

RELIGION AS A ROLE: DECODING PERFORMANCES OF MORMONISM IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

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## ABSTRACT

Dr. Scott Magelssen, Advisor

Although Mormons have been featured as characters in American media since the nineteenth century, the study of the performance of the Mormon religion has received limited attention. As Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) continues to appear as an ever-growing topic of interest in American media, there is a gap in discourse that addresses the implications of performances of Mormon beliefs and lifestyles as performed by both members of the Church and non-believers. In this thesis, I closely examine HBO's *Big Love* television series, the LDS Church's "I Am a Mormon" media campaign, Mormon "Mommy Blogs" and the personal performance of Mormons in everyday life. By analyzing these performances through the lenses of Stuart Hall's theories of encoding/decoding, Benedict Anderson's writings on imagined communities, and H. L. Goodall's methodology for the new ethnography the aim of this thesis is to fill in some small way this discursive and scholarly gap. The analysis of performances of the Mormon belief system through these lenses provides an insight into how the media teaches and shapes its audience's ideologies through performance.

For Caity and Emily.

Story after story, idea after idea;  
she smiles, brews another cup of tea,  
and is ready for more.

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## INTRODUCTION

American media has seen a surge of interest in Mormons. Audiences are shocked by compounds full of abused women, intrigued by reality programs about modern polygamy, enjoy the singing missionaries on Broadway, and asked if they are ready for a Mormon to take residence in the White House. Regularly, Mormonism is used as a plot line. These performances of Mormon beliefs and tenets of faith, even if some are based upon skewed knowledge, are the primary source of exposure for many who are outside of the Church. Additionally, it is because of these performances the too-good-to-be-true or too-evil-to-comprehend Mormon has surfaced as a [latter-day?] stock character. Like the depictions of Mormons in American Melodrama of the nineteenth century, modern representations of Mormons not only make a statement about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but also educate audiences about a culture and belief system less than three percent of the American population practices. Americans get their knowledge of Mormons through the media—and they're getting a particularly skewed or mediatized image. Through the media, Americans are taught what it means to be Mormon. Mormons seem unified and live a Church-prescribed way of life. If one only knew the Mormons of the media, then it would seem as though all Mormon believers read from the same script and each play versions of the same part. Therefore the time as come for a study that takes a close look at the particulars of this image, and how it holds up to how Mormons understand the performance of their identity in real life.

Using Mormonism as a case study, I will explore the performance of religion by the media, by the believer, and by the non-believer. I suggest that Mormon Believers/the Latter Day Saints are an imagined community as defined by Benedict Anderson. Anderson coined the term

“imagined communities,” defining a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>1</sup> These communities are not (and cannot be) based on everyday face-to-face interaction amongst their members. Thus according to Anderson’s concept, a nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Delimitation Statements**

Work that examines modern representations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is limited, leaving a gap in the scholarship of religious performance. In this thesis, using the writings and interviews with Mormons and former Mormons, I decode and analyze the performative nature of Mormonism as found in the media. In my decoding and analysis, I do not fully encompass all representations of Mormons in American popular culture nor do I provide a complete survey of scholarship focusing on Mormons in America. Instead I have chosen to focus on those selections that stand out in current media because they serve as example par excellence of what the audience sees as stock characteristics. This thesis will not include new genealogy/history of the LDS Church, nor will it analyze the finer points of Mormon theology (though these discussions will in part inform my study). Additionally, I will limit my study to English-language works readily available in the archive.

I am not part of the Mormon community, and because I hold a different worldview than they do I will attempt to remain unbiased by refraining from criticism about or misrepresentation

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Print. 224

<sup>2</sup> Anderson 224

of Mormon beliefs. As a performance scholar I recognize that my language of intelligibility is informed in both visible and invisible ways by personal religious views. Nevertheless, any value judgments that might occur in relation to the both the past and present theology Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are unintentional. Additionally, the subjectivity and faith-based nature of religion can provide a discursive stumbling block to the scholar who does not subscribe to the religion in question. To aid in my quest to remain objective, I am assuming the same stance as Mormon scholar Terryl L. Givens in addressing the issues of truth claims made within the Mormon religion. Givens comments in *By The Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2002),

In a history of a religiously controversial subject, of which the *Book of Mormon* is a premiere example, the disputability of the facts is too obvious to bear repeating on every page. I have therefore avoided constructions like ‘Joseph Smith's alleged vision,’ or ‘the purported visit of Moroni, as they would become tiresome and pedantic if repeated on every page. My focus in any case has not been on whether the Book of Mormon or the account of it given by Joseph Smith is true (Givens 54).

Following Givens’ model I have chosen not to dispute the truthfulness of the claims of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Such claims are beyond the scope of this work. Givens is correct in his assessment that such disputes would distract from the study at hand—the study of how Mormons are represented—not whether or not what they believe is correct. As far as reasonably possible, I seek to observe and respond to performances of this and other past and present Mormon values objectively.

In order to see the traces of Mormon theology through culture, one must understand the basic tenets of Mormonism and Mormon History. When researching any topic, the researcher should try to understand the lens through which the author is viewing the subject and how that is reflected in his or her work. As one might expect, literature exploring the history and beliefs of Mormonism runs the gamut—some texts carry a pro-Mormon bias and as a result are silent on the more controversial topics such as polygamy.<sup>3</sup> Other texts are adamantly anti-Mormon and ignore the positive aspects of Mormon practices and focus purely on sensational stories of abuse and manipulation. Generally, former and excommunicated LDS Church members in addition to those who seek to find flaws in the Mormon worldview pen these works. Rather than attempting to avoid such overtly slanted sources completely, I regard them as helpful sources that point to the contours of current discourse. The texts that contain overtly biased sentiments provide insight into how both pro- and anti-Mormon literatures have informed the development of scholarly conversation on this topic.

## **Foundational Reading**

Before beginning to analyze representations of Mormonism one must have knowledge of both Mormonism and the theories concerning representation. What follows is a literature review of the works I selected to inform my knowledge of both of these areas and how they relate to my project.

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<sup>3</sup> Pro- Mormon literature: *A Young Folks' History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (tredition, 2011) by Nephi Anderson, *Presidents Of The Church: Insights Into Their Lives And Teachings* (Deseret Book Co, 2004) by Truman G. Madsen; *Mothering With Spiritual Power: Book of Mormon Inspirations for Raising a Righteous Family* (Cedar Fort, 2007) Debra Woods; and *The Price We Paid: The Extraordinary Story of the Willie and Martin Handcart Pioneers* (Deseret Book Company 2006) by Andrew Olsen.

## Critical Theory

As previously mentioned, there is little scholarly work on twentieth and twenty-first century representations of Mormons in general. Certainly there are specific articles and texts that look at particular representations. These include Stout, Straubhaar, and Newbold's essay "Through a Glass Darkly: Mormons as Perceived by Critics' Reviews of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," which looks at how the New York newspaper reviewers addressed Mormonism in their reviews of *Angels in America*. Additionally, *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen* (Utah State University Press, 2010) offers a surface level analysis of Mormon representation in twentieth and twenty-first century culture. As a collection of essays, *Peculiar Portrayals* combines eight different scholars' methods for exploring Mormons and the way that television (*Big Love* and reality TV), theatre (only Tony Kushner's *Angels in America Parts 1 and 2* is acknowledged), and film (the cover is a large photograph of a Mormon missionary character in the 1997 film comedy *Orgazmo*) have shaped American notions of the tenets of the LDS Church. While there is little continuity in style or approach uniting this collection of essays, particularly useful is the article on *Big Love* and America's fascination with Mormon polygamy. Michael Austin's, "Four Consenting Adults in the Privacy of Their Own Suburb: *Big Love* and the Cultural significance of Mormon Polygamy," is seemingly one of the only scholarly treatments of this widely successful HBO television program. Other essays in the collection offer little original contribution and are helpful only insofar as they are encyclopedic reports, but not to be plumbed for rigorous scholarly analysis.

Therefore, due to the gap of in-depth analysis of religious performance, I look to the work of five theorists as a guide for critical analysis. They include: Anderson's theories on nationalism, Judith Butler's work concerning identity performance, Stuart Hall's exploration of

decoding and encoding, Amy Shuman's critiques of empathy, and finally the methodology put forth in H. L. (Bud) Goodall, Jr.'s work entitled *Writing The New Ethnography*.

In order to discuss how non-Mormons saw and continue to see Mormons as "the other." I look to studies that, while not necessarily about Mormons, nevertheless offer helpful theoretical models with which to examine America's interest in the Mormon worldview as opposed to other religions. The work of Benedict Anderson on imagined communities provides a theoretical framework for doing so. Anderson begins his text with Hugh Seton-Watson's statement, "I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists."<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Anderson strives to "offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of the 'anomaly' of nationalism." He later recommends, "We need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being ... and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy . . . Why these cultural artifacts have aroused such deep attachments."<sup>5</sup> Seeing Mormonism as an imagined community that is part of the larger also-imagined community we call America allows for the examination of how communities accept or reject one another's way of life in accordance to their own self-perception and their "deep attachments."

In order to formulate my theory of religion as a performance I borrow from Judith Butler, who suggests that gender is performative.<sup>6</sup> Butler writes, "Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted . . . it is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivity norms, ones which can not be thrown off at will, but which work, animate,

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<sup>4</sup> (Seton-Watson qtd in Anderson 3).

<sup>5</sup> Anderson 4

<sup>6</sup> See for example *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 2006), *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993).

and constrain the gendered subject . . . ”<sup>7</sup> I extend her theory to religion by making my own suggestion that religion is also a performative act coupled with a faith based belief. No one is born a believer in a particular worldview, but, like their gender, society and personal choice shape one’s daily performance of identity.

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall in his article “Encoding, *Decoding*” proposes that as performances are created they are loaded with both direct and indirect, to use Hall’s term, “fragments of ideology” that the producers hope will be integrated into society.<sup>8</sup> That integration can be as simple as having audiences return week after week to enjoy their new favorite series or as complex as radically changing people’s minds, worldviews, and personal ideologies. Seeking out the encoded messages within a performance and then decoding those messages allows the view/scholar to better understand the motive behind a performance.

In Chapter 5 of *Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, Amy Shuman analyzes the use of personal stories as a means of recruiting support or membership to an organization. Using political junk mail as an example she writes that the use of personal narratives in junk mail is a “plea for help, made by the soliciting agency, directed to you, the addressee, on behalf of others.”<sup>9</sup> It is through this plea and retelling of personal experience that political, cultural and religious organizations seek empathy that would motivate the targeted audience to align with their cause. According to Shuman, however, this is not without consequence. “The person whose story is told is not longer just a person,” she writes, but instead has become “a representative of the larger cause, [and] the person as individual, with a right to his or her own story, can be obliterated.” In relation to the performance of Mormonism,

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, Judith. “Critically Queer.” GLQ Volume 1 pp. 17-22, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Hall Stuart. "Encoding, Decoding." *The Cultural Studies Reader*. By Simon During. London: Routledge, 2007. 507-17. Print. 513.

<sup>9</sup> Shuman, Amy. *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2005. Print. 126.

these theories problematize the representations of Mormons by Mormons within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In his text *Writing the New Ethnography*, H. L. (Bud) Goodall, Jr. explains that academic writers must understand that “good writing, like good conversation, is transformational.”<sup>10</sup> He puts forth methodology for the academic writer to accurately record facts and stories in ways that “draw readers in and keep them there.” This slant of ethnographic research privileges “the development *in our relationship* an appreciation for differences that lead to improved understandings of ourselves in the contexts of others.”<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this study, I privilege the knowledge gained through the process of seeing Mormons as an imagined-community that of which I was not a member. In doing so I discover the difficulties and challenges of attempting to explore a performance of a group as a whole.

In summary, Anderson’s description of a group of people within “an imagined political community” provides the theoretical basis for seeing Mormons as one large body that is often seen as the other. The Mormons, like other religious groups, perform a lifestyle in a way that is parallel to Butler’s theories of gender performance. It is in these performances, whether they are depicted by non-Mormons or Mormons, that I look to Hall’s modes of decoding to better understand what is being conveyed to audiences and those who interact with the LDS. Finally, heading Shuman’s cautionary critique of performances and the use of empathy I seek to uncover, even if just by scratching the surface, some of the implications of these performances of religion. Finally, by following the methodological foundation as described by Goodall for ethnographic research I reflect on the beliefs and assumptions I had about Mormons and discuss them with a theatre scholar who is a practicing member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>10</sup> Goodall, H. Lloyd. *Writing the New Ethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2000. Print 41.

<sup>11</sup> Goodall 14.

## History of Mormonism

Unlike scholarship on Mormon representation, an abundance of general histories of the LDS Church can be found. Since the religion's conception, authors have written works—both pro- and anti-Mormon—that claim to give the complete history of Joseph Smith and the formation of Mormonism. Perhaps the most accessible is *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (Oxford University Press, 2001). Written by Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman, this accessible and comprehensive text records the history of Mormonism up unto the present. Of a more scholarly nature, the work of Terryl L. Givens, author of many books on the Mormon way of life and the treatment of Mormons by non-believers, provides the most complete and often-cited histories of Mormonism. *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (Greenwood Press, 2004), which is part of a series focusing on several different religions and their American experience, explores the daily life of Mormon believers, their historical past, the canonical works, as well as schisms the Church has experienced. The appendices are particularly useful as they provide a listing of notable Mormon figures, the articles of faith, a comparison between Mormonism and other religions, and an annotated bibliography. Givens' other works, *People of Paradox: History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2007) and *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (Oxford University Press, 1997) elaborate on themes addressed in the *Experience in America* text by looking at, respectively, distinctly Mormon contributions to art, literature, music, theater, science as well as how fictional accounts of Mormonism exacerbated anti-Mormon sentiment.

Even the unbiased histories of Mormonism often give a shallow attention to the Mormon polygamy that is often the focus of even modern Mormon representations. Nevertheless, there

has been an increase in the studies of Mormon polygamy through “tell all” biographies, Mormonism’s impact on American culture, and American culture’s impact Mormon families.<sup>12</sup> Of note is Beecher and Anderson’s *Sisters in Spirit* (University of Illinois, 1987), which covers most aspects of Mormon womanhood. Beecher and Anderson look to the scriptures, historical accounts, and modern interviews as their source material and as a result chronicle the shift in the roles of women from before polygamy, to the time of polygamy, to the post-polygamy era.<sup>13</sup>

The most encompassing tome on Mormon polygamy is *Nauvoo Polygamy*—“*but we called it celestial marriage*” by George D. Smith (Signature, 2008). Spanning from the earliest mention of polygamy in the LDS Church to eventual end of plural marriage, Smith gives a highly detailed account of daily life for polygamous families and how the Church “silenced” the history that included polygamous practices.

It should go without saying that one cannot study the Mormon religion without referencing and attempting to understand The Book of Mormon. For the purposes of this study I use a LDS-missionary-provided edition, which was last copyrighted in 1981 and includes an introduction in addition to the holy texts. In order to obtain a copy of The Book of Mormon I requested one from the Mormon.org website. As a condition for receiving a copy I was asked to have a meeting with Mormon Missionaries. The Elders (male missionaries, women are called Sisters) were kind and did not pressure me to become a Mormon in any way. Actually, after I explained my project, they were very accommodating and willing to help me find literature that

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<sup>12</sup> Examples of tell-all autobiographies: *Favorite Wife: Escape from Polygamy* (Lyons Press, 2009) by Susan Ray Schmidt; *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs* (Harper, 2009) by Elissa Wall; *Escape* (Broadway, 2008) by Carolyn Jessup; *Lost Boy* (Broadway, 2009) by Brent W. Jessup. Note: all of these tell-all autobiographies are anti-polygamy and not specifically against the Latter-day Saints. The Church considers the groups these authors were a part of as un-Biblical and not Mormon.

<sup>13</sup> Scriptural texts in the Mormon Church would include; The Old and New Testaments, *The Book of Mormon*, *A Pearl of Great Price*, and *Doctrine and Covenants*. *Joseph Smith himself wrote the Book of Mormon, A Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Convenants*.

they believed represented the Church accurately. Before they left they presented me a copy of The Book of Mormon and gave me their contact information if I needed any more assistance or had any other questions. I also consulted *The Book of Mormon: Selections Annotated and Explained* by Jana Riess (SkyLight Paths, 2005), who is an adult convert to Mormonism. Riess explains, in a scholarly and non-proselytizing manner, key passages so a non-believer may understand them.

For the purposes of this thesis, following the model of most peer-reviewed scholarship about Mormon representations, I will refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is based in Salt Lake City, Utah, as Mainstream or Mainline Mormonism. This is the religious group that has authority over the world's largest genealogical database, the papers of both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, and commissions Mormon missionaries of all ages to spread the Mormon gospel across the entire world.

Alternatively, those who identify themselves as Mormon and also practice polygamy are not considered to be part of Mainline Mormonism and are not recognized as members by the LDS Church. Often these groups are called several different terms, some of which are fundamentalist, breakaway, disaffected, or independent. There are several smaller offshoots that have their own prophets and ascribe to variations on the basic Mormon tenets.

But, at the risk of getting ahead of myself without providing sufficient context, let me move forward by exploring the history of Mormonism and polygamy. In the spring of 1820, Joseph Smith claimed to experience a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ in a wooded area of Manchester, New York. Amidst mocking and ridicule from his neighbors, Smith established what would come to be called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1852, even though they had been forced out of several cities and faced political oppression, the LDS Church

members began to publicly practice the principle of plural marriage. In incredibly brief terms, this principle first revealed to Joseph Smith in 1847, required devout men to marry multiple wives in order to receive eternal blessings.

Mainstream Mormons officially abandoned the practice of polygamy in 1890. In 1904 Joseph F. Smith, the sixth president of the LDS Church, gave the Second Manifesto. This declaration states that the church would no longer sanction marriages that violated the laws of the land and set down the principle that those entering into or solemnizing polygamous marriages would be excommunicated from the Church—this excluded marriages sealed before the Manifesto, which were allowed to continue until all parties had died. Nevertheless, the memory of the Mormon Church as proponents of plural marriage remains fast, even though this doctrine has been abandoned for over one hundred years.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

The first chapter of this thesis utilizes Stuart Hall's three hypothetical positions from which televisual discourse may be constructed. Specifically, I focus upon scripted/mediated performances of religion and how decoding such performances shapes cultural understandings of the group in question. Through this lens I will explore the impact that societal programs, specifically HBO's *Big Love*, which feature performances of Mormonism-based polygamy, have on perceptions of the members Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in their politics and legal arenas. Additionally, I will examine how such depictions of domesticity challenge the normative view of the nuclear family, sexuality, and gender equality with-in marriage.

My second chapter analyzes how the Church and its members perform their identity in daily life and as a living answer to media portrayals like *Big Love*. Using Anderson, Schuman,

and Hall as guides, I look at the online “I am a Mormon” campaign and Mormon housewife blogs to see how empathy and a desire to seem “normal” are shaping the LDS Church’s current image management. Simply put, how do Mormons perform Mormonism in these two venues? What questions must be asked of these performances and are these performances successful?

Finally, using the methodology of Goodall. I take a step back in chapter three to dissect and discover the influence of media performances that serve as the origin of my own understandings/assumptions concerning Mormonism. I explore how the process of analyzing representations of Mormons in modern media (i.e., the work of the two prior chapters) has corrected or reinforced my understanding of Mormons and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Additionally, through personal interviews, I ask questions to those who perform or have performed Mormonism in their daily lives in order to receive for the first time first-hand accounts of religious performativity.

The goals of this study are threefold. I aim to use Stuart Hall’s methods of decoding to analyze the performance of the Mormon religion within the television show *Big Love* that is not sponsored or endorsed by the Church. Contrastingly, I critique the Church-sponsored “I am a Mormon” advertisement campaign as well as Mormon Mommy Blogs, which both directly and indirectly attempt to show how Mormons are “just like everybody else.” Reflecting upon these two sets of analysis I look to the ethnographic methodology of H.L. Goodall Jr. to provide a lens through which to better explain and analyze the process of research of a group to which one does not belong. This scholarship, in some small way, will contribute to the discourse surrounding the performance of religious belief in the media and daily life, which, in a large part, the scholarship centering upon Mormons has been limited.

## CHAPTER ONE– BIGGER THAN BIG LOVE

Sarah Henrickson: Why can't we just hire a babysitter like everyone else?

Barb Henrickson: Because we're not everyone else.

*Big Love*

Episode 1.1 – The Pilot<sup>1</sup>

When programs feature religious or political themes, the messages conveyed within each episode have the potential to alter a viewer's outlook on a given topic or issue. HBO's *Big Love*, which ran for six seasons, excellently exemplifies the various ways messages encoded within a performance are integrated into society. Using Stuart Hall's three hypothetical positions from which televisual discourse may be constructed, I explore what societal impact programs, such as *Big Love*, (which feature performances of Mormonism-based polygamy) have on the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' politics, and legal arenas. Additionally, I examine how such depictions of domesticity challenge the normative view of the nuclear family, sexuality, and gender equality within marriage.

Stuart Hall suggests that for a message to be successfully communicated through the news or entertainment media, it must become integrated into society.<sup>2</sup> Hall sees this message as a means for communicating ideology of various sorts to the viewing public. This can take many different forms: from the concrete, such as one changing their eating habits as the result of health programming; to a more intellectually based form, such as deciding to vote for one political

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<sup>1</sup> Olsen, Mark, Will V. Scheffer, and Doug Stockstill. "Pilot." *Big Love*. HBO. 12 Mar. 2006. Television.

<sup>2</sup> Hall 508.

candidate over another. Assuming Hall is correct in his analysis, each program then carries with it some form of a message that is to be received by an audience.

### **Coding Defined**

As the foundation to his classification of the types of readings viewers may have of a television program, Hall writes that the process of conveying a message via oral, gestural, or written communication is comprised of a set of “linked yet distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction.”<sup>3</sup> As a program enters the first stage, production, its message encounters “professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on [that] frame the constitution of the programme [sic] through this production structure.”<sup>4</sup> Encoding and decoding are the creation and interpretation of symbols, references, and other artistic choices through-out the production cycle.

This production is framed by external influences such as “treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, ‘definitions of the situation’ from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure”<sup>5</sup> Simply put, these external influences combined are the encoding of a program. Hall, at this point in his essay, references the terminology and work of Phillip Elliott through the observation that these framing situations or encoded ideologies position the audience as not only the source of a “meaning” for a program but also as the message’s receiver or decoder.<sup>6</sup> Thus, relying upon the audience to decode those messages and interpret their meaning with-in a television program.

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<sup>3</sup> Hall 508.

<sup>4</sup> Hall 509.

<sup>5</sup> Hall 509.

<sup>6</sup> Hall 509.

## Types of Decoding

Hall proposes three kinds of decoding performed by audiences that can be seen as a continuum. Dominant-hegemonic occurs “when the viewer takes the connoted meaning from a television programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded.”<sup>7</sup> More simply put, a dominant decoding would have the audience seeing what the producers/writers/artists *want* you to see. The institution creating the program would consider a dominant reading a successful reading because the audience “got it.”

Hall’s second position would be identified as the negotiated code or position.<sup>8</sup> This position “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules.”<sup>9</sup> This view considers the messages being presented critically, not accepting them entirely at face value. Hall explains, “the negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility.”<sup>10</sup> It is in this reading that Hall asserts that most “misunderstandings” of programs arise “from the contradictions and disjunctions between hegemonic dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings.”<sup>11</sup> Hall identifies this asymmetry in encoding and decoding as a “failure in communication.”<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Hall calls the third possible reading “oppositional.” When one watches a program and interprets its codes and messages “in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework or reference [they are] operating with what we must call an oppositional code.”<sup>13</sup> It is

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<sup>7</sup> Hall 515.

<sup>8</sup> Hall 515.

<sup>9</sup> Hall 516.

<sup>10</sup> Hall 516..

<sup>11</sup> Hall 516..

<sup>12</sup> Hall 517.

<sup>13</sup> Hall 517.

It is at this point the audience receives the program's encoded message and decodes it in a way entirely opposite from what its producers intended.

*Big Love* also utilizes "double coding," which is the practice of creating a program that has encoded one message with two meanings that will be decoded by two different audiences in different ways. This type of encoding requires knowledge of a program's intended audience base and will be further discussed through Anderson's notion of imagined communities later in the second chapter.

### **Encoding within *Big Love***

*Big Love* premiered in 2006 and, while its viewer ratings continually rose and fell, the critical success remained primarily constant. Created by both writing and life partners Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, *Big Love* weaves the complex tale of one man, Bill Hendrickson, to his three (and, for a couple of episodes, four) wives in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, Utah. Bill Hendrickson is only legally married to one of the women, Barbra, who grew up a member of the LDS Church but agreed to become polygamous when she thought she was going to die from breast cancer. Bill then has celestial or spiritual marriages to Nikki Grant the daughter of the conniving Roman Grant, a self-proclaimed independent Mormon prophet; and Margene Heffman, who fell in love with the family while she served as their babysitter.

Even before the pilot episode premiered it was conveyed to *Big Love*'s potential audiences through print advertisements and commercials that this family is different and yet somehow far from abnormal, i.e., they are polygamous, three women to one man, but, aside from that, they have problems, daily struggles just like you and me, and are seemingly just another family. Michael Anderson, author of an essay entitled "Four Consenting Adults in the Privacy of

Their Own Suburb: Big Love and the Cultural Significance of Mormon Polygamy,” boldly claims that the “purpose of *Big Love* . . . is to try to change what we mean when we talk about families.”<sup>14</sup> Anderson supports this by going straight to the source. The creator and producer Mark V. Olsen told *The Washington Blade*

Will and I have watched the country become divisive with an increasingly strident debate about the culture wars and what is and is not a family and what should be an accepted family. We want to examine it at a different level without labels.

Let’s take a look at people as people and find the values that are worth celebrating separate of who the people are and how they’re doing it. <sup>15</sup>

While this may seem like a stretch to many—that polygamists are just normal people—Lee Siegel writes, “Their weirdness both normalizes your own most unsettling impulses and gets your vicarious wheels turning. But the latter effect is much stronger than the former.”<sup>16</sup> This, however, seems to be exactly what *Big Love* is going for. *Big Love* is asking audiences to “at least consider whether [an hypothetical family each named] David, Melissa, and Juli might not (like Bill, Barb, Nicki, and Margene) form a reasonably happy married family without hurting anyone else in the process.”<sup>17</sup> But are audiences doing so? Are audiences operating within this dominant-hegemonic code?

An answer is difficult to prove. Certainly the show ran for six seasons and received some critical success, but articles praising how *Big Love* challenges normative views of family are not written. Interviews about how everyone agrees with a program’s ideology are not conducted.

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<sup>14</sup> Austin, Michael. "Four Consenting Adults in the Privacy of Their Own Suburb: Big Love and the Cultural Significance of Mormon Polygamy." *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*. By Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2010. 37-61. Print. 55.

<sup>15</sup> Moylan, Brian. "Feeling the 'Love.'" *The Washington Blade*. 10 Mar. 2006. Web. 10 Apr. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Siegel, Lee. "Hedonism." Editorial. *The New Republic* 22 May 2006: 25-28. Print. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Andreasen, Liana Vrajitoru. "Revenge of the Patriarchy: Is Big Love Big Enough?" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 26.5 (2009): 406-14. Print. 45.

Such lack of drama does not sell papers or recruit new pledge sponsors. Siegel, however, makes an excellent observation regarding *Big Love* and HBO's continual success, "Showing the dark side of gratification even as it allows viewers to gratify themselves vicariously is *Big Love*'s essential success. And this is the brilliant mechanism at the heart of HBO's best shows."<sup>18</sup> By comparing *Big Love* to other successful HBO programs such as *Sex and the City* which "exposed the loneliness and instability" of the single life, or *Six Feet Under* and *Oz* which "were in their very different ways, tales of self-indulgence and harsh—or brutal—consequences," Siegel decodes within *Big Love*'s message a loftier layer of "thinking about something different." He suggests,

Even more than these other shows, *Big Love* is both the indictment of a commercialist ethos of gratification and the expression of it. As television grows less and less constrained in its imagination of the antinomian and the weird, you wonder where the emphasis will finally fall, on a new type of popular art or a new type of pandering to appetites.<sup>19</sup>

Although I might not know the creators' *true* intentions as they both consciously and unconsciously encoded *Big Love*, when I look at the statements made by Olsen I agree with Siegel's praise. *Big Love* not only provokes audiences to consider or explore different lifestyles, but also has audiences consider why we find "the other" so interesting in the first place.

### **Shaping Our Understanding**

Unlike dominant-hegemonic coding, negotiated coding of *Big Love* is well documented and the subject of many articles, essays, and interviews. For the purposes of this thesis, I have

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<sup>18</sup> Siegel 27.

<sup>19</sup> Siegel 28.

chosen to limit my analysis of negotiated responses to the themes presented to *Big Love*'s contested portrayal of sacred Mormon rituals as well how *Big Love* addresses the experiences and struggles of the homosexual community. As I mentioned previously, a negotiated coding acknowledges the dominant or preferred reading while, in simple terms, adding additional layers to the message.

Episode nine of season three, entitled "Outer Darkness," portrays a sacred and therefore secret Mormon temple ritual that dates back to the time of Brigham Young.<sup>20</sup> The decision to feature this ritual, the endowment ceremony, was highly controversial, not to mention offensive to some members of the Latter-Day Saint Church. The endowment ceremony is considered one of the most sacred rituals, and the Church released a statement explaining "certainly Church members are offended when their most sacred practices are misrepresented or presented without context or understanding."<sup>21</sup> HBO responded, "Obviously it was not our intention to do anything disrespectful to the church, but to those who may be offended, we offer our sincere apology."<sup>22</sup> In an additional statement the creators claimed that they "took great pains to depict the ceremony with the dignity and reverence it is due."<sup>23</sup> The issue goes beyond the depiction of the endowment ceremony. It goes beyond the depiction of Barb, dressed in an elaborate white robe and head veil, performing particular handshakes and repeating holy phrases. *Big Love*'s choice to, as some might say, expose the inner most activities of the temple is just one way that it is encoded and decoded using a negotiated code.

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<sup>20</sup> Myers, Elieen. "Outer Darkness." *Big Love*. HBO. 15 Mar. 2009. Television.

<sup>21</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *The Publicity Dilemma. Newsroom - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. 09 Mar. 2009. Web.

<sup>22</sup> Friedman, Emily. "HBO's Depiction Of Mormon Ceremony Upsets Church - ABC News." *ABCNews.com: Daily News, Breaking News and Video Broadcasts - ABC News*. ABC News, 11 Mar. 2009. Web.

<sup>23</sup> Friedman np.

This negotiated coding of “Outer Darkness” created conversation across disciplines. Alex Caldiero artist in residence at Utah Valley University succinctly explains that while the subject matter of this episode might be considered controversial, it is not disrespectful or a violation of any kind. He explains, “An entire context is needed to sanctify an image, gesture, ritual or event, and without its unique context the sacred cannot be violated.”<sup>24</sup> But what was the impact of this particular episode and the producers’ artistic choices? In an interview for *Talk of the Nation* on National Public Radio Howard Berkes, an NPR correspondent, makes an astute observation of the impact of such a performance,

I think that what *Big Love* has done has exposed to a broader audience practices that they place in a temple, practice of a faith that many people still consider to be a cult and consider not to be Christian. And I think that what the episode does is it raises the risk, I guess, for Mormons, that they’ll be perceived as odd, as distinct, as different, as not conventional Christianity. Because the ceremonies that were depicted are not really—don’t match ceremonies that you would see in Judaic Christian tradition.<sup>25</sup>

But this religious outing is not new to the Mormon Church. From the exposure due to Mormon presidential candidates like Mitt Romney, to the raids on Yearning for Zion Ranch,<sup>26</sup> to *South Park*’s nicer than nice Mormon characters, the Church remains surefooted. In fact, as a part of the publicity release addressing *Big Love* the Church writes, “The Church’s strength is in its faithful members in 170-plus countries, and there is no evidence that extreme misrepresentations

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<sup>24</sup> Adams, Brooke. "Revealing the Sacred on 'Big Love' Sparks Discussion about Ethics." *The Salt Lake Tribune*. 23 Sept. 2009. Web.

<sup>25</sup> Conan, Neal. "'Big Love' Shows Sacred Rite, Stirs Controversy." *Talk of the Nation*. National Public Radio. 19 Mar. 2009. Radio. Transcript.

<sup>26</sup> For more information about the Yearning for Zion Ranch, which is a compound of polygamist Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints under the control of their prophet Warren Jeffs, see chapter two.

in the media that appeal only to a narrow audience have any long-term negative effect on the Church.”<sup>27</sup> This as strange as it may seem at first, is the Church’s way of operating within the negotiated code. While there certainly are messages/codes in *Big Love* that are read as offensive and troublesome, the LDS Church views the Hendrickson’s and their family as non-Mormon, and therefore it doesn’t see the program as worthy of boycott or official legal action. In fact it goes so far as to say such actions are beneath the Church,

If the Church allowed critics and opponents to choose the ground on which its battles are found, it would risk being distracted from the focus and mission it has pursued successfully for nearly 180 years. Instead, the Church itself will determine its own course as it continues to preach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly it must be admitted that while the polygamists featured on *Big Love* are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Big Love* does often portray members as closed-minded and conniving. In the end of the series, Bill Hendrickson is murdered by Carl Martin, who is, according to Gina Bellafante, “literally speaking, a disgruntled and out-of-work neighbor—a casualty of the recession and his own traditionalism . . . this was a man who couldn’t care for his lawn or even a single wife as Bill simultaneously bed-skipped his way through three marriages.”<sup>29</sup> Although the creators of *Big Love* claim to have no agenda against the mainstream Mormon Church many plotlines within *Big Love*’s six seasons, like the depiction of an endowment ceremony, could be decoded as direct criticism by viewers who are familiar with the workings and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>27</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Publicity Dilemma.”

<sup>28</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Publicity Dilemma.”

<sup>29</sup> Bellafante, Gina. “In ‘Big Love’ Finale on HBO, a Comeuppance for the Man.” The New York Times. 21 Mar.2011. Web.

## Challenging Normativity

Olsen told *The Advocate* that despite having no agenda for the show there were goals he and Scheffer wanted to achieve. He explained, “There were three things we wanted to dramatize—self in marriage, self in family, and self in society: What is it like to be marginalized and deemed off the table of legitimate discussion for who and what you are?”<sup>30</sup> Speaking from personal experiences, (Olsen and Scheffer were married in California just days before the LDS-supported ban of gay marriage was passed in California), he continues, “Some of the struggles of the characters are very analogous to the gay community of 15 or 20 years ago. These characters are dealing with a lot of self-loathing. And it’s ingrained by a society that says you are freaks.”<sup>31</sup>

As described by Austin, “In “Viagra Blue,” the second episode of the first season,<sup>32</sup> Vernie and Jo-Jo, two of the three wives of Bill’s friend and business partner Don, are shown playing footsie under a bridge game.” Austin describes,

This early scene is a subtle, but unmistakable, reference that became more apparent as the series continued. [Later in the series these two women in fact leave their mutual husband and develop their own romantic relationship] Not only are homosexuality and polygamy connected to each other by a binding set of legal precedents, but they are related by the fact that the women in a polygamous marriage are sealed to each other as well as their husband – making polygamy a form of same sex marriage.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Frei, Darren. "Big Love." *The Advocate* 14 Mar. 2006. Print. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Frei 66.

<sup>32</sup> Black, Dustin Lance, Elieen Myers, Mark V. Olsen, Will Scheffer, and Doug Stockstill. "Viagra Blue." *Big Love*. HBO. 19 Mar. 2006. Television.

<sup>33</sup> Austin, Michael. "Four Consenting Adults in the Privacy of Their Own Suburb: Big Love and the Cultural Significance of Mormon Polygamy." *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*. By Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2010. 51

It is at this point that one may ask how a parallel to the homosexual experience relates to America's memory of Mormon polygamy. The shortest answer, and one that could be the topic of several dissertations, is that the laws that were originally written to apply to polygamous relationships, such as the Edmunds-Tucker Act, have been used to criminalize all homosexual relationships as well as some heterosexual ones.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, some law scholars see the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, which struck down anti-sodomy laws used to prosecute homosexual behavior, as a precedent that will eventually lead to the decriminalization of polygamy, due to the fact that they feel as though the proverbial flood gates will open if the courts decide that the government doesn't have the ability to regulate and define marriage.<sup>35</sup>

*Big Love* explicitly comments on this line of thought. In season one's episode three, Roman Grant, the polygamist prophet and Bill's father-in-law, has his words misquoted and used against him when he comments to a reporter, "If the Supreme Court says 'yes' to the privacy rights of homosexual persons, surely it's time to recognize our rights to live in peace, too." When his quote is reported it is truncated to say, "We're just like . . . homosexuals." The parallels and connections are unavoidably seen by a viewer familiar with the legal issues surrounding the definition of marriage and therefore family. *Big Love* upon first glance may not be coded to depict the legal process or even the current struggles for the homosexual community and its supporters, but it is certainly symbolic of a people aspiring to equality.

While *Big Love*, to some, may be seen as advocating a move toward equality for all sexual orientations, an oppositional reading of the program's coding could reveal quite the opposite. For example, Liana Vrajitoru Andreassen's essay "Revenge of the Patriarchy: Is *Big*

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<sup>34</sup> Austin 51.

<sup>35</sup> John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner, *Petitioners v. Texas*. Supreme Court of the United States. 26 June 2003. *Legal Information Institute*. Cornell University School of Law, 26 June 2003. Web. 15 Feb. 2011.

*Love Big Enough?*” which was featured in a 2009 edition of the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, makes the argument that instead of showing polygamy as positive *Big Love*, in fact, reaffirms the patriarchy. She writes, “*Big Love* employs . . . methods of normalization and glamorization to re-normalize patriarchy after decades of its theoretical unpopularity: it makes it human, funny, and sympathetic.”<sup>36</sup> Andreasen bases this on her analysis that “after the flashy signals of difference wear off” *Big Love* reinforces power struggles with-in marriage in a way that is gender-based and hierarchical.<sup>37</sup> Andreasen’s decoding of *Big Love* focuses on the dichotomy between good polygamists—like Bill and his wives—and bad polygamists like Roman Grant. Audiences immediately identify Grant as a bad man because of how he manipulates his wives as well as marries underage girls, but Andreasen suggests that viewers then do not place any blame upon Bill and his relationship with his wives. She writes,

By making polygamy sexy and contemporary, the show is jeopardizing both the ongoing struggles of monogamous women to achieve balanced, non-patriarchal marriages, and to the struggle to expose abuse of both women and children on real life compounds, where it is already hard for the law to break through the secrecy.<sup>38</sup>

One example Andreasen provides as support for her oppositional decoding is entitled “Circle the Wagons.” In this episode Bill’s third wife Margene supports his decision to begin a computer-poker company and he presents her as his [only] wife to his new business partners because it will help the business. But once he decides to admit his polygamist lifestyle, Margene is not given privileges but instead is relegated back to the status third wife.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Andreasen 406-407

<sup>37</sup> Andreasen 407.

<sup>38</sup> Andreasen 411.

<sup>39</sup> Andreasen 411.

There are problems with an analysis, if only because it is oversimplified. The religious convictions of these three women, although they might waiver, keep them devoted to the principle. An oppositional reading of some viewers is that they know that this may be a feminist critique, that these women should not be forced to stay and do things against their will, but deep inside they agree with the endorsement of patriarchy. It seems that if the public could be aware of the root of the problem, Andreasen's call to fight against domestic violence in marriage and abuse against women living on religious compounds might be better heard because of its place within the context. Andreasen's article supports my analysis in that she describes the power of fundamentalists, "In this difficult world we need to be watchful and guard against the return of a newly justified patriarchy in the wake of war."<sup>40</sup> She concludes the article with a call for change within the media industry,

The entertainment industry should stop indulging the fear of feminism as the Wicked Witch of the West, and take more steps to legitimize women's subsidiary role, beginning with the portrayal of family life. Only after the myth of male superiority is dismantled can we begin to have a dialogue about the merits of alternative lifestyles as a possible way of the future, not a return to the past.<sup>41</sup>

While her call is noble, I do not agree that the myth of male superiority must be dismantled before other alternative lifestyles can become part of the normative view. These two dialogues, both the anti-patriarchal and the pro-alternative lifestyle, can occur simultaneously. *Big Love*, while flawed and therefore not entirely successful, does begin the dialogue about what a "normal" family and lifestyle can be.

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<sup>40</sup> Andreasen 413.

<sup>41</sup> Andreasen 414.

It is precarious to predict the lasting impact of this program on society. Although *Big Love* has ended, legal battles surrounding marriage and family have yet to be resolved. Austin suggests that the most revolutionary thing about these public performances of polygamy are that the performances do not simply portray “polygamists sympathetically but it treats polygamists differently—that is it does not lump all practicing polygamists together.” But it goes beyond giving “good” polygamists a voice.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that HBO’s *Big Love* has been complexly encoded with messages not only about Mormonism, but also about religion and society as a whole. Be it the struggle against the patriarchy or the freedom to define marriage as something other than one man and one woman, *Big Love* subtly asks questions about what society considers “normal” or “typical” and whether or not the status quo is just. Through encoding the plot and characters of *Big Love* can mean many things to many people.

What remains to be answered is how Hall judges the incorporation or impact of a message into society. I am left asking how many minds must be changed in order to deem a program’s coding successful? When does a scholar, such as myself, know that a message has been successfully communicated through the news or entertainment media and has become integrated into society? Does a message achieve more success if it is obviously integrated? What if that message is just trying to provoke thought and doesn’t have a corresponding manifestation in the real world? I think that *Big Love* has achieved success, at least for the time being. *Big Love* might not be a program that is remembered for years to come; after all, it was on a premium channel and had few widely known stars. It was controversial at times, but that controversy

quickly faded. Has or will *Big Love* change anyone's minds? Perhaps, but it would be impossible to tell at this early in its cultural history. But Lee Siegel is correct. This program has made its audience step back and consider what is normal. It is a series like *Big Love* that challenges what we know or what we thought we knew and starts our vicarious wheels turning even if we don't end up going anywhere. In my next chapter, I will turn to performances of Mormonism that are either sponsored or endorsed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and how the endorsement of the Church shapes how these performances should be analyzed.

## CHAPTER TWO – JUST LIKE YOU, EXCEPT MORMON

Randy: Well it's just that . . . the Harrisons are really nice people and you should see how loving and together their family is. I think there's something to that religion.

Stan: That's what they made me think, too!

Randy: All right, that does it. From now on, our family is Mormon!

*South Park*

Episode 7.12, "All About the Mormons"<sup>1</sup>

For sundry reasons, Mormonism (depicted as interesting and strange in TV shows such as HBO's *Big Love* and TLC's *Sister Wives* as well as the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*) is quickly emerging as a favorite cultural motif. In addition to reality-TV performances and fictional representations, scores of successful exposé biographies continue to shape the image of Mormonism. *U.S. News & World Report* called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the fastest growing faith group in American history and the Church is more than often misrepresented, mischaracterized, and simply the brunt of the joke.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will look at performances of Mormonism that are endorsed or produced by the Church itself and how the Church use narratives and the empathy they stir in audiences in order to answer the

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<sup>1</sup> Parker, Trey. "All About Mormons." *South Park*. Comedy Central. 19 Nov. 2003. Television.

<sup>2</sup> Gilgoff, Dan. "A Political Portrait of Mormons: More Republican/Conservative Than Evangelicals." *US News & World Report*. 27 July 2009. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.

aforementioned misrepresentations and mischaracterizations that the media so prominently features.

### **Media representations of Mormonism**

When HBO introduced American viewers to *Big Love* in 2006, it would not be the last time the topic of Mormon polygamy graced the screen. In only two months after the show's premiere, fictional characters came to life as the self-proclaimed polygamist Prophet Warren Jeffs gained international notoriety as a suspect on the FBI's *Ten Most Wanted* list. Jeffs was accused of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution on Utah state charges related to his alleged arrangement of illegal marriages between his adult male followers and underage girls. He was arrested in August 2006 in Nevada, and taken to Utah for trial.

In May and July 2007 the State of Arizona charged him with eight additional counts—including sexual conduct with minors and incest—in two separate cases. He was quickly convicted on all accounts and placed in prison.<sup>3</sup> During Warren Jeffs' trial an abundance of tell-all novels and biographies shot to the top of bestseller's lists. A very small selection of some of the most successful would include: *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs* by Elissa Wall and Lisa Pulitzer (William Morrow, 2008); *Escape* by Carolyn Jessop and Laura Palmer (Broadway, 2008); *Favorite Wife: Escape from Polygamy* by Susan Ray Schmidt (The Lyons Press, 2009); and *The Lonely Polygamist: A Novel* by Brady Udall (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). As one

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<sup>3</sup> In August of 2011 Warren Jeffs again stood trial for his inappropriate sexual behavior. He was convicted of two counts of sexually assaulting a 12-year-old and a 15-year-old who were his "spiritual wives." The jury sentenced him to life in prison for the first count of aggravated sexual assault and 20 years for the second count of sexual assault plus a \$10,000 fine. The sentences were the maximum allowed for each count. The judge ruled that the sentences be served consecutively.

CNN Wire Staff, comp. "Polygamist Leader Warren Jeffs Sentenced to Life in Prison." *CNN (blog)*. 9 Aug. 2011. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.

may notice from reading the titles of these texts, when these authors discuss Mormonism, they often portray it as a vehicle for polygamist marriage.

Certainly there are texts that are about Mormons that do not feature polygamy, and the Church itself publishes many of these (often as biographies and coffee table-style journalistic photo collections). It is polygamy, nevertheless, that is most often portrayed in the American media.<sup>4</sup> At this time there are not any network channels that broadcast Mormon-Non-Polygamous families, characters, or storylines and no *New York Times* Best Sellers that feature non-polygamist self-identifying Mormons.

The LDS Church has not advocated polygamy for over one hundred years. Even so, the memory of the Mormon Church as proponents of plural marriage remains fast. A 2007 Pew Research Center survey reports that “polygamy” or “bigamy” was the most frequent response when participants were asked to describe Mormonism in a single word, followed by “family,” “cult,” and “different.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly this perception is reflected in news reports. Michael Austin, a professor at Newman University, observes, “A Lexis-Nexis search of articles written between April 2006 and April 2008 showed that 22 percent of articles about Mormonism or Mormons generally also discussed polygamy (215 out of 995).”<sup>6</sup> It is easy to believe then that a Gallup poll conducted in August of 2006 found that one in four of all Americans agree with the statement “most Mormons favor polygamy.”<sup>7</sup>

These impressions of the LDS Church, however mistaken they might be, were strengthened in the fall of 2010 when TLC premiered *Sister Wives*, a new reality show following

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<sup>4</sup> With the exclusion of BYUtv a cable/satellite television channel operated by Brigham Young University. BYUtv content originates from the university and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

<sup>5</sup> Full results of the survey can be found at <http://pewforum.org/surveys/religiousviews07/>.

<sup>6</sup> Austin 38.

<sup>7</sup> Carroll, Joseph. “One in Four Americans Think Most Mormons Endorse Polygamy: Only 2% Think Most Americans Support Polygamy” *Gallup Poll Briefing*, September 7, 2006, 4-7.

a polygamous family as they [begrudgingly?] welcomed a new wife and her children into their fold. The seven-episode season of *Sister Wives* drew as many as 2.75 million viewers and, as I write, is in its second season, which focuses on the consequences of living polygamous lives.

One need only look at the recent production of the raunchy yet wildly successful Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* (for the most part outside the scope of this study, but nonetheless germane to my study for obvious reasons) to see how the public adores the topic of Mormonism. *Book of Mormon* is a religious satire musical with book, lyrics, and music by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, who are best known for creating the animated comedy *South Park*. Parker and Stone co-created the music with Lopez, who co-wrote and co-composed *Avenue Q*. The show lampoons organized religion and traditional musical theatre, reflecting the creators' lifelong fascination with Mormonism and musicals.

After nearly seven years of development, the show premiered on Broadway in March 2011. *The Book of Mormon* has garnered positive critical response and numerous theatre awards. In June 2011 *The Book of Mormon* practically swept the Antoinette Perry Awards winning the Tony Awards for best musical Best Direction (Parker and co-director/choreographer Casey Nicholaw), Best Performance by a Featured Actress (Nikki M. James), Best Orchestrations (Larry Hochman and Stephen Oremus), Best Scenic Design (Scott Pask), Best Sound Design (Brian Ronan) and Best Lighting Design (Brian MacDevitt). An original Broadway cast recording was released in May 2011, and became the highest-charting Broadway cast album in over four decades.<sup>8</sup> There was little surprise when the Church released an official statement regarding this risqué musical: "The production may attempt to entertain audiences for an evening, but the Book of Mormon as a volume of scripture will change people's lives forever by

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<sup>8</sup> Hetrick, Adam. "Not Since Hair: The Book of Mormon Cast Album Makes Billboard Top 10 - Playbill.com." *Playbill: Broadway, Off-Broadway, London News, Listings and Tickets*. 15 June 2011. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.

bringing them closer to Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The brevity of the Church’s statement speaks volumes. Where as many religious groups become defensive when mocked by the media, the Church does not engage any tactics to defend itself but instead restates their most basic tenets for anyone who might be interested. This can be seen as a wise choice in image management. By not becoming defensive or angry about such a widely enjoyed musical, the Church appears more open minded and—as they have been called for decades—a peculiar people. Except this time, for one of the first times in their history, that peculiarity can be seen as positive.

But it must be said; there aren’t any polygamous Mormons in *The Book of Mormon*. In an era where most depictions of the Mormon religion center upon polygamy or “strange” religious practices, *The Book of Mormon* has taken a different direction in its representation of the LDS. Perhaps the South Park guys are changing the tone and actually moving past most people’s perceptions of LDS practices. Parker and Stone didn’t write any of the characters to be polygamous. Certainly their Mormon characters are awkward and ineffectual as missionaries. But they aren’t polygamous. At least as so far as the audience knows.

## **Twenty Five Years of Mormon Advertising**

The onslaught of representations, or, as some see it, misrepresentations of Mormon beliefs compelled the Church to directly address what Mormons believe for all the world to see. According to Scott Swofford, director of media for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in his discussion of the LDS Church’s advertising campaigns over the last twenty-five years, “the best way to dispel myths about us or get our message out to the world was to let

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<sup>9</sup> Kirkland, Lyman. "Book of Mormon Musical: Church's Official Statement - LDS Newsroom Blog." *Newsroom - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Feb. 2010. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.

Mormons speak for themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Since its founding, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has tried to recruit converts. In modern times, Mormons aim to successfully change minds through missionaries, worship services, television advertisements, and blogs. In an interview published in *Deseret News*, Swofford describes the *Home Front Series* as “about strengthening family. Then we moved into the phase of direct response, when we would give some product that would enhance their family life or a free Bible or free Book of Mormon.”<sup>11</sup> These methods were neither entirely unsuccessful, nor did they reveal much about the Mormon worldview.

Each commercial featured families spending time together, or seeing the error of their selfish ways and then choosing to spend time together. One advertisement that aired in 2003 shows “A workaholic dad discovers he's ‘missing’ from his family.” Another entitled “Lasting Marriage,” which aired in 2004, presents a husband and wife demonstrating how they use hobbies to keep their patience.<sup>12</sup> Chronologically following these efforts the LDS Church began its “Truth Restored” series, which shared the tenets of the Mormon belief system. Swofford notes, “Some people were ready for that kind of a communication.” Some people were not. Those who were ready could request a free book of Mormon by calling a toll-free number.<sup>13</sup> He continued, “But people want to hear from Mormons, not from an institutional voice in most cases.”<sup>14</sup>

With the development of new means of proselytizing, audiences are beginning to have the opportunity to move away from the stock character of the weird Mormon to a depiction of welcoming, wholesome, loving, all-American families. The Church has begun to change its own

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<sup>10</sup> The Deseret News is owned by Deseret News Publishing Company, a subsidiary of Deseret Management Corporation, which is a for-profit business holdings company owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, Joel. "Mormon Ad Campaign Draws Attention in 9 U.S. Markets." *Deseret News* [Salt Lake City] 21 Aug. 2010. Web.

<sup>12</sup> See [www.Mormon.org](http://www.Mormon.org).

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, "Mormon Ad Campaign Draws Attention in 9 U.S. Markets."

<sup>14</sup> Campbell "Mormon Ad Campaign Draws Attention in 9 U.S. Markets."

methods of performance by stepping into new roles and formerly untapped media outlets.

Perhaps it is this shift away from the elusive Church-generated performance to a more personal and interactive experience that is bringing changes to the interests non-Mormons have in the LDS.

### **Critical Analysis Previous LDS Advertising**

Due to the lack of critical theory specifically addressing the modern Mainstream LDS Church and popular culture, I look to the work of performance studies and theatre scholar Henry Bial, author of *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen*, as an example of methodology for studying the relationship between religious identity and modern media.<sup>15</sup> In *Acting Jewish*, Bial surveys the performances by Jewish artists since the 1930s. Bial traces the “construction of Jewish American identity” or the performance of Jewishness. Judith Butler’s theories on identity performance and Benedict Anderson’s concepts of imagined communities in turn duly inform Bial’s lens as he demonstrates “how double coding functions to negotiate between the desire to assert the specificity of the Jewish experience and the apparently competing desire to speak to the universal human condition.”<sup>16</sup>

In the past, double coding, as defined in this case by David Krasner, one of several scholars who write about double coding, has dealt with the performance of black identity. Krasner cites African-American performers in the 1900s as an example of a group of people were caught between their loyalty to their community and their audience of white patrons. These performers performed for each audience, on the stage for white audiences and in the streets for

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<sup>15</sup> For analysis of Mormons and the media during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries look to Megan Sanborn Jones’s *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (Routledge 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Bial, Henry. *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005. Print. (3-4).

their fellow African Americans.<sup>17</sup> Bial takes these theories and transposes Krasner's African-American subject with Jewish performance in order to write about another ethnic group but also a major world religion. Bial positions the comedic routine of Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce who lists things as Jewish (such as fruit salad or living in New York or any other big city) or goyish (living in Butte, Montana even if you are Jewish or lime soda) as an example of how Jews too participate in double coding.<sup>18</sup> Bial justifies his transposition by asserting, and then demonstrating through his text, that his methods are "a model based on neither questionable essentialism nor on the politics of victimhood." Specifically, Bial sees this double coding as manifestation of the navigation between "the specific ('Jewish enough') and the universal ('not too Jewish')." <sup>19</sup> By comparison, the Latter-day Saints are struggling to find the same balance. Mormons are claiming to be a peculiar people set apart from all others, but at the same time claim to be just like their neighbors. In light of Stuart Hall's work surrounding encoding and decoding, one must consider the possibility that Mormons themselves double code their own performances, once for their Mormon peers and once for what they would call the "gentile" population—those who are not familiar with the Mormon worldview and way of life. Especially when it comes to sacred rituals or the "unwritten rules" of Mormonism messages may be encoded and then decoded as part of the daily performance of belief.

Continuing in Bial's line of questioning, that is, the notion of identity performance for a religious group, I posit that these same theories of identity, imagined community, and performance are demonstrated in the LDS Church's "I am a Mormon" television, internet and Time's Square billboard campaign, as well as in several highly successful blogs written by

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<sup>17</sup> Krasner, David. *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre: 1895 - 1910*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Bial 19

<sup>19</sup> Bial 3

Mormon housewives. In order to analyze the messages being presented in Mormon-centered media as a non-Mormon I am positioning myself within an imagined community of non-Mormon yet Mormonism-aware decoders. Here the term an *imagined community*, as conceived by Benedict Anderson and applied by Bial refers to a group of individuals that possess a common language system and cultural system.<sup>20</sup> As such, according to Anderson, a community is necessarily imagined as limited, “because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.”<sup>21</sup> Anderson also explains that this grouping of people can be “imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.”<sup>22</sup> For Bial, Jews are the original imagined community, a nation that may not have geographical boundaries but shares “religious and linguistic commonality.”<sup>23</sup>

Mormons, unlike many other imagined communities, are unique because they can and do actively seek converts and new members. My methodology includes also viewing Mormons, the followers of the teachings of Joseph Smith, as an ever growing imagined community. Mormons, although they do not share an ethnic connection like Jews, do in fact share a common language and cultural systems. This is well demonstrated in Mormon scholar and author Orson Scott Card’s *Saintspeak: The Mormon Dictionary*, which, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, defines the words unique to Mormonism such as ward, priesthood, and celestial. It is these words that reflect a culture unique to the Mormons: a culture centered upon God, Church, and Family. Some of the most well-known characteristics of the Mormon lifestyle are the ways in which LDS Members

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<sup>20</sup> Bial 146 & Anderson 12.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson 7.

<sup>22</sup> Bial 146.

<sup>23</sup> Bial 146.

abstain from caffeine, smoking, and pre-marital sexual activity. These are just some of the qualities that define Mormon culture, as the imagined community of people who believe they are living a proper and eternal-reward-worthy manner.

### **The Problem with Empathy**

When analyzing the use of personal stories as a means of advertisement or image control I look to Amy Shuman who, in *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, analyzes the personal narratives that are used by political or other organizations:

The great promise that narrative makes is to transcend personal experience, both by allowing us to see our own, seemingly unexplainable, experiences in other people's stories and by helping us to understand the otherwise unfathomable experiences of others.<sup>24</sup>

While Shuman primarily focuses upon what she deems “political junk mail” that aims to recruit voters or support for a particular cause, this is the same maneuver the LDS Church is making.<sup>25</sup> By having its members explain in simple terms as part of the “I am a Mormon” campaign and through so-called Mommy Blogs (both of which I will describe in greater detail below) what it means to them personally to be a Mormon believer the Church is using the narratives of its members in order to help non-members understand what it means to be a Mormon. Shuman continues,

Narratives require the reader to accept a fit between the named person and the larger situation . . . This person is only one of many . . . but by introducing you [to this person and their lifestyle] . . . the political support group hopes to

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<sup>24</sup> Shuman 149.

<sup>25</sup> Shuman 137.

convince you to become involved and to contribute money toward solving the problem . . . [T]he political party has appropriated the personal story as a representative of a larger collective story (an allegorical relationship).

We are being introduced to the world of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as they would like to appear. While the Church might not script these stories, it is nevertheless using these narratives in order to present a positive of representation Mormonism and the modern LDS Church. One of Shuman's critiques that is particularly pertinent to the "I am A Mormon" campaign and Mormon housewife blogs suggests, "The exotic other is reduced to a representative in what is described as a familiar or understandable cause." Therefore Mormons might be different from the general American public and seen as exotic but, according to Shuman, "if the cause they represent can be claimed universally understandable, it is as if they are known, or as if the other aspects of their identities pale in importance."<sup>26</sup>

As part of my seeking to know more about Mormonism through these two particular outlets, the "I am A Mormon" campaign and Mormon housewife blogs, I will also look for the stories not overtly told. These stories are those that are told through words unsaid and images unseen. The tacit understanding of avoided topics and assumptions held does impact the reader. But how? What do these authors/narratives assume to be fact and how do those assumptions impact what they convey to the viewer/reader? While Shuman does not specifically explore Mormon imagined-communities, she addresses the inherent problems in translation of one imagined community by another. She warns,

"The goal of mutual understanding is narrative's greatest promise. Narrative promises mutual understanding (empathy) and entitlement, and these are

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<sup>26</sup> Shuman 149.

competing promises, the first determined by questions of translatability and border crossing, and the second by questions of custody and containment.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Shuman provides those interpreting narratives a means by which to avoid getting lost in translation or between the borders. She suggests, “[i]dentifying the roles of empathy and entitlement in narrative helps to bring conversations about personal and allegorical representations of experience into a sustained dialogue that resists celebratory claims and interrogates narrative at its limits.”<sup>28</sup> Mormon campaigns and blogs, similarly to the political ones Shuman describes, use personal narratives in the attempt to have non-Mormons form a connection and empathetic relationship with an imagined community, those who practice Mormonism, as a whole. Therefore, it is with this cautionary advice I approach the performances of identity through advertisements and blogs that are produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

### **The “I am a Mormon” Campaign**

The “I am a Mormon” campaign seeks to introduce non-believers to supposedly average everyday *just-like-you* Mormon believers. Advertisements, as I discussed earlier, are not a new tactic used by the Church. Ellen Futterman, editor of the *Jewish Light*, quotes writer Ben Munson, of Lake St. Louis, who is a regional media affairs specialist for the Church of Latter-day Saints. Munson observes that the campaign

portrays a new generation of Mormons as the voice of the Church; Mormon commercials in the mid-'80s had more of a PSA [Public Service Announcement]-feel to them. What the “I am a Mormon” commercials do is take the message of

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<sup>27</sup> Shuman 150.

<sup>28</sup> Shuman 151.

what we believe and show members living their faith, tying it all into the social media aspects of 2010.<sup>29</sup>

In order to do so, the campaign includes ads on television, radio, billboards, bus platforms, and in the interior of transit vehicles, which feature everyday Mormons talking about their regular lives and their faith. The profiles reach an international audience through *mormon.org* and via digital and social media, Internet ads, Facebook and YouTube. Stephen B. Allen explains, "Its principal purpose is to 'dispel the myths and misperceptions' about Mormons, a critical task for a religion that considers proselytizing an ecclesiastical mandate."<sup>30</sup>

The campaign began with thirty Church-produced testimonial videos featuring a diverse cross-section of Mormon believers.<sup>31</sup> The producers took suggestions for interviewees from Church members across the nation. Eventually a committee was given around sixty names, which were narrowed down several times to the final thirty. *The Mormon Times* journalist Emily Schmuhl reported in September 2010 that "[t]he selected subjects are an eclectic mix of ethnicities, backgrounds, occupations, ages and talents. A mix of veteran commercial filmmakers and student filmmakers, headed by creative director Parry Merkley, joined the project."<sup>32</sup> Schmuhl quotes Swofford, "We went for YouTube quality. We had two-man crews going across the country gathering the pieces. No art director. No makeup person. We wanted it to be very raw and documentary-like."<sup>33</sup> These video profiles were edited to thirty second television spots and aired in nine markets: Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; St. Louis, Missouri; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Rochester, New York; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania;

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<sup>29</sup> Futterman, Ellen. "In Marketing We Trust?" *St. Louis Jewish Light: Connecting Our Community: Connecting Our Community*. 22 Sept. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Wangsness, Lisa. "Mormons' Image Campaign." *Boston.com*. The New York Times, 20 June 2011. Web. 25 Jan. 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Schmuhl, Emily. "The People in the 'I'm a Mormon' Ad Campaign." *Deseret News* [Salt Lake City] 13 Sept. 2010. Print.

<sup>32</sup> Schmuhl np.

<sup>33</sup> Schmuhl np.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Tucson, Arizona; Jacksonville, Florida, and, not long after, Times Square itself.<sup>34</sup>

As a complementary part of the campaign, Church members are invited to share their profiles on the mormon.org website. Any LDS member who wishes can submit a photo and personal story for review. Over 4,000 members, in addition to those who are featured in videos, have been approved. Swofford was surprised by the response the campaign received, “[when looking at the profiles] you will find those people [who are featured on the website] are very unified in the understanding of what they believe. It is shocking. I expected responses to be all over the place, and they are not.” In fact Swofford believes that the advertisements are effective because, “People in their own words are articulating their beliefs better than perhaps we could.”<sup>35</sup>

According to the public relations arm of the LDS Church’s website “The profiles are reviewed, but not edited or modified. They are left in the original form as they were submitted.” Stephen B. Allen, who is the managing director of the LDS Missionary Department explains, “When you read those profiles you get inside people’s hearts, and it is pretty obvious right from the get-go that people are sharing their own beliefs.”<sup>36</sup>

It stands to reason that a study on the “I Am A Mormon” campaign would include a thorough description of the process by which these profiles are constructed, and indeed it is at this point in my study that I originally intended to include a sampling of what questions are asked and what prompts are included the Mormon.org profile submission process. I went to Mormon.org and clicked on the “Create a Profile” menu option. It links to an information page

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<sup>34</sup> Campbell, "Mormon Ad Campaign Draws Attention in 9 U.S. Markets."

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, "Mormon Ad Campaign Draws Attention in 9 U.S. Markets."

<sup>36</sup> "New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront - LDS Newsroom." *Newsroom*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Web. 01 May 2011.

that among other introductory items says, “participation is optional, but you must be a member of the Church to create a profile. English-only profiles will be available this year; other languages will follow after.” Below this paragraph there is an additional sentence, which states, “You will need to register and create an LDS Account to create a profile on this site. If you already have an LDS Account, click on the sign in button to create a profile.” I do not have an LDS Account, and I noticed in particular the requirement of church membership in order to have a profile. I also felt that it was against the intentions of the website to have a Mormon friend join the website so I could get an insider’s look. This website is intended for a community of which I am not a member, and therefore it was at this point that I decided to not continue with this vein of my research.

That issue aside, at least for now, I still found myself wondering why does the LDS Church seek to present such a normative and yet trendy image? Mormon.org project manager Ron Wilson says the Church's goal is to dispel so-called myths about Mormons and the Mormon religion.<sup>37</sup> As part of a Church news release, Swofford provides this answer, “The goal here is for people to understand that any institution, any collection of people, is really just a manifestation of the beliefs of its members. It’s not so much what we believe but what we do because we believe that makes Mormons interesting.”<sup>38</sup> Quin Monson, a political scientist at Brigham Young University comments that “[t]he problem for Mormons is that we don’t interact outside of the religion very much.” Monson continues, “[p]art of that is that we’re a little

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<sup>37</sup> Mercedes, Cheryl. "New Mormon Campaign Only the Beginning - WAFB Channel 9, Baton Rouge, LA." *WAFB Channel 9, Baton Rouge, LA | - Baton Rouge News, Weather and Sports*. WAFB TV, 09 Aug. 2010. Web. 04 May 2011.

<sup>38</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront - LDS Newsroom.”

different, and part of that is we're a little insular, and part of that is the religion itself is pretty demanding; if you're in, it can be many hours a week.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Just like Me**

“I call them the ‘Mormons are surfers, too’ ads,” said Patrick Griffin, a New Hampshire GOP media consultant. “The theme is, ‘It’s normal to be Mormon.’”<sup>40</sup> When one ventures to the Mormon.org website they are presented a menu of faces from which to choose. I’ll admit I chose the face that looked most like mine, a white woman with long brown hair, wearing a sweater in my favorite color—purple. As I watched this video I was introduced to Shawni. During her video, which seems to have been shot in her dining room, I learned that Shawni has four stunningly adorable, well-dressed children, a handsome husband, trendy yet modest clothes, and loves to photograph her children. This is just what I see. I hear her talk about how important spending time with one’s family is—so much so—that in fact she gave “up doing professional photography a couple years ago when [she] realized it was sucking up too much time from [her] family.”<sup>41</sup>

She also tells me, the viewer, that she is a blogger (on a Macbook Pro) in order to keep a record of her family. We learn of her trials as a mother, forgetfulness, bad days, and “trying over and over again, and it doesn’t work about half the time.” Her video ends with the statement,

I am a wife. I am a blogger. I believe in slamming the door when you’re really mad—it makes you feel better [laughs]. I am a fiercely devoted mom. I am a

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<sup>39</sup> Wangsness np.

<sup>40</sup> Wangsness np.

<sup>41</sup> "Hi, I'm Shawni." *Mormon.org*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Web. 01 May 2011. <<http://mormon.org/me/2XRX>>.

photographer. I am a devoted Mom. My name is Shawni Eyre Pothier. And I am a Mormon.<sup>42</sup>

It is not until the very last moment of the video that I see there is not really anything different between Shawni and the woman I aspire to be—except that she is Mormon. Each of the advertisements in the “I am a Mormon” campaign follows the same structure. The viewer meets an interesting person, learns a little about his or her values, his or her interests, and his or her daily life. The viewer sees a snapshot of that person’s life and the end of each YouTube-hosted video concludes with the statement, “. . . and I am a Mormon.”

### **Response and Reception**

At a glance, an “I am a Mormon” advertisement for the Latter-day Saint Church seems inviting, diverse, and even creative. But what are we not seeing in these advertisements? What identities are not portrayed or supported? Certainly some of the more obvious omissions are homosexual singles or couples, as well as Mormons who seem to be less than affluent, or those who aren’t fully invested in the teachings of the Church. Of course it makes sense not to feature members who have issues with Church policies and the teaching of the prophets. We do not see women saying negative things about staying at home with their families, no one seems to have children that are in any way difficult or not perfectly well behaved, and of course everyone seems to love the Mormon life. The viewer must realize that these representations of the Latter-day Saints are in fact performances of identity that are handpicked by church administrators and edited for content. The Church is attempting to teach the non-LDS public that not all Mormons

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<sup>42</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Hi, I’m Shawni.”

are the same, yet, by doing so, they have created and reaffirmed the notion that Mormons live shiny, happy, family-centered lives—and they *all* are perfectly satisfied in doing so.

Across the board the media has given and reported both positive and negative reactions to the LDS Church's campaign. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported recently: "The ads arrived on the heels of an anti-Mormon backlash by some gay rights activists on the West Coast. But the campaign's designers said it responds only to numerous survey findings that half of Americans don't know a Mormon. ABC News aired a story that quoted Mormon blogger, John Dehlin, saying the ads are misleading."<sup>43</sup>

Dehlin says the ads do not reflect Mormon doctrine and teachings when it comes to race, gender equality and individualism. Male familial headship is one of the tenets he does not see presented in this campaign. For example, he continues, "the husband is supposed to work and the mom is supposed to stay home and take care of the kids. There's a difference between what the prophets teach us and what this PR campaign is holding up."<sup>44</sup>

This is a common critique of the "I am Mormon" advertisements among some LDS viewers.

Similarly, blogger Sharon Lindbloom sees inconsistencies in this public presentation of the Mormon way of life. The advertisements, to Lindbloom, appear to be campaigning in the United States to see Mormons as "normal; that is, as mainstream America, mainstream Christians."<sup>45</sup> She sees these the "I am Mormon" campaign as a means to say that there is

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<sup>43</sup> John Dehlin is a self-proclaimed progressive Mormon and editor of the website mormonstories.org.

<sup>44</sup> Rodgers, Ann. "Ad Campaign Re-branding Mormons as Regular Folks." *Post-Gazette.com*. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 22 Aug. 2010. Web. 04 May 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Lindbloom's biography, as featured on her blog, is as follows: "Sharon Lindbloom has loved and served the Lord Jesus Christ since 1979. Though never a Mormon, Sharon's interest in Mormonism — and her great love for the Mormon people — began in 1987 when a family member started investigating The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This led Sharon to study Mormonism through reading the Mormon scriptures as well as the writings of LDS prophets and apostles. Sharon's research led her to become the director of a Minnesota-based outreach ministry

nothing different about Mormonism—just look at how ordinary the Mormon people are. Herein lies Lindbloom’s critique that, “Mormonism was founded on the very idea that it is different. It claims to be the only true church, after all. To suggest that one can know all they need to know about Mormonism by looking at the apparent normalcy of its members seems almost to employ a bit of slight of hand.”<sup>46</sup> Most certainly, there are many religions that claim to be different and true. Mormonism in particular, however, prides itself on being, to use the term most widely used in LDS circles, a *peculiar people* who are set apart from the rest.

Not all critical responses, however, call the motives and sincerity of the advertisements into question. Many, in fact, are rather confused and apathetic about the ads. Most feedback centers on a misunderstanding about the purpose of the campaign. Often the articles and news reports focused upon the “I am Mormon” advertisement campaign making fun of the perfect and cool lives lived by those in the videos. Salon.com contributor Alex Pareene does just that in an article entitled, “The weird middle-American Mormon ad campaign” with the lead, “Residents of nine mid-sized cities are meeting the cutest and coolest Latter-day Saints—but why?” Pareene sees the tactics of this campaign as understandable. He explains, “There is a history of Americans persecuting Mormons, and they're a bit touchy about getting run out of everywhere they were until they ended up settling beside a giant dead salt lake, so working on their brand is understandable.” Since the beginning, Mormons have faced persecution for their beliefs, even those that don’t include polygamy. Pareene doesn’t stop there. He adds, “But (in addition to incredibly expensive mission work) this could also be damage control for the messy press they got for bankrolling the anti-gay marriage campaign in Florida.” His final statement is a cheeky if

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to Mormons. She served in this capacity for 18 years before joining the staff of Mormonism Research Ministry where she now serves prayerfully as a full-time volunteer lay-apologist.”

<sup>46</sup> Lindbloom, Sharon. "Normal Mormons." Web log post. *Mormon Coffee*. 12 Aug. 2010. Web. 01 May 2011. <<http://blog.mrm.org/2010/08/normal-mormons/>>.

astute observation, “They may be spending millions imposing their morality on us, but look, guys, one of them rides a motorcycle!” Oddly enough, Wangsness reports, “Survey data collected by the church found that negative associations with the word ‘Mormon’ — from ‘cultish’ to ‘sexist’ — dropped noticeably in the test markets that ran the ads last summer.”<sup>47</sup> Even ‘antigay’ associations dropped, a mystery to even the Mormons, since none of the ads features someone who is gay or who advocates for gay rights.

The reason most often suggested for why the LDS Church is releasing this type of campaign at this time is the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney. Swofford and other LDS spokespeople have repeatedly refuted this claim. "It had nothing whatsoever to do with Mitt Romney's campaign," LDS spokeswoman Kim Farah told FoxNews.com. "The Church is politically neutral and does not support a political candidate."<sup>48</sup> But, Quin Monson also told FoxNews.com that Romney’s failed '08 presidential bid was a "wake-up call for Mormon leaders and rank-and-file alike to the fact that some people don't like us. . . . And [Romney’s lack of acceptance] likely is what caused Mormon leaders to think about what we can do about our image."<sup>49</sup>

### **Mormon Mommy Bloggers**

While the “I am A Mormon” campaign is geared toward a diverse audience, blogs by stay-at-home Mormon mothers (affectionately referred to in the field as Mormon Mommy Blogs) have found themselves having a pretty specific audience. Their audience includes not only mothers of young children who see themselves and their struggles in the often-daily blogs but

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<sup>47</sup> Wangsness np.

<sup>48</sup> Clark, Stephen. "New Mormon Ad Campaign: Seeking to Dispel Myths Or PR for Romney '12 Run? - FoxNews.com." *FoxNews.com - Breaking News | Latest News | Current News*. 04 Sept. 2010. Web. 01 May 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Clark np.

also young twenty-something educated women without children. Certainly the “I am a Mormon” ads are limited in number but there are more Mormon Housewife blogs than one would attempt to count. They are full of photos of adorable (white) children, homes decorated with an air of vintage whimsy, fabulous theme dinner parties, and lots of smiling. Their blog entries center upon family coming and goings, crafting, motherhood, and young-hip-life. At first, as with the “I am A Mormon” campaign, one doesn’t know that these women are religious. But to quote blogger and author Emily Matchar,

They mention relatives in Utah, they drink a suspicious amount of hot chocolate. Finally, you see it: a subtly placed widget with a picture of a temple, or a hyperlink on the word 'faith' or 'belief.' You click the link and up pops the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.... They're members of a large, close-knit network of Mormon lifestyle bloggers—young stay-at-home-moms who blog about home and hearth, Latter-day Saint-style.<sup>50</sup>

Matchar, who describes herself as “your standard-issue late-20-something childless overeducated atheist feminist” writes in her article *Why I Cannot Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs* for Salon.com of her personal fascination for these women and their writing.

Many of these blogs began not long after Elder Russell M. Brand in 2007 told BYU-Hawaii’s student body that, “[w]hile some conversations have audiences in the thousands or even millions, most are much, much smaller. But all conversations have an impact on those who participate in them. Perceptions of the Church are established one conversation at a time.” He concluded by calling for the students to consider using blogs to provide an alternative

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<sup>50</sup> Matchar, Emily. "Why I Can't Stop Reading Mormon Housewife Blogs - Internet Culture - Salon.com." *Salon.com - Salon.com*. 15 Jan. 2011. Web. 22 June 2011.

representation of the Mormon Church than that which is provided by the media.<sup>51</sup> This is an interesting suggestion when one considers Shuman's analysis that, "[f]irst-person experience derives its authority from its claim to be the original and thus authentic source of knowledge."<sup>52</sup> These blogs (because real live Mormon believers write them) are claiming a sense of authoritative performance and narrative that the non-believing media cannot claim. Therefore, the Church seems to believe, the blogs should be the preferred source for information because they are written by those who know what they are *really* like and what the Mormons *really* believe.

Since I already "met" Shawni through her "I am a Mormon" video, I decided to explore the blog she mentions writing. Entitled *71 Toes*, named for the number of toes of her children and husband (one daughter was born with six toes on one foot), Shawni's blog is a prime example of Mormon housewives who blog about daily life. As in her Mormon.org piece, Shawni's life is made up of beautiful children, taking photographs, and trying to be a good wife and mother. Unlike other Mormon housewife blogs, Shawni often speaks about her religion and how it impacts the daily life of her and her family. More often bloggers take the position of Naomi of *Rockstar Diaries*, who lives in Washington, DC with her husband and baby. Julliard trained dancer and fashionista Naomi, until the birth of her daughter in February 2011, featured the yuppie-fashionable life of this couple living in the nation's capital—and of course their adorable dog and apartment.

Why are these blogs so popular? After all, if they are just writing about everyday life, why do they have hundreds or even thousands of readers? *The Deseret News* asked that very question to Gabrielle Blair of the blog *Design Mom* who replied,

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<sup>51</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints "Apostle Urges Students to Use New Media" Web. 01 May 2011. <http://newsroom.lds.org/article/apostle-urges-students-to-use-new-media>.

<sup>52</sup> Shuman 120.

There are a lot of talented, educated Mormon women who grew up assuming motherhood would be the end all be all of their existence. Then they found, once they became mothers, that they had capacity for projects and ideas in addition to and beyond motherhood. And design blogs are an easy outlet for all the creative energy.<sup>53</sup>

But *The Deseret News* does its own bit of critical analysis by adding that Blair admitted that this theory is her sister's, who happens to also run a successful Mormon Mommy Blog.<sup>54</sup> Emily Matchar specifically provides an outsider's insight as to why these blogs are becoming such a popular outlet for Mormon women and why non-believers so often read them. Matchar has discovered through interviews and online discussions that women generally read these blogs because

Well, to use a word that makes me cringe, these blogs are weirdly “uplifting.” To read Mormon lifestyle blogs is to peer into a strange and fascinating world where the most fraught issues of modern living — marriage and child rearing — appear completely unproblematic.<sup>55</sup>

Women read these blogs because they can connect to the lives of these mothers and because the blogs give readers the hope that they too can have such a life. But these women don't just “have it figured out.” Many of the Mommy Bloggers give the credit for their success to God and write that their religious beliefs are key to achieving that “unproblematic” existence.

It is in these qualities that I see a reason for critique. Do Mormon bloggers really provide an accurate account of daily life or are these blogs sanitized for publication? I have read Mormon

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<sup>53</sup> Boyd, Hal. "Popular Mormon Mommy Blogs Revisited." *The Deseret News*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 27 June 2011. Web. 13 Aug. 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Boyd np.

<sup>55</sup> Matchar np.

blogs for over two years and cannot recall a single instance where a wife tells of fighting with her husband or being so angry with her kids that she yells. Does that mean that Mormons never fight and never get angry? This is an issue of public-versus-private. These private narratives become public and therefore become part of the church's public image. Shuman writes, "Although not private, these stories operate as tokens of privacy embedded as enclaves in a public discourse. The stories retain their authenticity as personal and thereby grant authentic status to the public discourse."<sup>56</sup> If one does not question the empathy and connection readers feel for these Mommy Mormons, the presentation of LDS worldviews and life may also go unquestioned.

Is the Church suggesting that these narratives are authentic simply because they are from "real live" Mormons? I do not think so, and have found no evidence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints controlling what is published in blogs. But it must be noted that several of the most famous Mommy Bloggers were tapped to film "I Am A Mormon" videos. So, obviously, the Church must approve of what their blogs include or else it wouldn't have allowed them to become an official face of Mormonism; or would it? Even if the church "allowed" blogs they didn't approve of their subject matter it would just show how open and progressive the Church can be. The Church reacted in such a way to the raunchy nature of *The Book of Mormon* musical; it wouldn't be hard to believe they would do the same for *just some housewife's* blog.

The question remains whether these advertisements and blogs are actually impacting the image of the Latter-day Saint Church. Are people's minds actually changing when it comes to their opinion of Mormons and the teachings of Joseph Smith? *The Deseret News* quotes Scott Trotter, spokesperson for LDS Church's Public Affairs Department who said,

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<sup>56</sup> Shuman 121-122

The markets where we placed the ads last year did see an increase in interest in the Church and the total number of visitors to mormon.org. We think the campaign is working, which is why we're expanding to other communities this year. There is undoubtedly a national conversation going on currently about the Church and its members, and we want to be part of that conversation.<sup>57</sup>

But a conversation may not equal success. There is, as yet, no scientific way of knowing what these conversations are actually accomplishing in the LDS Church and in the minds of non-Mormons. If even if they are not gaining new converts, the ads are certainly stand to improve Mormonism's image as "normal" and perhaps even appealing.

The "I am a Mormon" campaign and Mormon housewife blogs allow outsiders to imagine personal knowledge of real life Mormon believers. When I see Shawni or I read about Naomi I find myself connecting to their struggles, their interests, and their lives- even if we don't share religious views. I begin to understand where they are coming from. I begin to develop empathy for this group of people who seemingly just want to be accepted for what and who they are. That is what the Church is trying to achieve. Their efforts are successful even if I don't convert. They are successful because I at least begin to *try* to understand.

### **A Compelling and Troubling Performance**

Regardless of their success—however it might be defined—both the "I am A Mormon" campaign and Mormon Mommy Bloggers are using a means of performance and representation in ways that are both compelling and troubling. As the Church both officially and unofficially confronts misrepresentations it remains to be seen if any change can be made. Viewers are

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<sup>57</sup> Walker np

presented the lovely side of Mormonism, the hopeful side of being a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but what are they actually seeing? Is this advertisement campaign actually powerful enough to combat the negative stereotypes the media is so fond of presenting?

When using the work of these scholars to problematize and analyze the “I am a Mormon” campaign as well as blogs written by LDS mothers, I discover that there is a lot more here than a Church simply trying to reach new members and to fight against the exoticness of the *Sister Wives* or the hilarity of *The Book of Mormon*. This is a purposeful and driven image management campaign. Rightly so: Mormonism has been performed in ways the Church would not consider correct and the Church is attempting to find new ways to set the record straight without directly confronting each and every representation. This is its mode of operation, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The LDS Church attempts to not let its proverbial enemies choose the battleground and instead aims to be above such struggles. The “I am a Mormon” campaign and Mormon mommy blogs are just two situations where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, as much as it can, being avant-garde and confronting problems on its own terms.

I, of course, cannot speak for all others who have viewed these videos and blogs. But for me, someone who isn’t looking to convert, these performances are successful and give me personal connections to those with different beliefs from my own. I might not ever meet Shawni, but I think she’s pretty interesting and a woman I’d like to have coffee with regardless of her religion . . . that is, if she is a Mormon who drinks coffee. Maybe we’d have to go out for hot chocolate instead.

### CHAPTER THREE – CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

We began turning our gaze *away* from those who we were studying to the *processes* we used to study and write, and within that turning, we came full circle, back to ourselves.

H. L. (Bud) Goodall Jr.

*Writing the New Ethnography*

Most of the Mormon women I see in the media seem to be stay-at-home moms with an overabundance of children. *Big Love* features women as the drama makers. *Sister Wives* leaves you feeling sorry for the women who live a life of plural marriage. The same feeling arises when reading one of the many exposé-former-child-bride novels. But these women, because they practice polygamy, are not considered to be Church members by the Church of Latter-day Saints. The Mormon Mommy bloggers, on the other hand, seem too shiny and polished to be true, and the women featured in the “I am a Mormon” campaign are not much different (and often actually are) Mommy Bloggers. I did not meet a Mormon until my Freshman year of college, so up until then, these were the only exposure I had to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Needless to say, I was not informed to what the LDS practiced or what Mormons actually believed.

But I’m not alone in my ignorance. In June 2000, MTV’s *Real World* featured a cast member named Julie Stoffer who was a BYU student from Delafield, Wisconsin. During the show’s run spoke with Utah’s *Deseret News*: “I’ve gotten hit with so many Mormon myths, you don’t even know,” she said. “I’ve been dispelling a lot of them.” The *Deseret News* continues by

providing examples of Julie's (*Real World* characteristically only uses first names) myth busting. In the first hour, one roommate asks her if she's married: "He's under the illusion that all Mormons marry at the age of 15 or 16. The question of whether she can drink Coke comes up. Later on, people assume Mormons have prohibitions against dating, dancing and even makeup."<sup>1</sup> On the *Real World* Julie is encountering many of the questions I have wanted answered. During the premiere episode and throughout the 22nd episode season, Julie didn't hesitate to answer these questions, but she was at "least a little bit uncomfortable with the thought of representing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."<sup>2</sup> Julie hadn't intended to be the poster girl for the LDS worldview to MTV audiences—she went to the audition because it was a free trip to Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> But, in the end, she did come to realize that it was unavoidable. She explained her position as the sole Mormon in MTV's [in]famous house of strangers, "I recognize, though, that it being my religion, that I am a representative of it. And I think I have handled that responsibility in a good way because I've been true to myself throughout. I haven't tried to be a bad representative, I've just been myself."<sup>4</sup>

Part of Julie being herself was shocking her housemates with her daily life. But while there may be TV footage of Julie practicing her values as a Latter-day Saint, there are few other representations in either film or television that portray the daily life of Latter-day Saint women. Women who believe in the Book of Mormon and the teachings of Joseph Smith are usually portrayed as polygamous, sheltered, and wearing prairie dresses. But simply put, the women who follow the value system set forth in the LDS church are given much more autonomy. Despite what reality TV might teach audiences, LDS women can wear pants, are allowed to

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce, Scott D. "Unlikely Path: BYU to MTV." *Deseret News* [Salt Lake City, UT] 2 June 2000. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Pierce np.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce np.

<sup>4</sup> Webley, Kayla. "Seven Strangers Picked to Live in a House - Top 10 MTV Moments - TIME." *Breaking News, Analysis, Politics, Blogs, News Photos, Video, Tech Reviews - TIME.com*. TIME, 10 Feb. 2010. Web. 19 Aug. 2011.

choose to have short hair, and sometimes even work outside of the home. The misconceptions about Mormon Womanhood abound.

## **Performing Mormonism**

As a theatre and performance studies scholar I see religion as a set of performative acts, meaning that religious texts are our scripts and blocking notes, costumes are dictated by our moral standards, and even the setting in which we dwell is dictated by our choices and beliefs. Scholars such as J. L. Austin and Shannon Jackson write that theatre is the least performative on the performativity spectrum because, unlike religion, theatre has an understood and perceived constructed-ness, use of imagination, acting, and pretending in the minds of its spectators.<sup>5</sup> But through out this study I have found that approaching religion from the perspective that it parallels theatre has allowed me to breakdown a belief system into parts to be analyzed and decoded. Then the opportunity arrived for me to share my perspective with someone who could correct me if I was wrong.

The way it worked out, I found myself sitting in my childhood bedroom, at my childhood desk. This is the same desk I sat at while reading so many Mormon expose books as a high school student. I held the phone on speakerphone and I asked her even though I already knew her answer,

*So would you call yourself a Mormon?*

She paused and stopped for a moment like she was thinking about how she would phrase her answer,

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<sup>5</sup> Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962. Print.  
Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

*Yes, I would and I do. I write on Mormon topics, and will be at conferences and talking to colleagues they see [the study of Mormon Topics] as legitimate and very quickly the follow up question is asked, 'So are you Mormon?' Yes, I am. It's not just that I do it privately; I also do it publically and in my career.<sup>6</sup>*

Immediately I knew that she had excellent insight for me and could answer questions I had not only about Mormons but also about my own religious worldview.

### **Some Questions Answered**

Meghan Sanborn Jones is a theatre scholar. She is a mother. She is a wife. She likes musicals. She's a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. That means she's a Mormon. She is a professor of theatre at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. As I write I find it hard to truncate this woman into words and sentences. I barely know Meghan Sanborn Jones. I would probably call her Dr. Jones. We are not friends and have never looked each other in the eyes, and I'm not sure I would be able to pick her out of a crowd. But I know her work. I respect her scholarship. I admire her skill. Talking to this scholar is an exciting event for me on my journey through academia.

Dr. Jones received her doctorate from the University of Minnesota and has published in many journals and her book *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* is included in Routledge's Studies in American Popular History and Culture. Its blue cover has brightened my stack of books for over a year now. I will admit I have accrued over thirty dollars of late library fines from needing it *just a few* more days. We casually chatted. Both our phones dropped the calls and interrupted Dr. Jones in the middle of an answer. But she was gracious

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<sup>6</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

enough to keep calling back and to keep repeating herself. Having the opportunity to ask Dr. Jones questions about both Mormonism and performance was exciting. I shared with her the question I am most often asked when I explain my area of study most people ask, “They are the polygamous ones—right?”

*So do you ever get asked that question?*

*No one asks me about polygamy. Maybe its because I am a scholar and hanging out with other scholars it seems pretty clear if they have done even a little bit of research or watched the disclaimer at the beginning of Big Love. Plus the Church has gone way out of its way to remind everybody that it's not polygamists.*

*Nobody ever really asks me that.* <sup>7</sup>

I must admit I was surprised. Polygamy is all over the news and television. I can only guess why we are asked different questions. Scholars of course don't ask such an obvious question. Utahan's of course don't ask such an obvious (and perhaps uncomfortable) question. But when I try to explain what I am spending my time doing in graduate school I'm not usually talking to scholars or even people who have ever even met a “real life” Mormon. She continued explaining what questions she actually is asked,

*Perhaps more often because I am a theatre professor working at BYU the questions are a lot less about my belief system and a lot more like “How is it teaching at BYU?” Meaning- how do I negotiate being an artist and theatre practitioner, which generally involves a level of critical thinking at an institution that is run by a church that is famous for neither liberalism or critical thinking.* <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

I was impressed that she would say such a thing. So many of the books I have read that are pro-Mormon are unabashedly all pro-Mormon all the time. I respected this about her. Even within my own religious circles, I often have qualms with some of the leaders and the way they interpret the Holy Scriptures. Listening to Dr. Jones say something critical or at the very least ambivalent about the political, intellectual or artistic views of the Church leadership[?] gave me the confidence to ask more probing questions. I came right out and asked the question I really wanted to know.

*So what do you think about the stereotypes of Mormon women on TV?*

*The idea that there is a certain kind of Mormon woman – which is a woman who stays home and is a mother – is actually largely accurate. So to pretend that all Mormon women are raging feminists feeling like they are being held down by the man . . . Most Mormon women stay at home and are a mom (anecdotally, a majority). If they are married and have kids, they stay home!*

I grant her anecdote some weight. She's talking about her friends and her family. She explained further without my prodding,

*The stereotype isn't being made up maliciously. I do find that no one has ever questioned my choices, the exception being my students at BYU who say we should respect the words of the prophet and asking why we are working women—maybe a handful [of students have questioned] in eleven years. And my mother in law was a little nervous, not in a condemning way at all but rather “Oh so this is how this works.”*

Jones's mention of her students catches my attention. As an educator at a religious institution she has to find a balance between non-Church supported themes that are featured in theatre. BYU asks that while she provides her students well-rounded theatre education that she considers her Church's teachings, sensitivities, and dispositions. It's a balance I am trying to find for my own someday-students and for myself. She explained how she selects her course materials based upon anthologies and what she feels communicates to her students most effectively. Plus she gives them, if they have a really convincing reason, the opportunity to complete alternate assignments if they particularly object to a text. Dr. Jones continued with a laugh.

*I am a big fan of people being able to draw their own lines. I am not a big fan of people who don't agree with that.<sup>9</sup>*

I proceeded with my questions. I explained that I see Mormons so often represented on TV in ways that are incredibly dated and that I am searching for the reason why American audiences are so fascinated with polygamous marriages. Dr. Jones explained to me that she felt differently.

*I don't find the predominant representation of Mormonism in popular culture is polygamy anymore. I think that's not the case. That's a dated representation of Mormons. While clearly is a resurgence of polygamy between Big Love and More than one Wife . . . is that what it's called? [Sister Wives] The predominant image of Mormonism today is the one that suggests slightly ineffectual Boy Scout, who's is really nice, and a little too cheerful. That's the representation that seems more pervasive. Clearly, polygamy is a ghost that is going to continue on—it's not*

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<sup>9</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

*going to go away- but the way Mormons are shown in the media is the brunt of the joke not so much with polygamy but the boy scout.*<sup>10</sup>

She was exactly right.

*Big Love* and *Sister Wives* are just two of many representations. The Boy Scout image outnumbered the polygamist one by at least two to one by my latest reckoning. *The Book of Mormon* the musical, *South Park*, movies like *Orgasmo* and *SLC Punk!*, and various sitcoms show Mormons as overly nice family-centric people not polygamists. Even *Big Love* shows members of the LDS Church in the same light. Jones laughed and amended her prior statement, “That being said I find [laughs] the ineffectual Boy Scout to be a pretty darn good representation. . . so it’s interesting that is used as a joke. But it is not that far off.”<sup>11</sup>

We continued to talk about Mormon Housewife blogs and how they really shape the culture and impression of Mormons. We laughed at how often those women claim to not be employed but they can support their entire family on the profits from their sponsors. An hour had almost passed and I had asked all of my pre-scripted questions. I knew she had commitments she needed to see to and I began to thank her for her time and her honesty. I thanked her for providing such a stellar example for my work and me. It was then that she added one more observation.

*The issues at the heart of the shows about polygamy correspond to the Mormon family in very clear ways. Mormons do like, even in this day and age, do like to feel like they are being put upon. And I think that comes from a tradition of actually being put upon in horrible, horrible ways. The nineteenth-century history of persecution has sort of created a communal . . . not love of but acceptance of*

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<sup>10</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

*persecution as the way it always will be. So it puts negative representations in a very particular framework that says “Well of course they are represented negatively because that’s what the media does and it makes us stronger to know that people are picking on us.”*<sup>12</sup>

With that, we said our goodbyes and she offered any help she could provide. Once she had hung up, I sat at my computer just trying to process this new perspective.

### **The New Ethnography**

Ethnographer H. L. (Bud) Goodall in his text *Writing the New Ethnography*, which amounts to a how-to book for those seeking to use ethnography as a research methodology, tells scholars to read their research looking for a storyline or a pattern. Goodall explains further, “The pattern you help the reader discover must contain some basic human grammar, out of which readers can find the blood link to their own experiences . . . their own constructions of how persons and things become meaningful through everyday actions.”<sup>13</sup> Once they eventually find the correct pattern for their project, it has the capability, similar to a good conversation, to be transformational.<sup>14</sup> Talking to Dr. Jones had been one of those transformational conversations. Speaking to her served as a catalyst. It was the first time after a year of looking for the patterns of performances of Mormonism that I realized that I had found my own blood link, that I realized how my constructions of Mormonism had become meaningful through everyday actions. Like television programs and advertisement campaigns I had studied so intensely I was shaping in some small way others’ understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<sup>12</sup> Meghan Sanborn Jones, Personal Telephone Interview, August 12, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Goodall 41.

<sup>14</sup> Goodall 41.

Let me explain.

Day one of graduate school I knew that I wanted to write my thesis about performing one's religion—any religion except my own. I didn't feel comfortable critiquing what I believe and what my closest friends and family hold so dear. So instead of traversing through my own convictions I chose one that I had been always fascinated by. As you have obviously figured out, I chose Mormonism. I got to be the expert in the room. Whether my information was entirely correct or not, I was the one who had “done the research” and knew about “that stuff.” Daily, the words I said and the analysis I made presented an unmitigated message to my peers. Countless times, with not only my academic peers, but also with friends and family, I have found myself explaining Mormonism and all that it entails. Looking back now, I most certainly had a preferred decoding in mind. I wanted others to see that the Mormons are fascinating but mostly that I was a fascinating and oh so incredibly brilliant scholar.

Having a conversation with a literal expert on the topic, Dr. Jones, really made me reconsider what assumptions and framing I had brought to this project since day one and how those assumptions, like that the media predominately portray Mormons as polygamists, were shaping the arguments I was trying so hard to make. I have always tried hard to be fair and unbiased, but frankly it's just impossible. As Dr. Goodall writes, “The characters in your story *have to learn something out of what happens to them*. They must *grow* an understanding and maybe change, forever, because of it.”<sup>15</sup> In this situation the character in my story was me.

While reflexive ethnography refines the ethnographic research to translate cultural differences by representing their effects on the ethnographer, Dr. Goodall defines a new ethnography as “a story based on the represented, or evoked, experiences of a self, with others,

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<sup>15</sup> Goodall 41.

within a context.”<sup>16</sup> No matter how many books I read, no matter how many episodes I study or scholars I interview, in the end I can only decode the meaning that speaks to me. What I am presenting is by no means a definitive look at how Mormonism is performed within and how it influences American culture; it is instead the story of how this Lutheran woman from North Carolina decodes performances of Mormonism.

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<sup>16</sup> Goodall 83.

## CONCLUSION

Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities provides critical footing for the notion that groups of people are connected, even though they may never know each other, because they hold a common set of beliefs and lifestyle. Ideas about and understanding of the qualities of an imagined community, such as Mormons, are often generalized, and serve as the basis for stereotypes. In the media, *Big Love* serves as a prime example of how encoded messages within a television program teach audiences about religion. It supports and creates stereotypes that are often the only exposure audience members have to the practices of Mormons and Mormon-offshoot groups. Specifically *Big Love* highlights polygamy as a Mormon practice, even though the Church no longer sanctions it. Not only that, issues of gender equality and domesticity are explored throughout the plotline of *Big Love* in a way that portrays the values of the LDS on a shallow level. Through this program, as well as through other programs such as *South Park*, *The Book of Mormon*, and literature that focuses the evils of polygamy, the non-Mormon public is educated incorrectly.

As a result of these developments, the Church felt the need to directly combat these misconceptions. The "I am a Mormon" advertisements as well as Mormon Mommy blogs demonstrate the means by which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members are attempting to challenge the stereotypes surrounding Mormonism. By appealing to non-Mormons by proudly showing their lovely homes, perfect children, and do-it-yourself craft tutorials, these blogs and advertisements are attempting to show that the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are just like anyone else. This appeal to "sameness" taps into the viewers' empathy and understanding of daily life struggles. Amy Shuman finds flaw in this

manipulation of empathy because such advertisements and blogs do not show the less shiny and less perfect side that these families most certainly face. Beyond that façade of perfection, Shuman critiques the use of personal stories in advertising to speak for an entire [imagined] community. Shuman's critique can be extended to these campaigns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which has appropriated and promoted the personal story of its believers as a means of image control.

As I have shown, the public image of the LDS faith is a compellation of both non-Mormon and Mormon performances. It is these performances that shape all research of Mormonism and its impact upon and place in cultures. The study of Mormonism, or any other religion in culture is inherently difficult because of religion's faith-based nature. I discovered through my own research that it is difficult to separate one's self from her subject and that the researcher's bias and language of intelligibility colors any work she produces. As a result, it is best to not try to separate myself from my work, and instead I must allow my own experiences and understanding to shape my methodology. This realization of limitations is an important when analyzing the performance of religion in the media and daily life. For this project, I was faced with the task of reconciling my own assumptions about Mormonism, which I have learned through the entertainment and news media, with the actual practices of members of the LDS faith.

By choosing to approach my studies from this ethnographic perspective, the work of research and writing I formerly thought was complete now required revisions that allowed the researcher (me) to shine through. In the end, I hope to have avoided doing what both programs like *Big Love* and Church-supported advertisements like the "I am a Mormon" campaign do so

well. Instead of only showing support for my ideas and my assumptions, I in some small way provide an outlet to have one Mormon woman speak for herself.

These discoveries have broader implications on the understanding of the media's performance of religious life. Stepping back and attempting to see how Islam, Judaism, Christian, and sundry other religious practices are represented provides better insight into the assumptions American's carry about those who do not share their beliefs. While this thesis traverses through three demonstrations of Mormonism, there is also a need for closer analysis of how Mormonism and its tenets have impacted American society and culture. Such analysis may lead to the discovery of why Mormonism is so compelling to non-Mormon audiences. Understanding that allure not only speaks to the power of the media, but to the inner workings of the American mind.

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