indicates, the nation’s paper of record. As I say none too tongue-in-cheek in this book, feminists, gay people, and intellectuals are a highly educated and literate group to piss off, and much of the primary source material that constitutes the latter-day screens of mediated Mormonism use Packer and others like him as evidence of the shocking inhumanities that orthodoxy espouses. While certainly not all Mormons in the world are conservative or close-minded—and indeed, there is a thriving liberal, pro-feminist, pro-intellectual, and pro-LGBT+ agenda among some members of the mainstream church—the broader register of representation uses the idea of Mormonism to illustrate the wrongs of a larger system. To comment on the conservative right, the liberal left need only import the Mormon.

I have offered many examples of this phenomenon throughout the book, but one particularly interesting illustration comes from spring 2017, on a television show otherwise having nothing at all to do with Mormons, Shonda Rhimes’s *The Catch* (“The Bad Girl”). Much like other Shondaland material, such as *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, *The Catch* follows the eroticized world of the workplace, this time that of a professional detective,

Alice, and her secret love, a professional grifter, Ben. Ben is a member of the Kensington Firm, a fictional London mob run by a brother and sister team, whose murdering and lying ethos is underscored by their polymorphous perversity. Both enjoy sex and a lot of it, and both brother and sister are openly bisexual in their ardor.

All of this sets the scene for what would otherwise be a throwaway moment on the primetime show. Brother Rhys sits on a couch in his posh hotel room, in a white robe, reading a book, a smirk of satisfaction on his face. Beside him sits a woman also in a robe, whom he has just bedded. We know from previous episodes that Rhys has a penchant for sexual role-play with partners in uniform. From the bedroom emerges an African American woman dressed as an EMT, buttoning her shirt and smiling seductively. And then, out of the same bedroom come two young white men in black pants, white short-sleeved dress shirts, and black ties, grinning as they button their pants. The men approach the couch, one kissing the woman and the other kissing Rhys. “Thanks for the book, boys!” says Rhys as he nonchalantly tosses it over his shoulder, the book’s blue cover with gold lettering barely legible for a millisecond as a mockup of the Book of Mormon (see figures C.1–C.3).

“What did I just see?” I ask myself, incredulous, wondering if I have been thinking and writing about Mormonism for so long that I have superimposed something on the screen that was not there. Were the two men emerging from a polyamorous orgy really supposed to be Mormon missionaries? After repeated reviewing, I could not dispute the fact that such was the message of the brief clip. This is a scene in total lasting about forty-five seconds, and so details are sparse. We don’t know if the EMT and the missionaries are playing a part or if they are supposed to be recruits to Rhys’s erotic desires. But in either case, the larger point is securely made: the public understanding of what missionaries look like and what they stand for (virginal, conservative, religious, peripatetic, young, white, sexy) underscores their perfect use as foils to provide a rapid shorthand about Rhys and his sizeable sexual desires. Here the function of the Mormon missionary as meme offers a quick indication about a character. Proving Rhys’s erotic fluidity in the eight seconds the two missionaries are on screen is dependent on the polysemic associations connected to the Mormon missionary and leveraged through the cultural work that Mormonism as a meme performs.

In a more fundamentalist register, the same kind of shorthand is at play. The internet series *Transparent*, for instance, includes an off-the-cuff remark about a diminutive female character in a dominant/submissive lesbian rela-



FIGS. C.1–C.3 ABC’s *The Catch* and eight seconds of Mormons as meme.

tionship. In this brief scene to establish characterological depth, a woman is depicted as the wide-eyed and manipulated castoff of a Mormon polygamy sect, clearly the sexual economy of polygamous fundamentalism standing as a gateway to other forms of non-normative sexuality.

As I have noted, often to talk of and about Mormonism is also to talk about sexed and gendered identity. And this linking of Mormons with sex has been true from the religion's founding. One might wonder, in this age of overt sexuality and open discussions of desire, why we might still be fascinated by what Mormons represent. Are we still in such need of objective correlates that allow us to talk about sex without speaking its name? Perhaps. Clearly, sexuality—or pluralized sexuality and the regulation of both desire and jealousy—is very much at the heart of stories about FLDS polygamy. In turn, the chaste economy of sexuality that attaches to mainstream Mormonism carries its own fascinations. It is a religion committed to resistance of the secular through exacting self-discipline and ethical devotion. It creates a peculiar people who operate in the very heart of the mainstream world.

Indeed, Mormonism provides a glimpse of an old-world organization on the brink of its own evolution. Many forms of media would serve to illustrate this claim, but one memoir in particular indicates the attraction of a church born in the new world whose living prophets might be seen and touched. The same book also indicates the pain of apostasy as well as the sadness and anger of being betrayed by a system that promises, well, everything in this world and the world to come after life is ended. In *Tell It All: The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism. An Autobiography*, Fanny Stenhouse (1875) speaks of the phenomenon of conversion that gripped much of Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Suffering under poor working conditions and stultifying class structures, the British working classes, particularly in the Midlands, Northlands, and Wales as well as Irish peoples in the Republic of Ireland, were drawn to Mormonism for its message of hope and assurances of individual agency and the glories of contemporary prophecy. Mormonism blew a fresh breath, the breezes of the new world, into the dusty registers of millennia-old Christianity, offering a religion for the end of times rich in the powers of the contemporary. Writes Stenhouse of her own conversion, "I was captivated by the picture which [the missionary] drew of the marvelous latter-day work which he affirmed had already begun. The visions of by-gone ages were again vouchsafed to men; angels had visibly descended to earth; God had raised up in a mighty way a Prophet, as of old, to preach the dispensation of the last days; gifts of prophecy, healing, and the working

of miracles were now, as in the days of the Apostles, witnesses to the power of God” (1875, 25).

Mormonism does not require that a believer adhere to the words of a prophet voiced two thousand years in the past; instead, it offers democratic citizens a contemporary voice, one authoritative yet adaptable, in the here and now. Further, it promises that male adherents might themselves hold such prophetic powers, both on earth and in the hereafter. Mormonism tantalizingly holds out the possibility that worthy men might inherit their own kingdoms, become Gods of their own planets, surrounded forever by their (multiple) wives and children in perpetual sealed unity. The heavenly rewards of this Celestial Kingdom require massive sacrifice, the foregoing of food and drink in ritual monthly fasts, abstinence from other food and drink on a daily basis, mandatory tithes and financial contributions, perfect obedience to patriarchal leaders. These mandates are difficult to uphold—purposefully so, since their goal is to forge strength through adversity.

Stenhouse speaks to all of these issues and more, and her voice has not been lost to history. Though her memoir has been given various titles and subtitles and may not be on the tip of the tongue of popular discourse culture, her thoughts on the “tyranny of Mormonism” have been consistently available since their first publication in 1874.¹ Similarly, in 1875, when Ann Eliza Young, one of the many wives of the Mormon Church’s then second president Brigham Young, divorced him, she published a sensational memoir, *Wife No. 19: The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy*. Largely due to the notoriety that attached to her tale, she was able to earn a living on the public lecture circuit, speaking against polygamy and for women’s rights, most of which serves as a backdrop to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century reprints of *Wife No. 19* as well as the novel and television movie reimagining of the story in *The 19th Wife*. For both Stenhouse and Young, Mormonism presents itself as a common foe, allowing for a flourishing of feminist voice and identity as acts of defiance and courage.

Queer and Feminist Frontiers

I leave my reader with one final moment to testify to the way that Mormonism helps shape a collective understanding about social justice, particularly for women and LGBT+ people. In February 2017, Utah politician, LDS elder, and vice chair of the Wasatch County Republican Party James C. Green

wrote a letter to the editor criticizing a new legislative equal pay bill designed to rectify gender-based pay gaps in the workforce.² He argued that men have traditionally earned more than women as a matter of “simple economics,” claiming that “[men] need to make enough to support their families and allow the Mother to remain in the home to raise and nurture the children.” Green contended that legally mandating equal pay for women would necessarily mean that men would be paid less, in turn creating a “vicious cycle” that would create more competition for men’s jobs, “further downward pressure on the pay for all jobs,” and thus more mothers “forced into the workplace. And that is bad for families and thus for all of society.”

While these comments are no doubt unsurprising given the mainstream LDS Church’s now notorious blocking of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, Green’s words struck readers as particularly backward in 2017. A post on the Reddit site *r/exmormon* went up a day after Green’s letter was published, calling public attention to his comments. “This needs to go viral. I have already put out a couple of feelers to reporters,” wrote Fearless Fixer (Bednars_Gay_Son 2017). Reporters clearly were interested. Utah Policy reported the same day that Green’s post had attracted so much negative attention that it had “blown up Facebook” (Schott 2017). A few days later, the national outlets were on the story. Indeed, I first learned of it through a push notification on my phone from the *Washington Post*. By then, only four days after the publication of Green’s letter in two small-town papers, there had already been such a national hue and cry against Green and his thinking on wage equity that he had both apologized and resigned his position with the GOP. The *Post* noted that “Utah Women’s Coalition, which supports SB 210, took to social media with its criticism of Green’s comments. ‘Are we really having this conversation in 2017?’ asked a Facebook post sharing a local story about Green” (Phillips 2017). The Salt Lake City Fox affiliate *KSTU* published a story online, featuring Green’s comments and the ensuing response from Stephanie Pitcher, director of the Utah Women’s Coalition. “His suggestion that we just don’t pay women equally is unlawful,” she said. “It’s against the law by both the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Utah anti-discrimination provisions here in Utah law. Utah has one of the widest pay gaps in the nation, so I think it’s definitely a positive development that our legislators are looking at these issues and trying to find solutions” (Green 2017).³

In featuring this controversy, I do not mean to suggest that Mormonism is behind the times with respect to gender norms and everyone else is progressive. Far from it. Instead, I hope to show how Mormonism so easily lends itself as a cultural screen on which the idea of a religion symbolically negotiates

the meanings of gender justice through media. Whether it is on the cover of popular tabloids, through social media, in the ruminations of pop superstars, as part of a published memoir, or somewhere along the dial of extended cable television, mediated Mormonism largely features stories about individual rights, ethical treatment, and subjects who do not hold conventional forms of moral authority, creating a complex modern milieu where old-world solutions do not apply. As it concerns gender, choice, and agency, these latter-day screens forge the path to possibility, fluidity, and progressivism.