

## EPILOGUE

## Mormons on My Mind, or, Everything I Ever Needed to Know about Hegemony I Learned in Mesa, Arizona

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The West always paralyzes me a little. When I am away from it I remember only the tang on the tongue. But when I come back [I] always feel a little of the fright I felt when I was a child. I always feel afraid of losing something, and I don't in the least know what it is. It's real enough to make a tightness in my chest even now, and when I was little it was even stronger. I never can entirely let myself go with the current; I always fight it just a little, just as people who can't swim fight it when they are dropped into water.

—Willa Cather, *The Selected Letters*

This book no doubt had its genesis way back in the second grade, when I was a winsome, if a bit homely, seven-year-old with a massive crush on Scott Smith, the cutest boy in my class. Indeed, if you had asked me in 1971, the cutest boy in the entire school. Maybe the world. Scott was a swimmer, and he had super shiny blond hair that wrapped in straight waves around his tanned head, like a golden helmet. Even then, he had a big smile, a square chin, a killer sparkle in his slate-blue eyes, and a teasing manner that made its way to my heart and set it flutter when we played girls-chase-the-boys on the playground. One day when I actually caught him, I felt the sizzling energy of first love electrify my entire body.

For his part, Scott played hot and cold with my affections. Sometimes he flirted with me and other times he was far more taken with Amy, the flaxen-haired and ringleted new girl in our class, whom I perceived as my primary

competition in the battle for Scott's heart. By the third grade—a full year after I had tagged Scott and felt the crackle of romantic ardor—I was even more desperately in love, and Amy was still on the scene like over-chewed gum on my sneakers. But then, the death knell.

In February, my parents informed me and my brothers that we'd be moving to a new house in the same town but a different school district, and given how many miles our desert city contained, I wasn't sure that I'd ever see Scott again, the hot, dry streets stretching like a long highway into oblivion. In desperation, I decided to give him a handmade valentine that laid bare my longing. I'm not sure what I wrote on that frothy concoction or really just what I expected from him once he knew of my feelings, but I do remember working very hard into the night on that valentine, coloring and glueing his card together as I watched a documentary about Abraham Lincoln's assassination (Valentine's Day and Presidents' Day always such odd bedfellows).

This story foretells its own ending, since when Scott opened my declaration of love and devotion, he was first surprised and then mockingly amused and a little confused, no doubt because I had managed to write out my love in an awkward iambic pentameter. My hopes were dashed when, after reading the valentine, he threatened to show my handmade creation to the entire class. Amy, who sat next to him, simpered along with the joke, her ringlets bouncing in time with her smirks. I sat in front of them and felt the sticky tendrils of mortification: shamed, panicked, and exposed. As Scott pushed his metal chair back from the desk—a tinny sound I can still recall with absolute clarity—I seized my opportunity, reached back, grabbed the valentine from his hand, and ripped it into indistinguishable pieces of pink and red confetti—the evidence destroyed. Scott was surprised by my quick and even violent reaction, and he voiced the statement that would define more than one relationship as I came of age in Mesa, Arizona. Looking a bit sad (or so I imagined), Scott said to me with resignation, “It never could have worked anyway, Brenda. You're not a Mormon.”

Even at the age of eight, I knew that was a really odd thing for one kid to tell another. Though I had pledged my love in mangled Shakespearean form, my passion knew its limits. I hadn't proposed marriage or a lifetime together, for Pete's sake. And when, a week later, two Mormon missionaries arrived at our house to try—yet again—to convert my family, I felt more freaked out than hopeful that Scott was trying to turn me in order to accept my valentine and ensure our celestial future in eternity (yes, I'm aware of the vampire metaphors).

I only saw Scott in person one time after we moved, three years later when the then first lady, Betty Ford, came to town to dedicate a new civic center, and all of the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and Campfire Girls in town kitted out in motley costumery to show Mrs. Ford our proud patriotic spirit. I was one of the Campfire Girls selected to help raise the flag and then stand in salute as we all said the Pledge of Allegiance. But right as I hooked the flag onto the pole, I caught sight of Scott out of the corner of my eye, and my public patriotism soon gave way to a pounding in my heart and head so palpable that I couldn't even hear the national anthem above my own internal pulse. Squinting into the bright glare of the sun as my eyes traced the flag's ascent into the cerulean blue sky above, I felt this excruciating vulnerability that was equal parts desire and disappointment. Scott seemed more taken with the multiple teams of white-shirted and tie-wearing Mormon missionaries, who were patrolling the celebratory site in search of potential converts. Perhaps Scott had in his mind his own version of desire and dread, as he watched the young missionary he himself would soon become in a few short years, working the crowds in the name of Jesus and Joseph Smith.

Those missionaries in pairs, often on bikes, with their short haircuts, white dress shirts, black neckties, black pants, and laminated name tags with formal names of Elder So-and-So printed on them, were ubiquitous symbols of my childhood. Though I lived in a city that had a large Latter-day Saint population and its own temple, young white Mormon men were still sent to Mesa to try to convert the rest of us. As I discuss in the book, by divine decree (as interpreted through the church's prophets), black men were not called to serve missions until 1978; women were and are eligible to serve missions, but they tend to be rare, and they are still barred from holding priesthood positions in the church. So it really was clean-cut white male teenagers—their still-growing frames, pimpled faces, awkward hands, and bony Adam's apples emerging from inexpensive and too-large suits—who patrolled the streets of my childhood.

Even as a nonmember, the exclusionary privilege that blocked women and people of "African blood" from membership in the LDS Church struck me as colossally unfair, and it was one of the many things that made the culture of Mormonism around me more suspect than desirable. As a junior feminist, I was invested in social justice and equal rights and so was never good conversion material, a knowledge that somehow engendered in me an odd combination of pride and embarrassment. Certainly, Scott knew what he was talking about when he said things would never work between us.

It was pretty hard to walk a neighborhood street in Mesa without seeing missionaries doing their work—we'd meet them coming and going on our way to school or trips to the dusty playgrounds. I always figured the missionary teams in Mesa must have been the borderline boys, those reckless teens who needed to be closer to the master church rather than being cast into the wilds of the Saharas or the streets of Shanghai, where some of my friends from high school were later sent. Doing a mission in Mesa was much like serving in Salt Lake City or Provo—Mormonism was in the earth, the air, the water. We ingested it with our orange creamsicles, limp French fries, and bland macaroni and cheese served in the food court at Kino Junior High. We waded through it in the pools and irrigation canals. We tubed down it on the Salt River in black oily inner tubes that smelled of warm petroleum. Over the years of growing up in Mesa, it became customary to expect a visit from missionaries weekly, either because they stumbled onto our house or because one of our neighbors, or the parents of our friends, or our teachers at school, or my parents' bosses or coworkers sent them over to try again. And again. And again.

It also became customary to turn down, politely refuse, and sometimes outwardly spurn gifts of the Book of Mormon offered by friends at school or my piano teacher or the man who coached one brother's Little League team or the leader of my other brother's Boy Scout troop. One time I was in an eighth-grade algebra class, and the girl in front of me turned around with a huge smile on her face. "Brenda," she said warmly, offering me a beautifully wrapped present, "I want to give you this. And I'd like to invite you to my house next Monday night. Will you take it? Can you come?" No stranger to these sorts of maneuvers, I politely declined. Mondays were Mormon family home evenings, times when families stayed home to commune together, do crafts, play games, engage in Bible and Book of Mormon study and prayer, and eat sweet treats. In truth, I admire that sort of commitment to familial solidarity, but when I was thirteen, being invited to a family home evening was code for a subtle gang conversion. So was being invited to a dance at the stake center or to before-school seminary (religious classes). Yet even though I knew invitations were thinly veiled attempts at conversion, being invited was somehow quite sweet. And alluring. I must have said yes to some of these events, because I distinctly remember standing on the edge of a recreation room at the stake center as Mormon boys asked Mormon girls to dance. Even in the dark, I wore a fluorescent scarlet sign flashing GENTILE (their word for non-Mormons) that made it obvious I was not like them.

In fact, I wasn't even a prime conversion prospect because I was deemed too pushy and opinionated. While I was generally a good girl, sometimes to my own detriment, I had a particular talent for getting into heated religious debates with Mormon kids (and their parents, and their stake leaders, and even visiting Mormon dignitaries). My parents were of the mind that the best way to deal with the proselytizing fever of Mesa was to live and let live in public but to push Presbyterianism with equal fervor at home. The problem with this idea is that Presbyterians as a group are somewhat unextreme. Inheritors of the rational tradition through Calvinism and the Church of Scotland, Presbyterians tend to be orderly and reasonable in all things, and they take great pride in their self-described open-mindedness and rationality, which can often feel stale and emotionally empty. Naturally, then, the right way to deal with Mormons according to Presbyterian doctrine was through reasonable conversation and scholarly debate.

At one point when I was in ninth grade, I actually had a sit-down with a member of the Seventy, the elevated LDS officials who serve as general authorities within the higher orders of the church. Brother Seventy was himself actually close to seventy; I was fourteen. Our conversation mostly centered on the idea that in the LDS cosmogony there are three levels of heaven: celestial, terrestrial, and telestial (much like Dante's Paradise, Purgatory, and Inferno, the celestial level is the highest and most wonderful, the terrestrial a sort of heavenly waiting room, and the telestial no place anyone wants to go). I had also heard what struck me as a weird rumor from my Mormon friends that their dads could inherit their own planet if they made it into the Celestial Kingdom, which required that they marry in the temple and have enough children, tithe regularly to the church, and let themselves be baptized in proxy for the dead. It didn't square for me, even as a young teenager, that a faith allowing for real people on earth to later become Gods could also call themselves Christian under the orthodox view of monotheism that I had been taught. Of course, this was before I began a more studied contemplation of the world's religions and began to realize how deeply complex, and contradictory, most organized faiths can be. And it was long before I gave up on organized religion altogether.

In those talks with Brother Seventy, I was as doctrinaire and unbending as he, pushing my points with equally dogged religious fervor as we both kept circling back to arcane biblical passages to buttress our respective positions. The deck seemed crazily stacked in his favor, and I'm sure nothing I said fazed him. But he did seem oddly unnerved by the fact that I didn't back down. Indeed, in going to verbal holy war with him, I failed to exemplify the perfect obedience and subservience that is expected of girls and women

within Mormon culture. Weirdly, his surprise at my intensity eroded my fire. I was ashamed of myself for being so difficult. Though I wasn't a Mormon, I had already internalized its central mandate for girls: be good, be pure, be docile, be obedient. Let men win. Work to deserve their love and approval. Feel guilty when you express yourself. Of course, these values about gendered ways of being simply mirror a larger cultural investment in how good men and women, boys and girls, ought to behave, but this was yet news to me.

I suppose one of the other things that Mormonism taught me is that I would be punished if I did not conform—not literally, of course, but in the figurative expression of judgment and social shunning that is wounding to human relationships but particularly crushing to a teenage heart. One day, you'd have a best friend; the next day the missionaries would visit; the day after, you were eating lunch by yourself. It was a shocking form of cognitive and emotional dissonance, brutal in its expression. Mormons are not, of course, the only group that uses social belonging and exclusion as part of the establishment of its worldview, but in the Mormon world of Mesa, these forms of affective vanishing were common.<sup>1</sup>

Like many who grow up in these kinds of environments, the only way up was out. So when I was eighteen, I left Mesa and the Mormons for Tucson and the University of Arizona. I dealt with Mormons most of my life primarily by not dealing with them—tucking them away into the oddities of childhood. But childhood shapes everything about a life. And the Mormons have very much influenced mine—both directly and indirectly, both when I lived in their midst and now that I might pick and choose my exposure. Due to how thoroughly Mormonism dominated my coming of age, it is now impossible for me to filter out the Saints when I think about my early life. Mormonism, as both religion and culture, was critical to my experience, both because Mormon kids tended to dominate every activity—sports, student council, band, drama, choir, speech, and debate—but also because my childhood was defined by exclusion. If Joanna Brooks can write a story of her life called *The Book of Mormon Girl*, I could just as easily write a memoir called *The Book of Non-Mormon Girl*, for not-being-a-Mormon-ness saturated every part of my life between the ages of five and eighteen.

#### Seen and Unseen

Joanna Brooks is a good place to expand this reflection since her memoir takes as a given that Mormons are invisible to mainstream American culture, passing among us as regular folk only detectable to each other. “Invisible as

our differences might have been to the non-Mormons we lived among,” remembers Brooks,

we Mormons were never invisible to one another. . . . Even in airports, gas stations, and department stores, we Mormons could spot other Mormons: married people with several children in tow; always modestly dressed, our dresses and shorts to the knees, our shoulders covered, the shadow of the neckline or hemline of our sacred undergarments barely visible through the clothes; our faces soft and pale from the church commitments that kept us indoors most of the weekend; our men clean-shaven and sort of girlish because they were free of vices, and still wearing haircuts short as missionaries’; never a curse word uttered, never a Coke or a coffee or cigarette in hand. Maybe driving a two-toned blue passenger van with bench seats, and always carrying an extra book of scripture: never just the Bible but our Book of Mormon too. (2012, 15–16)

It’s not like those codes were such a big secret. Not in the desert city of Mesa, Arizona, anyway. In Mesa, Mormonism held sway, in all of its smiling, persistent, bland everywhere-ness. And it wasn’t just the missionary teams you’d pass on the street or endless copies of the Book of Mormon that were handed out freely; it was the way ordinary everyday events—a kid’s birthday party, a play date, a field trip—had to be factored through an elaborate set of church-centric calendars, menu restrictions, and do’s and don’ts. No Sunday afternoon events. No before-school meetings. Not if you actually wanted anyone to show up. Mormonism asserted itself in the way that practically any kind of adult clothing you could buy in stores was designed to cover Mormon garments (their holy underwear), and Mormonism showed itself in the way that Mormon kids had so many brothers and sisters that they didn’t need friends. Launette Hunt even had an electric drinking fountain in her backyard for all her brothers and sisters!

Indeed, many of the tells that Brooks identifies are as legible to me as they would be to church members. I may not know all of the words to LDS hymns (though now I can find them online, if I’m so inclined), but much of the treasure trove of mediation that fills this book is absolutely familiar to me from my own childhood. The Brown family with arms folded across their stomachs in prayer on *Sister Wives* or Barb, the first wife on HBO’s *Big Love*, exclaiming, “Oh my heck!” in frustration. Indeed, I was recently at a family wedding in Chicago, and my son’s babysitter (whom we had found through a babysitting app) exclaimed, “Oh my heck!” when my son startled her with

a pig mask he had found in the closet of our Airbnb. In discussion later, I asked if she had grown up in Chicago. She said no. She was from Utah. It was only a hop, skip, and a jump from there to her story of growing up LDS and leaving the church—but its distinctive expressions are still a part of her speech when she's off guard.

When I read Martha Beck's (2006) compelling autobiography *Leaving the Saints*, about growing up Mormon in Utah with a father who was a high-ranking LDS official and also a child abuser, I was floored by how much of her experiences with the rigid patriarchies of "The Church" resonated for me—not because I had also experienced abuse but because I had such a deep recognition and familiarity with the people she described, the cadences of their speech, the coercive power of their smiles. The culture of Mormonism that Beck evokes felt like pages ripped from my own personal history, even though I was never Mormon. Yet I internalized and metabolized more than a little bit of Mormon ideology and injunctions as if the righteous life was something in the fluorinated waters pumped through the dusty desert landscapes and the tract housing of Mesa, Arizona. I never smoke or drank or took drugs; I upheld the law of chastity. I didn't swear; I tried hard to be pure and upright. Indeed, I barely drank caffeine until my late twenties, and I didn't have a beer until I was twenty-eight years old and working on a master's degree in Scotland, much to the dismay and shock of my Irish flat mate, who proudly introduced me to the pleasures of a pint. I lived through the cocaine-addled decade of the eighties swathed in a Mormon-made cocoon that kept me away from sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Safe but wrapped in layer upon layer of latter-day bubble wrap.

Of course, some—maybe even most—of my prudish behaviors and limited forms of experimentation are due to the fact that I was a particularly cautious kid with modestly conservative parents, who encouraged me to be thoughtful, sober, and careful in all of my choices and to stay away from cosmetics, fashion, and boys. But even they were baffled by my righteous (often self-righteous) behavior—in fact, at the age of ten, I scolded my mother when we were waiting in line at the grocery store for reading the headline of a tabloid out loud. The magazine announced Elizabeth Taylor's latest divorce. "Will Liz go to hell?" my mother read aloud with a delighted laugh. "Mother!" I said with indignation. "You shouldn't say that word, ever, but particularly not in public." She could have looked at me like I was a space alien, but instead, she appeared startled and ashamed, as she quietly tucked the tabloid back into its metal cage.

In another visit to the grocery store and another run-in with the tabloids, I stared in judgment at a starlet who had conspicuously gone from brunette



to blonde, her vanity on full display. “I will never dye my hair,” I vowed to myself at the age of eleven, feeling that the color of one’s hair served as a necessary and incontestable key to one’s integrity and honesty. These memories are a bit laughable to me now, given that I’m divorced, I swear, I read tabloids, and I dye my hair. I even have a subscription to *People* and a standing appointment for highlights, damn it. But in those dawning days of individuation, I had swallowed the pure life hook, line, and sinker, and I was committed to being a good girl in the eyes of my parents, in the eyes of my church, and in the eyes of my very Mormon community.

So, there’s a good deal of my own personality that inclined me to invest in the moral razor’s edge inculcated by the LDS Church. But my personality also makes of me a sort of sensitive sponge—I cry when other people cry, feel what others feel, pick up on what’s around me. Those qualities help in writing cultural analyses, but growing up, they made it very hard to know the boundaries of my own ego. Think of it this way—in those emerging days of teenage consciousness, when one’s changing body, relation to self and others, and desires for sexual expression begin to emerge, my sponge-self wordlessly absorbed a strict life of disciplined devotion. My Mormon friends (boys and girls) were being quietly inculcated into a chastity culture. Boys in the Aaronic Priesthood were learning about their “little factories,” the storehouse of sperm in the testicles that had to be protected at all costs.<sup>2</sup> Masturbation was a sin, these boys learned, not just because it spilled the seed but because it led to a dangerous form of self-indulgence and self-pleasure that, according to the slippery slope logic, resulted in the perversion of homosexuality. Girls were taught that their virginity was a flower that, if handled too much (or at all), would become crushed and un-beautiful (though apparently not turning them into lesbians). It’s no wonder that my friends’ strong indoctrination in these codes that demonized sex and sexual expression would trickle into the ether and be absorbed by ever-ready sponges like me, particularly since these codes of chastity were similarly (if not quite so drastically) reinforced by my own faith tradition and gender socialization.

But clearly, I was not the only one confused by (and even suffering from) the cognitive dissonance of it all. Consider Ali Vincent, the first female winner of *The Biggest Loser*. In 2009, Vincent penned a memoir about her weight loss journey. Specific to this story: Vincent was a Mesa Mormon but always felt herself to be unlike the Mormon ideal her community projected. In her words,

I grew up in Mesa, Arizona, in a community with a strict moral code based on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—Mormonism. I can't emphasize enough how important a role the church played in how I felt I was supposed to be and act and what kind of family I thought I was supposed to have. I grew up thinking that you were supposed to have both a mom and dad who raised their kids at home, your mom and dad weren't supposed to drink or smoke, no one was supposed to have sex before marriage, and you were not supposed to associate with anyone who did those things. That's what I learned in Sunday school. (2009, 5–6)

Because Vincent's parents were divorced, her father was Catholic, and her Mormon mother bucked the rules of the church, and because Vincent's weight and own sexual behavior put her outside of the idealized frame of the church, Vincent believed herself a failure. "I wasn't a good Mormon girl" (18). The prescriptive bar is high, and being a Mormon does not ensure that one is a good Mormon. Indeed, part of what I began to metabolize in and through Mesa's Mormon culture was this sense of not-being-enough-ness, of always needing to push more toward self-improvement and success.

Growing up immersed in the Mormon tradition while knowing myself to be outside it accentuated a need to be like Mormons yet to somehow be better than them—like I wanted to beat them at their own game. This compulsion extended to a whole swath of activities that had nothing to do with bodily purity, self-control, or belief and had everything to do with prominence. For me, distinction took the form of achievement, and I drove myself mercilessly to earn As in every class, in every year, on every report card. This kind of pressure did not come without consequences, including teenage insomnia and panic attacks. When I was in high school, my mom came into my room late one night to reassure me that she and my dad would both still love me if I didn't get straight As. As two people committed to moderation in all things, they were startled by my overachieving tendencies. But the fact is, I was competing against my peers, who were primarily a group of Mormon kids coached to lead in every quarter of school life: academics, sports, cheerleading, drama, music, student council. You name it, the Mormons had monopolized every seat of power in the Mesa public schools.

In truth, I held my own OK and I'm not arguing here that losing the lead in the school play or an officer role on the student council was necessarily unfair. They were better than me. My Mormon classmates could rely

on a lifetime of communal coaching and familial encouragement that made their success a foregone conclusion. The imperative to grin in big toothy smiles, exert happy energy, be friendly and play nice, move through the world in an endless wholesome kineticism, and refuse to listen to anyone who doesn't agree with you, and yet to do so in a way that effaces vanity or self-aggrandizement, is a ready template for a prescriptive Americanness grounded in optimism and pluck.

If M. E. Thomas, a Mormon lawyer who penned the memoir *Confessions of a Sociopath*, is right, however, this mask of cheerfulness may also be the breeding ground for pathology, since it glorifies the traits of “interpersonal domination, verbal aggression, and excessive self-esteem” that mark psychopathology (2014, 55). It may also breed, as the cheeky Broadway sensation *The Book of Mormon* suggests, a culture of repression and denial—the cute little Mormon trick of just turning it off. I'm not arguing here that Mormonism is inherently pathologized, but I am suggesting that the relentless code of optimistic do-goodism might itself be a bit suspect. Incessant cheerfulness has its costs, the least of which is the culture of judgment that accrues to people who experience doubt, depression, or anxiety. But even so, perhaps these costs are minimal sometimes in relation to the corrosive tax levied by realism, cynicism, and critical awareness. I readily admit that when I was a college freshman bumbling uncertainly into my own future, fearful about my confusion and my lack of direction, I envied the scripted pathways laid out for my Mormon peers. I wanted to know that cool little Mormon trick, how to turn off the chatter of my monkey brain, how to escape the dark clouds of desolation and uncertainty that would often force their way into my life.

It all reminds me a bit of having finally found myself, well on the road to a PhD. I attended a springtime graduation ceremony for a younger friend who earned a bachelor's degree at Yale. Ivy League self-belief and entitlement wafted through the air that day, its heavy scent empowering to the graduates and stifling to me. The Yale grads breathed in the oxygen of taken-for-grantedness that of course you will achieve, do meaningful work, be great, while I struggled for air. That casual sense of specialness and belief in oneself was something I never experienced in Mesa. Indeed, my high school didn't even have vocational counseling or college preparatory advising for girls, aside from a few advanced placement courses and nominal aptitude tests that said I should be a hairdresser or a librarian. Most of the boys were headed to missions and then Brigham Young University in Provo. Most of the girls would either marry a returning missionary or go to BYU to find a

husband. Who needed more vocational counseling than that? On one occasion when I was actually asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered, "I want to write art reviews for the *New York Times*." Honestly, I might as well have said I wanted to grow snakes from my head, such were the stares of incredulity that met my answer. It was with more than a little satisfaction when doing research for this book that I sat in a theater in London's West End watching *The Book of Mormon*, while scribbling furiously in a notebook and peering eagerly through the binoculars I had hauled to England from the States. "Excuse me," said the woman next to me in a posh accent. "Might I be impertinent and ask if you are reviewing this production for the papers?" In a manner of speaking, yes.

### Mesa: West of Everything

It's no secret that I grew up in Mesa, Arizona. This may not strike you, reader, as such a big deal, but for the longest time I refused to admit I was from Mesa, only obliquely answering questions about where I was raised by saying, "A suburb of Phoenix." Even recently in Bloomington, Indiana, where I live and work, I was introduced to someone who, like me, grew up in Arizona. She was raised in Tucson. When I told her I was from Mesa, she said, "Oh, I'm sorry." The connection to Mormonism was clear. "I took a Mormon to lunch once," she said, "just to see what it was all about." Since I left Mesa, it's been a place for forgetting, not for remembering. And much like Willa Cather's ruminations about the West, I approach this home place with a hesitation that borders on paralysis. But recently, I've begun to realize that Mesa tells a distinctive story not only about my own life but also about Americanness that is born and bred in the West.

Situated seventeen miles southwest of Phoenix, Mesa sits prominently in the Mormon Corridor, or what is sometimes referred to as either the Book of Mormon Belt or the Jell-O Belt (Mormons having acquired the dubious distinction of being an extraordinarily high consumer market for Jell-O). Mesa also has more Mormon-bodied people than any other place in the world. More than Salt Lake City. More than Provo. Of course, many other cities and towns have a higher percentage of Mormons, and Utah wins the distinction of having the highest per capita concentration of Mormons in the U.S. (somewhere around 62 percent), but the thriving and quite large desert city of Mesa is surprisingly loaded with LDS folks (about 381,235 of them, according to the 2010 census). Together with their Mormon brothers and sisters (and their sprawling households of children) in the neighboring

cities of Gilbert and Chandler, this part of the Phoenix metro area wields an amazing power base of LDS ideas and influence.

My parents first moved to Arizona in the late 1960s when I was about three. We were an Air Force family, and my dad was stationed at Williams Air Force Base about twenty miles outside of Mesa. My mom stayed home with the kids until I was nine. The endless hot air and rainless skies made the desert a perfect place for learning to fly, first helicopters and then refueling tankers. Dad later left the Air Force, but rather than moving back to the Midwest where both of my parents were raised, they stayed in Arizona, moving from the base into town when I was around five. From that age until I left for college, I called Mesa home. These days downtown Mesa has experienced a bit of a revival and now boasts a Square Mile of Unique Style that includes a few museums and shops, but when I was growing up there were no nearby movie theaters or museums or malls (Fiesta Mall—what we used to call Festering Mall—didn't open its doors until I had almost graduated from high school). Indeed, there was precious little to do in the long hot days of summer other than to tan at the local swimming pool (crazily, with baby oil and LP record albums wrapped in foil). Every year we would hear cautionary tales about girls who had fallen asleep while sunbathing, never to awaken due to heat stroke, their blood boiling in the cauldron of their bronzed bodies. But it didn't seem to stop us. In 2014, researchers at MIT and UCLA named Mesa "the most conservative American city," a fact reporter Ethan Epstein (2014) found ironic since "it hardly feels like a city at all."

I don't mean to malign Mesa too much. In many ways it was a good place to grow up, with a top-rated public school system and a wholesomeness about it that surely kept a good many Mesa kids out of trouble. Filled with dusty wide streets charted out in even orderly grids that went on forever, Mesa's expansive boulevards are part of my muscle memory. Indeed, I vividly recall standing at stoplights, waiting in the hot desert sun for the green light to signal that pedestrians might cross the street. Because of the relentless sunshine and heat in the Arizona desert, to wait at a stoplight is an endurance contest, made memorable by the intensity of a heat that bores into the skin. It would take nearly a minute to get from one side to the other, the blacktop shimmering under my feet. I had always thought Mesa's wide streets (and thus long wait for stoplights) were a function of being in the Wild West—leaving room for wagon trains to turn and all that. I discovered in writing this book that those wide streets are due to the fact that the First Mesa Company, the Anglo group of Mormon founding fathers who established the city, based the city plan on Joseph Smith's perfect city.

Crossing Stapley and Brown, I was already treading through Joseph Smith's imagination.

At 133.13 square miles in size and splayed across the top of the Sonoran desert, Mesa epitomizes the meaning of hot suburban sprawl. For a town of its size (roughly the population of Atlanta or Cleveland), the Mesa of my childhood was depressingly empty. All that vast expanse of land meant to me as a kid was that it took hours to get anywhere. Even unimpeded by traffic, we could easily expend two hours driving from one edge of the city to the other. In the summer when temperatures hovered around 110 degrees, those trips were as much about enduring the sun's relentless rays as about actually going anywhere. I carry the markings of those interminably sunny drives on my skin to this day, sun spots emerging with age, brown patches and freckles sprinkled liberally across my face, arms, and back, vestiges of a relationship to the sun before SPFs and warnings of a diminishing ozone layer, the sun's tattoo on my skin that says I grew up west of the Rio Grande and south of the Colorado.

Two things typified the Mesa of the 1970s and 1980s: Mormons and winter visitors or snowbirds, as they were often called. With its mild winters and more-than-mild city life, Mesa was the perfect habitat for both LDS and old folks, and often on the long drive to the one Dairy Queen in town, we'd encounter both of Mesa's major demographics, Mormons (with their large families buckled into Chevy Suburbans) and retirees (with their white heads just topping the steering wheels of their gigantic Cadillacs or LeBarons). Getting to Dairy Queen involved going down Apache Junction Boulevard, which turned into Main Street. The Dairy Queen in those days was a drive-in where you had to eat your ice cream outside. Since the DQ parking lot was positioned directly beside the white Grecian edifice of the towering Mormon Temple, for the longest time I connected the cold refreshing sweetness of soft serve with the white coolness of the temple's stones, an impression that was only intensified by the large reflection pool in the temple gardens. Just thinking of the temple brought a welcome cool relief from the blistering desert sun. But it was also baffling to me as a child to see people—all dressed in white—standing outside the private back doors of the temple, dripping with water. Perhaps, I reasoned, there is a swimming pool in there. Or they have to take showers—in their clothes. It was more than my eight-year-old brain could comprehend that those smiling damp white-clad white people—my piano teacher, Mrs. Mortensen, or my neighbor Mr. Osbourne—were participating in ritual baptisms, offering their bodies as proxies for the dead sometimes up to forty times in a day. Those wet white-wearing folks I saw at

the temple's back doors were taking a break from their proxy service, drying out in the desert's bright sunshine.

Because of that temple, which was completed in 1927, the seventh of the presently 141 worldwide temples built by LDS Church, Mesa in many ways serves as both a pilgrimage destination and a religious battle zone. When I lived in Mesa, the temple was this gigantic thing, an unmissable enormous white shimmering edifice in an otherwise unremarkable light-brown expanse where tumbleweeds literally blew across the streets. Unlike the Salt Lake City Temple with its steep gothic spires and glowing golden angel trumpeting the new dawn, the Mesa Temple is square and flat, more like a large white box with columns or the federal Treasury Building. In its mass, the temple took up a full city block and was positioned directly across the street from Pioneer Park where my brothers and I often played on the hot slides and swings, or more often taught each other the curse words etched into the undersides of the park's railroad cars. Surrounded by an armada of palm trees, both freakishly and oddly dwarfed, like a coxcombed jester in the furry fronds of a hulu skirt, the temple rose like an exotic mirage from the desert floor. This surreal impression was only exaggerated at Christmas when the elaborate light display festooned across the palm trees and cactuses on the temple's ground and reflected back to itself in a large still pool made the entire display appear not unlike Disneyland (figure E.1). I say this with admiration more than critique: like most kids in suburbia (and like most Mormons), I had a great fondness for Disney. A trip to "Disney California" was a promise of mystique, magicality, and verve, open to me for the (steep) price of a ticket. Getting into the Mesa Temple, however, cost a fee I could never quite muster, its magical kingdom always outside my experience.

We—the nonbelievers—were not allowed inside the building, only on the temple grounds or in the visitors' center, where an enormous white marble statue of Jesus stands ready to greet those who inquire within. But restricted access is also the case for Mormons, who must first be baptized in the faith (which typically happens at age eight) and then receive a temple recommend before they can go inside. If you are an active LDS member who defies the church—or even appears to go against its teachings—the first act in retaliation or punishment will be to deny you access to attend the marriage sealing ceremonies of your sister or best friend, since these activities occur in the temple. And these ceremonies are themselves highly secretive affairs, in which a man and a woman are fused to one another through all eternity. The logic of sealing is complicated, and I remember doing a lot of permutations in my head as I tried to sort out whether it is at all desirable to be sealed to



FIG. E.1 The Mesa Temple, ready for Christmas.

the same group of people in an endless afterlife. Or what do you do with the circumstances of modern living like divorce? Or whose family do you belong to most? These things become a bit trickier, too, when the ghosts of polygamy are thrown in.

Those who are sealed in the temple learn a special language, a Priesthood handshake (also called the patriarchal grip), and undergo a process called “going through the veil,” all of which are meant to equip the couple for their eternal life on the other side. Temples are not places where Mormons go to church but sacred spaces where Mormons do a special kind of ceremonial worship that is hinted about but rarely discussed. This subtext, the other life that only some may know, was a consistent theme in my childhood, and I often felt that there were ghostly specters dashing just outside my line of vision, there for a split second and then gone with no proof of existence—perhaps the faint smell of sulfur.

I have stepped into the private spaces of a Mormon temple twice, once in Mesa, in 1975, and the second time forty years later in Carmel, Indiana, in 2015. It is a common practice for all new and newly renovated Mormon temples to be fully open, so that the public might view the sacred spaces within the building, a privilege available only by appointment. After a period of two to three weeks, the temple is consecrated and made both sacred



and secret, so that only Saints who are temple worthy might enter and engage in the secret ceremonies that take place inside. I'd like to say that my experience of being inside the Mesa Temple was all rather awe-inspiring, but what I mostly remember from my eleven-year-old exposure to the inner sanctum were many small rooms and very plush light carpeting, which to me seemed somewhat odd in a holy place of worship. Perhaps I had in mind the elaborate mosaic tiles that line the floors of the world's great Catholic cathedrals, like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome or St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, though I had only seen these places in books at that point in my life, and Catholicism was far more exotic and mysterious to me than these fiercely private Mormons and their exalted church structures. In preparation for this book, I drove ninety minutes north of my college town in Bloomington, Indiana, to a new Mormon temple in the tony Indianapolis suburb of Carmel. The opportunity to gaze, again, on carpets and couches, on the golden rams that hold up the baptismal pool, allowed me to meet my eleven-year-old self through the various rooms of this most holy of holy places. As before, I was struck by how not-cathedralesque the space felt. Indeed, in art and ambience, the temple felt like the equivalent of an elaborate McMansion or a three-star hotel, which in some ways is altogether fitting given that the Marriott hotel chain is owed by a Mormon.

At the Indianapolis Temple, I was struck by two things: how many extremely expensive cars were in the parking lot and how much the smiling volunteer tour guides reinforced the greatest dividend of Mormonism, forever families. It is clear all of the volunteers had been coached to push the concept of family sealings as a central element of Mormonism distinguishing it from other religions. At the end of the tour, I was invited to take a souvenir photo. Standing in line, I watched families with massive quantities of children squeeze into the camera frame before me. One dad, one mom, and eight children. Or ten. Or twelve! When my turn came, I sat down alone in front of the camera, the new temple my backdrop. "Oh my heavens," said the woman taking my picture. "You poor thing! Are you all by yourself?" The picture shows all too clearly my mixed reaction of bemusement and alienation (figure E.2).

In the Mesa of my childhood, the temple was mostly a big building in an otherwise obscure desert city, and it had little draw or appeal to those not doing business within it—except at Easter. In the spring everything changed; or at least, things got a bit more interesting because in the week before Easter every year, the Mesa Mormons would host an elaborate pageant that in-



FIG. E.2 Bemusement and alienation. Photograph courtesy of the author.

volved upward of nine hundred people in its cast and crew. It was a veritable extravaganza of sight and sound. Now remember, Mesa had precious little else to offer in the way of live entertainment or community events. So the Easter pageant was the go-to social event of the year that was rivaled as a place to see and be seen (at least as a teenager) only by cruising Main Street every Saturday night. Nowadays, the organizers of the pageant duly note that its purpose is to “invite the spirit to testify to cast and audience members of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, the promised blessings of the Atonement, and the restoration of the fullness of His Gospel to the earth” (“Code of Conduct” 2013). But in the 1980s and ’90s, the pageant was also a veritable religious revival, where believers of every stripe and denomination flocked to convert the picnickers arrayed on blankets, their elbows chapped by the dry brown flakes that pass for grass in the Southwest. The Easter pageant served as a polyglossic religious attraction that pulled religious fervor to it like iron shavings to a magnet. It was on the Mormon temple grounds that I met my first Hare Krishna (bused in from California), and it was before an Easter pageant that I received my first evangelical cartoon booklet from a Phoenix fundamentalist, who told me I was no kind of Christian and would go to hell unless I quickly gave up my seat, renounced my secular ways, and

was born again into his church. Their extremism made the mild-mannered Mormon missionary patter that I had grown used to somewhat sweet and adorable. I'll say this for the Mormons—they can be relentless and secretive, but they are invariably nice.<sup>3</sup>

#### Said and Unsaid

I grew up non-Mormon in a Mormon world, and given that most of my information came from kids like me, it's not surprising that much of my knowledge about the practices and beliefs of Mormonism was cloudy. There was some talk about special underwear, or garments, but I never really saw them. Did they really wear such long hot scratchy underwear all the time? Even in Arizona's incredibly hot summers? Even when mowing the lawn? Either those wearing these abbreviated long johns took them off before they went to public pools and dressing rooms, or Mormons had their own private swimming areas and gyms, because I never bore witness to garments. But other things were too obvious to be missed—houses filled with children, and yet whole bedrooms reserved as larders, with upward of two years of supplies lying in wait just in case—of what I was not sure . . . the end of times? A run on cereal and canned beans? Nuclear fallout? Given the LDS relation to Armageddon, commercialism, and atomic bomb sites, any of those three options are distinct possibilities.

And then there were sort of in-between levels of knowledge. For instance, in the context of a people pledged to bodily purity through the wow (Word of Wisdom), which required no drugs, smoking, caffeine, or premarital sex, I would often see kids behind my high school—those called Jack Mormons—who smoked cigarettes and drank Cokes at lunch. Even the quarterback of the football team would attend afternoon classes with bloodshot eyes and a demeanor that suggested pot smoking during school rather than other red-eye-inducing activities, like swimming or being caught in an Arizona dust storm. We were supposedly in a culture of chastity, where young Mormon teens pledged their sexual purity until marriage. Yet when I graduated from high school, I was amazed at the commencement ceremony to see at least a dozen Mormon girls march past me with extended pregnant bellies. Somehow they had all gotten a message that I didn't quite receive: yes, the faith mandated a set of severe behavioral codes and limits, but you didn't really have to follow them all that carefully. Not when you were a teenager. Unless you didn't know this. And so, like me and my cohort of overachieving nonbelieving friends, you followed the rules without being in the club. My

friend Daniel, an über-successful, gay lawyer who now lives in San Francisco, still can't swear. The last time I was in the Bay Area, we had a reunion over lunch, and when he stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk, he yelled loudly, "Flip!" I laughed out loud. "Did you really just say 'flip'?" I asked him, teasing. "You're fifty. You can say 'fuck' if you want to." He looked at me in equal parts amusement and shame. "It's those g-d Mormons. They stole the swear from me when we were growing up."

There were other stories never told at all. I did not know about blood atonements or secret handshakes. I didn't know there were special healing ceremonies or bunkers built into the hills of Utah that housed the names of everyone who had been baptized into the church (whether by choice or by proxy). I didn't know that the LDS Church was so antigay that they regularized realignment treatments that included aversion therapies and electroshock therapy. I didn't know that Brigham Young taught LDS believers that black skin was a sign of sin, though it was painfully clear how very white the Mormon world could be. And I didn't know until reading message boards for *Big Love* about MMPS—or multiple mortal probations—essentially the idea of reincarnation from person to person (rather than through animals or plants), that is, that the physicality of the founding prophet Joseph Smith might be fully embodied and emboldened in our own present day. Indeed, although my early experience of Mormonism did not come to me through mediated accounts, it has been media that have provided the context and specificity that allow my memories to make sense to me now.

My childhood friends also never told me that Joseph Smith and the early Mormons practiced and promoted polygamy, or more accurately polygyny, the marriage of two or more women to one man. But then, given how easily even the largest of experiences can be rubbed out through the sands of history, I'm not sure they knew much about their own polygamous roots. Now, even as a child, I had some idea what the "fullness of exaltation" meant in the Mormon lexicon, because I could see evidence of it all around me in Suburbans bursting to overflowing with children. So having a lot of kids was clearly critical to the Mormon mandate. But I didn't realize that the "fullness of exaltation" was a euphemism for what it took to get into the Celestial Kingdom, the highest level of Mormon heaven, where a man (and only a man) can inherit his own world, and he achieves this promotion through the number of wives with whom he is sealed, the number of children he begets, the number of people he baptizes for the dead, and other good works and proper ways of living. Also, because Mormons believe there are a finite number of premortal souls waiting for bodies and once those souls have been assigned bodies the

end of times is nigh, the more children one has, the sooner Christ will come again. So, in this context, more children literally brings the end of the world. Although Arizona's Colorado City is home to one of the largest and most notorious FLDS settlements, polygamous patriarchs and their plural wives weren't really on my radar growing up. The Mormons around us in Mesa were primarily jolly, super-straight, friendly folk, who made their own root beer and formed family bands with one mom, one dad, and up to seventeen children. Part of their banter: "Mother's name is Joyce. We ran out of names, so our youngest daughter is Rejoice!" I never suspected the aunts who lived with these large families might actually have been sister wives.

### Mormons on My Mind

Mormons are very nice people, sometimes excruciatingly so. They are wholesome, family oriented, and devout, and demographic records indicate that where the concentration of Mormons is the highest, crime rates are the lowest (and pornography consumption the highest). They make good neighbors and decent acquaintances—but only to a point. If you aren't a Mormon, you are always at the top of the list for being turned into one, meaning that missionaries (or their many helpful advisors) watch you moving around your own town like birds of prey eyeing carrion. After a while, you get used to that. What's oddest, and at times most painful, is that try as you might, when you're a non-Mormon growing up in a Mormon world, you never fit, are never fully accepted, can never do things particularly right, and there is always a subtle and wholly unspoken disconnect between what people say and what they do.

In November 2012, I returned to Mesa, to its wide dusty streets and its big open skies, to attend my thirty-year high school reunion and to revisit places rich with personal history, places that I had for most of my life spurned and avoided. Top of the list for that visit was the Mesa Temple. I took both my mother and my almost three-year-old son with me, thinking they would legitimate me somehow, the feminist always suspicious in her resistance to the temporalities of convention and families. My son Jakey was immediately amazed by the thirty-foot white marble statue of Jesus that stands at the entrance to the visitors' center, calling him Cheezus and begging to touch his foot (seriously!) (see figure E.3). After feeling his stone-cold toes, Jakey and my mom strolled outside to gaze into the reflection pool. I poked around inside, noting the gigantic pile of dark blue books stacked to resemble a pyramid in one central room (figure E.4). These were various translations of

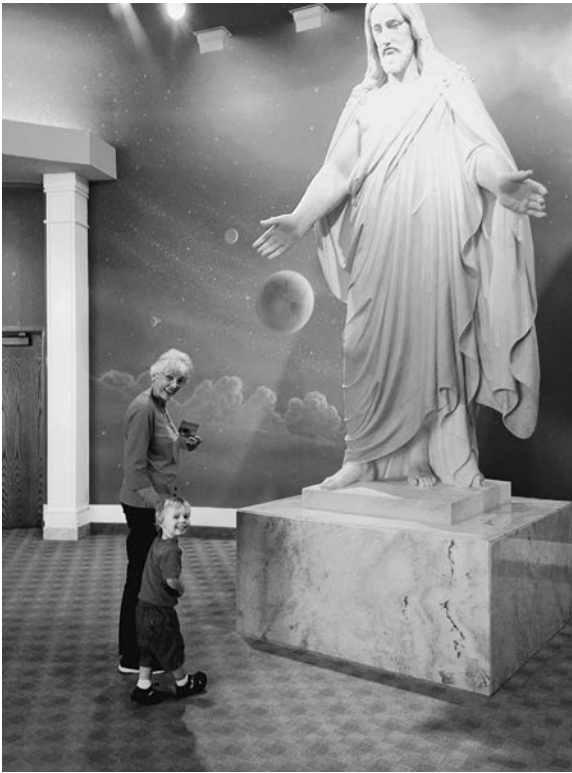


FIG. E.3 At the feet of Cheezus. Photograph courtesy of the author.

the Book of Mormon, testifying to the colonializing sweep and international popularity of the faith.

As in most LDS temples, a lovely young woman approached, asking if she could answer questions (and lead me to eternal salvation). I was more friendly to these questions than I have ever been before, which, I'm sure, puzzled her, since my level of openness, curiosity, and pleasantness would have been more conventionally expressed by someone who was already a good Mormon, and thus in the actual temple rather than its visitors' center. I asked her a few questions about herself, her background, and so on. She asked me a doozy in return. Looking puzzled, she scanned my forty-something face as she gestured toward my toddler. "Who is that boy's mother?" When I told her I was, she looked incredulous. "Is he your youngest?" she asked. "He is my only child," I answered. For her, it absolutely did not compute that I could look as I did and be a mother of a two-year-old. A

FIG. E.4 The tower of Babel, Mormon style. Photograph courtesy of the author.



grandmother most assuredly. But a Mormon-friendly forty-eight-year-old mother was an oddity too rare to be believed.

The surreality of it all became even more pronounced when at the reunion event itself, many of my former classmates spoke of children in their thirties, of nineteen-year-old grandsons soon departing for their missions, of having birthed children in duplicate and triplicate. They gushed over my books, told me how smart I was, congratulated me on making something of myself. A former cheerleader, who had never given me the time of day in high school, awarded me a keychain as the prize for being most photogenic. Yet no one took my picture. (So how did they know if I was photogenic or not?) They tsk-tsked about our missing classmate and their fellow Mormon, Tim, who had once been so handsome and full of life, now in the grips of a horrible depression. “He’s not himself anymore,” they said with bright smiles on their faces. “But you’re doing great!” It all made me feel unbearably sad.

Amid all those smiles, I knew I had broken some kind of covenant. I knew it as clearly as I knew that ordering a vodka and cranberry at a social event primarily attended by Mormons would send more than a subtle message. Except that they all thought I was just drinking red juice—my subtle sign of resistance converted to a gesture of sameness. And this is how it goes. Somehow despite yourself, you end up playing a game whose rules most people seem to know but you can't quite make out—like being at a loud party where you aren't fully hearing what people are saying, but you nod in agreement anyway. It creates a cognitive dissonance that isn't quite a recipe for insanity, but it's not too far removed from it either.

The most formative years of my development were marked by this muffled relation to acceptance and authority, desires for belonging, and implicit sense of alienation. I suppose in many respects, that's why I'm now interested in the ambivalent presence of Mormons in mainstream media, since these subterranean currents create powerful eddies about status and identity. In my youth, this separation between being and belonging was profoundly confusing and painful. In the broader culture, Mormonism and the followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are often considered a fringe religion and people. For me, Mormons and their codes of behavior and faith were a dominant force that permeated every major experience of my early life. But the point of this book isn't about me—or really, when you get down to it, about Mormons as people. The point of this book is about identity and ideas and how the two are often fused in ways that illustrate the workings of hegemony, the consolidation of gendered ways of being, and the saturation of media, in this case through the meme and analytic that is Mormonism.



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## NOTES

### PAST AS PROLOGUE

1. In 1852, Brigham Young spoke to the meaning of the Adam/God theory: “When our father Adam came into the garden of Eden, he came into it with a celestial body, and brought Eve, one of his wives, with him. He helped to make and organize this world. He is MICHAEL, the Archangel, the ANCIENT OF DAYS! about whom holy men have written and spoken—He is our FATHER and our GOD, and the only God with whom WE have to do. Every man upon the earth, professing Christians or non-professing, must hear it, and will know it sooner or later” (Young, “Mysteries,” April 9, 1852).

2. Throughout this book, I discuss the notion of forever families, or the idea that spouses and family members might be sealed to one another for all eternity. Indeed, “forever family” could well be a trademarked brand of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the concept is often used as one of the primary draws for investigators who are considering conversion. Yet mediated Mormonism plays fast and loose with just what is involved in the forever family, particularly its ties to polygamy. For instance, *Charly* (Weyland 1980) is a hugely famous young adult novel that was made into an equally popular film, *Jack Weyland’s Charly* (2002). Both narratives feature a love story between a non-LDS woman with a sexual past, Charly, and a devout, virginal LDS man, Sam. She converts, they marry, and after the birth of their son, she develops cancer and dies. Both novel and film are sad, but both play on the idea of forever families as a salve against the pain of Charly’s death. Yet because eternal sealings require temple recommends and these, in turn, require that both partners be “pure,” it would not be possible for this particular couple to be married in the temple and thus be sealed into a forever family. They could, however, marry legally, wait a year, and then be sealed, but this interrupts the temporal alacrity of her cancerous end. The movie makes much of the never-ending monogamous love story between Charly and Sam, even ending with words on the screen, “This is NOT the end.” In the book, eternal marriage is also critical. However, Charly encourages her husband, Sam,

to find another wife, being sure to pick someone she will like since they will all live together in the afterlife.

3. Ancestry's brands include Ancestry, AncestryDNA, AncestryHealth, Ancestry-ProGenealogists, Archives.com, Family Tree Maker, Find a Grave, Fold3, Newspapers.com, Rootsweb, AncestryAcademy, and AncestryInstitution. Under its subsidiaries, Ancestry.com operates foreign sites that provide access to services and records specific to other countries in the languages of those countries. These include Australia, Canada, China, Japan, Brazil, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and several other countries in Europe and Asia (covered by Ancestry Information Operations Company). See Ancestry.com on Wikiwand (<http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ancestry.com>). As one case in point, my university library just bought an institutional subscription to Ancestry.com for research use.

#### INTRODUCTION

The quote in the title of this chapter is by Brigham Young, in J. Turner (2012, 301).

1. Kody and Meri Brown legally divorced in 2015, so that Kody might legally marry his fourth wife, Robyn, and thus be eligible to adopt her children from another husband.

2. Utah lost another reality polygamist family in 2018, when the Alldredge family of *Seeking Sister Wife* left for South Dakota, thus increasing the theme of persecuted non-normative families on the run to more welcoming places.

3. In the feature film *Brigham Young* (1940), one of Hollywood's retellings of this exodus, Mormons vacate Nauvoo—much like the Browns—under cover of a single night.

4. Las Vegas—famous as sin city for its legalized prostitution and gambling—is a present-day Mormon stronghold highly populated with both mainstream and fundamentalist peoples. Las Vegas is also a ready symbol for the early church's colonizing fervor. Under Brigham Young's direction, a team of fifty-five missionaries built and occupied a fort in Las Vegas in 1855, becoming the first occupants of European descent to live in the area. Although they abandoned the fort due to the Utah War (1857–58), in which the U.S. government engaged in armed conflict with the settlers of Utah Territory (largely over public polygamy), the National Park Service still calls the Old Mormon Fort “the birthplace of Las Vegas,” reinforcing the settler colonialism and white supremacy that effaces the complex history of indigenous peoples such as the Paiutes, who had been living in and near Las Vegas for nearly 1,200 years (“The Old Mormon Fort” 2017). In Season 9, which began airing in January 2019, the Brown family moves to Flagstaff, Arizona. In contrast to the move from Utah to Nevada, this move is depicted not so much as a response to persecution but as a test of Kody's patriarchal authority.

5. In 2016, a three-judge panel of the Tenth Circuit effectively reversed the 2011 ruling, arguing that it was very unlikely the Brown family would have been prosecuted for bigamy absent other charges such as child bigamy, fraud, or abuse.

6. One good place to see such a sliding hermeneutic about Mormons and sexuality is in the 1969 feature-film musical *Paint Your Wagon*. Based on a Broadway musical of the same name, the film took off in a new direction from the Broadway original to offer a more detailed picture of life in a California mining town called No Name City, where bourgeois conventions do not exist. When a polygamist Mormon comes through town with two wives, the miners persuade him to sell one. Elizabeth agrees to be sold, reasoning it can't be worse than her present living experience. She is sold to and then marries Ben, and this relation sets up the possibility that the film might introduce an intriguing subplot, whereby the former Mormon wife might fall in love with yet another man, Pardner, while still wishing to be married to Ben. The reasoning here: she had been a sister wife, why couldn't they be brother husbands? Ben and Pardner think it over and can come up with no reason to decline. For most of the film, Elizabeth, Ben, and Pardner create a home and family together. And though, by the film's end, the polygamous threesome becomes a monogamous twosome, this deviation (and perhaps deviance) allows for a delicious recasting of sexual economies courtesy of the Mormons.

7. A few examples from mediated Mormonism: The Lifetime movie *Outlaw Prophet: Warren Jeffs* contains a scene of Jeffs smiling as he looks into a mirror. "I'm more famous than bin Laden," he intones with satisfaction when they both are on the FBI's ten most-wanted list, a historical truth that occurred in 2006. In the memoir *Breaking Free*, Rachel Jeffs (daughter of Warren) notes the isolation she and others experienced on the FLDS compound, reflecting on the 9/11 terrorist attack: "Years later, when I saw documentaries about bin Laden, the man's ability to brainwash his people to do his bidding reminded me very much of Father" (Jeffs 2017, 167). And scores of media use bin Laden as a reference point for Jeffs, each standing in as a symbol of evil and depravity. Writes the *Los Angeles Times* about the documentary *Prophet's Prey*: "At one point, we see the FBI most-wanted poster that first included Jeffs, his gaunt, deceptively meek-looking mug at No. 2 next to Osama bin Laden. *Prophet's Prey* is a sobering reminder that tyrannical monsters who hide behind religion can be home-grown too" (Abele 2015). More general comparisons between Mormons and Muslims can be found in many media forms, including Scott Carrier's (2011) *Prisoner of Zion: Muslims, Mormons, and Other Misadventures*; Dennis Kirkland's (2008) *Mormons and Muslims: A Case of Matching Fingerprints*; Avraham Azrieli's (2012) *The Mormon Candidate*; and Robert Robinson's (2017) *Muslim Mormon Koran*.

8. For a fictional accounting of Mormons on the front lines of gender-related matters, see Mette Ivie Harrison's (2014, 2016, 2017) Linda Walheim mysteries—*The Bishop's Wife*, *His Right Hand*, *For Time and All Eternities*—a series of murder novels that also consider Mormonism's precarious relation to domestic abuse, homosexuality, transgender identity, female authority, and polygamy.

9. Dr. King used this statement about the nature of justice in a baccalaureate sermon given during the commencement exercises at Wesleyan University in 1964. His printed version of the sermon puts the sentence in quotation marks, indicating that he attributed provenance to an earlier source. Its actual first use is not fully known, but

most scholars believe the statement initially appeared in a sermon given by Theodore Parker (1853).

10. “The dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new), and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals” (Packer 1993). In this book, I use LGBT+ to indicate the broadest extension of identity amassed under the gay pride rainbow: LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transitioning, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally).

11. Romney’s political career and two runs at the U.S. presidency have created their own niche of mediated Mormonism, including a memoir, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness* (2010), and *Mitt* (Whitely 2014), a feature-length documentary. Mitt Romney’s wife, Ann Romney, has also authored *The Romney Family Table: Sharing Home-Cooked Recipes and Favorite Traditions* (2013), the memoir *In This Together: My Story* (2015), and an inspirational self-help book: *Whatever You Choose to Be: 8 Tips for the Road Ahead* (2015).

12. The website Famous Mormons makes this case empirically with respect to the mainstream LDS Church, offering a comprehensive list of famous Mormons (like Mitt Romney) and recognizable Mormon cultural producers (like Stephenie Meyer) that numbers in the thousands and ranges from government to entertainment to sports to business professionals. While the website is a good resource for determining which reality TV participant is LDS, it pointedly does not include Mormon-themed media that are either controversial (such as the many Jodi Arias exposés) or fundamentalist (such as *Sister Wives* or *Big Love*).

13. Indeed, as described by Zoe Chase (2018) in her *This American Life* feature, Flake could well be one of the plucky missionary characters designed by Matt Stone and Trey Parker and starring in *The Book of Mormon* musical: “How do I describe Jeff Flake?” she asks. “Suit and tie, clasped hands, earnestly looking at me on his office couch. I mean, he’s a senator. He’s deeply earnest to the point where he’s kind of dorky. He’s a Mormon. He’s super disciplined. He often goes to the gym twice a day. He has this way of being more hopeful than it seems like he should.”

14. In a similar vein, Jeff Benedict’s (2007) *The Mormon Way of Doing Business* argues both tacitly and overtly that the religious and cultural principles of Mormons directly aid their success in the business world. In a survey of nine LDS men who are also CEOs or the founders of major companies like JetBlue or American Express, Benedict contends that the work ethic, devotion to righteousness, discipline, and commitment to equality led these men to “naturally” flourish. Not incidental, according to Benedict, is the fact that each of the men had ancestors who survived the crossing of the American plains in the mid-nineteenth century. Benedict does not include women in his survey, underscoring the hegemonic gender roles that are so much a part of the ethos and mythos of Mormonism.

15. The mainstream LDS Church partnered with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) in 1903, believing that their common ideals of God, country, and masculinity were in tandem. In 2018, the church formally severed that partnership, after the BSA became instead Scouts BSA (meaning girls and transgender scouts were welcome). The Scouts

also welcomed those who were lesbian and gay, which further led to the church's move for separation.

16. In the mystery novel *The Mormon Candidate*, Avraham Azrieli (2012, 288) puts this same sentiment about the potentiality for change in Mormon doctrine in different words: "We know our fellow Mormons. . . . All they need is a spark to ignite their righteousness, to set free their suppressed recognition that the Church must change. They will fight to end racism, to end women's abuse and subjugation, to end homophobia, to end the dictatorship from the top, and to end the shameful suppression of the Church's true history. . . . A revolution! Just like the Arab Spring. . . . We will instigate a Mormon Spring!"

17. One of the more nuanced academic considerations of this phenomenon is E. Marshall Brooks's *Disenchanted Lives* (2018). Brooks rightly notes that neither belief nor church membership is an on/off switch. He writes, "I quickly found that intellectually renouncing the church's teaching did not mean that they [former Mormons] had successfully rid themselves of the feeling of *being Mormon*. Ex-Mormons continued to inadvertently remember what they longed to forget" (122). As my own memoir in this book attests, this ambivalent relation between knowing and forgetting is also true for non-Mormons raised in Mormon communities.

18. As a point of comparison, there is much similarity between the secret temple ceremonies, or ordinances, of the LDS Church and the equally secret ceremonial rites of the Freemasons. Joseph Smith was himself a member of the Masons, as were four other founding members of the church. And there is great flow between the two secret societies in terms of their iconography, ideology, and structure. I do not, however, devote a good deal of space to investigating these links, since the larger archive of mediated Mormonism seems largely uninterested in these connections. While several books do lay out the relation between Mormons and Masons, that connection and/or influence has not found its way into the active concerns of twenty-first-century discussants, as, for instance, polygamy has.

19. Another lurid Mormon sex/murder scandal played out in November 2013, when Martin MacNeill was convicted for the 2007 death of his wife, Michele. A *New York Daily News* headline offered the best synopsis of events: "Utah Doctor Martin MacNeill Found Guilty of Murdering His Wife after Coercing Her into Plastic Surgery, Drugging Her and Leaving Her to Die in Tub." Not included in this overview was the role played by his long-term mistress, the fact that his daughters pushed for his conviction, and other mysterious deaths now tracked back to "the Mormon Doctor" ("Utah Doctor Found Guilty" 2013).

20. See William Shunn's (2015) glossary for Mormonism.

21. The adversity experienced by the early settlers—starvation, illness, animal attacks, freezing, death—in turn have created one of the largest truth narratives in the F/LDS self-mythology: our ancestors endured great suffering and were able to survive only through sheer determination and divine intervention. For a direct rendering of the struggles and salvific message of the settlers, see the feature film *17 Miracles* (Christensen 2011).

22. Many serialized television Westerns contain an episode with Mormon themes, including *Wagon Train* (1959–65), *Zane Grey Theater* (1956–61), *Death Valley Days* (1952–70), *The Big Valley* (1965–69), *How the West Was Won* (1976–79), and *Bonanza* (1959–73). Interestingly, when *Bonanza* was rebroadcast in syndication in the 1990s, the rights were owned by Pat Robertson's cable Family Channel, which refused to air two episodes, called “The Pursued,” about Mormon polygamists. Not all episodes are fixated on the sexual economies of plural marriage. Most histories of the West contain stories of outlaws, and Mormonism has one of the most notorious: Robert LeRoy Parker, also known as Butch Cassidy, who was raised in a strict Mormon family and struck out on his own to look for fame and adventure, as depicted in the “Drop Out” episode of *Death Valley Days*.

23. In 2017 active LDS member and former bishop Sam Young started a website and petition called Protect LDS Children. Included on the website are several hundred stories detailing the “shame and abuse” and “suicidal thoughts” experienced by LDS children and teens around the topic of sex. The website archives both written and video testimonials of Mormons of all ages, who have been asked explicit, specific, and “vile” questions about the nature of their sexual experience, knowledge, and experimentation, including masturbation. Writes #165, a thirty-year-old woman, after an experience of drinking and having sex at age seventeen: “I’ve done everything from counseling and therapy to studying shame and shame resilience, [but] I still can hardly bring myself to think it or speak it out loud: I was raped. . . . The bishop—this shy, mousy accountant—took me in to our home office and asked me if I had been drinking. . . . He asked probing questions like how many times we had sex, what I meant by sex (‘oral on you, or on him, or actual sex.’). . . . Shame suffocated me. I wanted to disappear” (“See the Stories” 2015). Similarly, former missionary and now ex-Mormon John O’Connor created a parodic Twitter account, @LostMormon, through which he creates highly sexualized commentary about the church’s president, Russell M. Nelson, as a form of social protest. Writes reporter Tarpley Hitt (2019), “The LDS Church has been sharply criticized in past years for its practice of ‘bishop interviews,’ where teenagers are required to be interviewed in detail by adult male faith leaders about their sexual experiences. ‘It’s OK to acknowledge the extreme sexual abuse by making fun of it,’ O’Connor said. ‘The church itself is a very sexual church. It’s repressive. It creates a lot of pedophiles. It creates a lot of abusive men.’”

#### 1. MORMONISM AS MEME AND ANALYTIC

1. There is a much smaller subset of representation that engages the female Mormon missionary. While more news accounts exist, fictional representation seems to be limited to the Mormon-produced film *The Errand of Angels* (2008) and the erotic novel *Sisters in Sin: A Forbidden Mormon Romance* (Abney 2017).

2. In April 2017, news accounts ran rampant with the tragedy of retired NFL tight end and practicing Mormon Todd Heap, who accidentally killed his three-year-old daughter when he hit her with his truck. Similarly, in January 2017 one of my LDS friends from childhood lost his wife and youngest son in a house fire. Although I’m

sure both Heap and my friend received much love and support from their extended communities, the idea that such horrifying incidents would be perceived as the just consequences of unrighteous living is just heartbreaking.

3. “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.” Malachi 3:10, New International Version.

4. See also “85: Mormons and Money” (2004). Given that Joseph Smith himself was accused of bank fraud when his Kirtland Savings Society failed in the Panic of 1837 and many of his followers lost all of their savings, one might argue that affinity fraud and Mormonism have long been on speaking terms.

5. It is not only dōTERRA or essential oils that use these appeals, of course, but empowering women as “Dr. Mom” does seem to be the primary rhetorical sales pitch of essential oil companies, particularly those related to LDS concerns. Consider Butterfly Expressions, an essential oil company run by the Westover family, made infamous in Tara Westover’s 2018 memoir *Educated*. According to Tara, the Westover family lived off the grid. Deeply religious and LDS, they eschewed formal education and medicine. Instead, Tara’s mother treated the family’s illnesses with essential oils, a hobby now turned into a multimillion-dollar company. As with dōTERRA, Butterfly Expressions (2018) encourages the use of essential oils for “empowering yourself.” The website also offers a link for “Dr. Mom: A complete guide to using essential oils for everything from A-Z.”

6. In 1992, Harold Bloom put this idea of the LDS long game into a more nationalist frame: “One gets the impression that the present Mormon leadership is very patient; they believe that much of the future is theirs, particularly in America. We have not yet had a Mormon President of the United States, and perhaps we never will, but our Presidents are increasingly responsive to Mormon sensibilities, rather more than might be expected for a religious movement representing just two percent of our population” (89).

7. Other famous Mormons, both active and former, include Glenn Beck, Aaron Eckhart, Ryan Gosling, Derek Hough, Julianne Hough, Chelsea Handler, Roseanne Barr, Amy Adams, Christina Aguilera, Gladys Knight, Jewel.

8. For more on Mormons and image management, see Chen and Yorgason (1999).

9. Lawrence pointedly excludes the FLDS from his consideration, and there is no doubt the overall popularity statistics on Mormons would have fared far worse had he asked people their impressions related to fundamentalism and polygamy.

10. Similarly taking the pulse of America’s regard toward Mormonism, in 2009 Salt Lake leaders hired two big-name advertising agencies, Ogilvy and Mather and Hall and Partners, to discover what Americans think of the LDS Church. Relying on focus groups and surveys, they found that Americans used adjectives about Mormons that were primarily negative: “secretive,” “cultish,” “sexist,” “controlling,” “pushy,” “antigay.”

11. One case in point is MormonLeaks, the Mormon equivalent of Wikileaks. Founded in 2016, MormonLeaks is dedicated to provoking transparency in the otherwise secretive Mormon Church, with the hope of producing “fewer untruths,



less corruption, and less abuse within Mormonism.” In particular, MormonLeaks’s archives are filled with hidden church pamphlets and policy doctrine on homosexuality, sexual abuse, and chastity laws, but it also engages with materials related to finances and recruitment strategies (<https://mormonleaks.io>). Indeed, Mormons who experience a faith crisis because of things they discover on the internet are considered members of the “Google Apostasy” (Hitt 2019). Other materials, such as Patrick Q. Mason’s *Planted* (2015), work to provide counters to the many questions provoked by the internet around such topics as nineteenth-century Mormonism, race and the priesthood ban, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, or women and feminism.

12. In the U.S., 74 percent of Mormons are Republican or Republican leaning (Passey 2013).

13. Franklin Quest, named for Benjamin Franklin and his quest for personal perfection, and the Covey Leadership Center merged in 1997. Together as FranklinCovey they continue the Mormon-based ideals of personal efficiency, in the words of Jennifer Brostrom, to “spread the good word about time management, appealing at once to the uncertain identity, greed, and superficial morality of the business community” (1997, 117).

14. Mormons are a common unexplained reference and throw-away punch line in contemporary film and television culture. My two favorites: In Season 2 of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–present), a character urges Midge and Susie to put Utah license plates on their stolen car, saying, “They’ll think you’re Mormon and leave you alone. I mean, no one talks to Mormons unless they have to.” In *The Santa Clarita Diet* (2017), the two lead characters frantically try to dispose of a body the newly zombified wife has half-consumed. They see a car coming and quickly develop a cover story: “OK, we’ll say we came across this murder site, and we’re just cleaning up.” The wife asks through clenched teeth, “Who cleans up murder sites?” The husband responds through a forced smile, “I don’t know. We’re Mormons.” She doesn’t like the idea: “Mormons don’t clean up murder sites.” He responds with authority, “Mormons are helpful.” For other seemingly off-handed references, see Peterson and Moore (2014).

## 2. THE MORMON GLOW

1. Kolob is the planet or star where God is thought to reside. While knowledge of Kolob is understood to be very protected, it is an open secret in mediated Mormonism. For instance, in an interview with *Mormon Stories*, Clark Johnsen, a former LDS member and one of the original cast members of *The Book of Mormon* Broadway musical, spoke of his amazement that Matt Stone and Trey Parker knew about Kolob. Yet any fan of pop music would have had similar access to this information, had they bought and listened to the Osmonds’ 1973 LP *The Plan*, which details and provides illustrations of the Mormon cosmogony and is produced by Kolob Studios.

2. For more on Brigham Young’s statement on race, see Young (n.d.).

3. As with polygamy, fundamentalist Mormons double down on race, declaring both plural marriage and white skins to be mandates for heavenly admission.

4. In *QB*, Steve Young (2016) (great-great-great grandson of Brigham Young) credits the health codes of Mormonism for his physical resiliency and capacity to recover quickly from the literal bone crushing of playing football at the national level.

5. Donny's memoir, *Life Is Just What You Make It: My Story So Far* (1999), could well be read as a prototype for American masculinity that must struggle against adversity, in this case his own childhood success, to rise triumphant in a second act of mature manhood.

6. Immediately following the appearance, Protandim ranked first among Google searches in the United States. Visits to LifeVantage.com increased 300 percent, and visits to Protandim.com increased 800 percent.

7. The internet is a remarkable thing. The contract between Osmond and LifeVantage can be found here: "Agreement between LifeVantage Corporation and Donny Osmond Concerts, Inc., Securities and Exchange Commission, September 12, 2011," <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/849146/000119312511309812/d241721dex101.htm>.

8. This fact is not lost on Osmond himself. In 2006, he appeared with "Weird Al" Yankovic in the parody "White and Nerdy," a music video making fun of the bad dancing, awkward speech, and nebishy uncoolness that both Yankovic and Osmond personify.

### 3. THE (TELEVISED, POLYGAMOUS) CLOSET

1. For example, the 2018 lead-up to TLC's *Seeking Sister Wife* made a particular note of the three families being profiled and their relation to Mormonism as part of their commitment to living plural marriage.

2. Of course, whenever we are talking about mediation, we need to be mindful of how ideas are shaped and by whom. In the specific context of reality television, positions of producer, consumer, and product are tremendously obscured, if not altogether unintelligible. *Sister Wives* is a mediated text, made by Puddle Monkey Productions and Figure 8 Films, the latter also responsible for such freakish reality fare as *17 Kids and Counting* (now *19 Kids and Counting*), *Salvage Dawgs*, and *Abby & Brittany*, a reality series about conjoined teenage twins. As I have argued in *Make-over TV* and *Reality Gendervision* (Weber 2009, 2014), reality TV is remarkable for its polymorphous perversity. Its featured actors are both professional and amateur, both real people and characters. Its situations are simultaneously factual and fictional, *vérité* and concocted. Reality TV's mode of production slips the confines of standard conceptions of artistic creation, since there is no single author/director/creator and no coherent artistic product. Indeed, the stories of reality television are told as much through blog posts, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, Instagram, and tabloids as they are through the diegesis that unfolds each week on the small screen (of television, phone, tablet, and computer). In this respect, we can look to the conglomerate intermedial message to determine the overall logic of shows like *Sister Wives* or *My Five Wives*, but we cannot really ascertain whether this logic is the specific intent of its participants or producers. In the brave new world of twenty-first-century mediation, the author is dead like never before in history.