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DISENCHANTED LIVES: APOSTASY AND EX-MORMONISM

AMONG THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Disenchanted Lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism among the Latter-day Saints

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This dissertation ethnographically explores the contemporary phenomenon of religious apostasy (that is, rejecting ones religious faith or church community) among current and former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka Mormons). Over the past decade there has been increasing awareness in both the institutional church and the popular media that growing numbers of once faithful church members are becoming dissatisfied and disenchanted with their faith. In response, throughout Utah post-Mormon and ex-Mormon communities have begun appearing offering a social community and emotional support for those transitioning out of the church. Through fifteen months of ethnographic research in the state of Utah I investigated these events as they unfolded in people's everyday lives living in a region of the country wholly dominated by the Mormon Church's presence. In particular, I conducted participant observation in church services, ex-Mormon support group meetings, social networks and family events, as well as in-depth interviews with current and former church members. Each chapter of this dissertation explores the causes and effects of religious disenchantment as they reverberate across multiple registers: how an overabundance of memory about Mormonism's sacred history has led to people's estrangement from its religious life-world; how despite rejecting beliefs on a cognitive basis the effects of those beliefs can

still linger in people's sense of embodied self; how apostates' uncanny familiarity provokes current church members' attempts to expel them from families and neighborhoods; and how the loss of belief is negotiated through attempts to both identify and dis-identify with the Mormon community.

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Introduction

At nineteen years old Taylor received his “mission call” from the LDS Church. A few months later he reported to the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah where he received training in church doctrine and strategies for teaching the gospel during his two year long mission in Boston, Massachusetts. During the first year of his mission Taylor indeed preached the gospel with spiritual fervor and a passionate sense of purpose. He baptized nearly half a dozen new members, and achieved several leadership promotions in his mission area. He dreamed of the day he would proudly return to his family and friends in Utah for his welcome home party, and afterwards begin looking for a wife with whom to marry in the temple and start a family.

However, on the second year of his mission Taylor’s zeal for missionary work had disappeared. While “tracting” on the streets - handing out pamphlets and engaging pedestrians in conversation about God and Jesus - a person Taylor initially thought to be a potential “investigator” of the church began asking questions Taylor had not prepared for. Why had Joseph Smith married other men’s wives? Why was there no physical evidence supporting any of the historical events depicted in the Book of Mormon? Why had his church supported institutionalized racism? Taylor was at a loss for words. Not only did he not have answers to the man’s questions, prior to that day he had never even asked them himself. Reflecting back on that day, Taylor told me that it seemed as if “the guy knew more about the church than I did.”

After his encounter with the man on the streets Taylor began reading outside of the standard set of church approved texts allowed to missionaries. Though he did not at

that time have the answers he was looking for, he started asking questions that set him on a course of ever increasing religious doubt and confusion. As a result, Taylor eventually returned home from his mission early, a gross dereliction in this sacred Mormon rite of passage. Although seeking solace from his doubts back in the comfortable and familiar embrace of his home, he was instead met only with disappointment from friends and family who began to scathingly speculate about what spiritual misfortune had beset their once zealous son.

Once at home, Taylor poured through books and scoured internet sites discussing church history. He also began to cycle through bouts of panic, confusion, anger, denial, guilt, and resentment, as his once secure existence in the church began to unravel with each passing day.

He stopped attending church altogether. He moved out of his parent's house in Lehi to an apartment in Salt Lake City, less than an hour north, but in many cases a world away. There he met other ex-Mormons from an online chatroom for those similarly "recovering" from the church. He began attending parties, experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and sex, in what he described as an attempt to "forget about the church." It was in these groups that he was introduced to philosophy, science, and atheism, and slowly began to replace his reverence for LDS church leaders with his new intellectual heroes of Nietzsche, Hitchens, and Sagan.

I met Taylor through these groups, my primary field sites while in Utah. I would meet with him whenever he made the car drive back down to Utah County - where I lived - to visit his family, during which he would inevitably complain of having to re-enter this epicenter of "Mormondom." It was almost a year since his disaffection, and he had grown

bitter and resentful of Utah, of Mormons, and of the Church in general. His family had all but banished him. He was branded an “apostate.” His friends and family refused to discuss his life “outside the church” or his reasons for apostasy. Their only response to his change of faith was to encourage him to “keep it quiet.” Taylor knew they were ashamed of him, knew they “thought the worst” about why he had left the church. This is how I knew him; emotionally and psychologically alienated and forlorn - in the throes of a traumatic religious disenchantment.

As I came to see, Taylor lived between two worlds - irreconcilably enmeshed in a Mormon world he no longer believed in yet was unable to escape. Yet his presence was hidden and shadowed. Everywhere I looked in Utah I saw the stamp of Mormonism’s presence on the physical and cultural landscape - a seeming unending site of temples, churches, and highway billboards all testified to the church’s uncontested dominance in this place. As an apostate, however, Taylor was conspicuously hidden from public view. His voice was silent, his presence marked only by the disparaging gossip and stereotypes circulating in Mormon neighborhoods about those who “fell from the church.” As I later began to find out, his sudden shift from belief to nonbelief had made him dangerous and uncanny in this area of hegemonic faith and religious certainty. His study of church history, and the obvious effect it had on his “testimony” of the church’s truth, had rendered him a prescient example of the costs of non-faith promoting curiosity, a model to others of what happens when faithful church members stray from the “plan of salvation.”

Yet as I began to see over the course of my fieldwork, apostates were indeed everywhere in Utah. Strewn about this seemingly undifferentiated plane of religiosity

were these nonbelievers, the embodied manifestations of doubt and dissension in a Mormon world growing increasingly confident amidst its meteoric growth as a burgeoning world religion. Yet, as anecdotes to a local reality, apostates testified of another world beneath the one being perpetuated in church ad campaigns, and depictions in the popular media and academic writing that celebrated the continued vitality of American religion (Berger 1996, 1999) and Mormonism in particular (Stark 2005).

Taylor's story is therefore but one iteration of a story I saw repeated time and again while in Utah. In support group meetings, online social networks, and informal get togethers, increasing numbers of people like Taylor were growing aware of their collective plight, gathering together to discuss the causes and consequences of their apostasy and what it meant to live "in the shadow of the temple."¹ The geographical concentration and cultural ubiquity of Mormonism in Utah seemed to have produced a counter-culture of religious detractors, of ex-Mormons yearning to be heard and seen by a religious community that would just as well forget they existed.

I began to understand my task as an anthropologist to try to conjure up the historical and cultural transformations underway in the modern Mormon church that produced these people, not only as individuals making personal decisions about faith and God, but as reflections of deeper tensions and transformations underway.

1 This term has been popularized throughout ex-Mormon communities, most notably in a DVD produced by the ExMormon Foundation in which former members of the church tell of their experiences leaving the church and the various consequences this had on their personal lives.

http://www.exmormonfoundation.org/shadow_temple.html.

In late 2011 Elder Jensen, official historian of the LDS church, gave a talk in front of a class of religious studies students and faculty at Utah State University during which he fielded questions about the challenges facing contemporary Mormonism. Did the leaders of the church know its members were “leaving in droves,” a woman confidently asked. In an uncharacteristically open admission from a “general authority” regarding the condition of the Church, Jensen responded, drawing direct comparison with an earlier era in church history - “Maybe since Kirtland, we’ve never had a period of - I’ll call it apostasy, like we’re having now.”²

At the time I had just arrived in Utah to begin my research on apostasy and ex-Mormonism in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Elder Jensen’s statement came as a surprise and a validation of the topic I was setting out to study. He was officially acknowledging a growing trend in Mormonism that most lay people in the church had, to one degree or another, been aware of for some time. The reluctantly admitted fact was, throughout the church, in Utah and abroad, thousands of once faithful

2 The full text of Elder Jensen’s comments, recorded by a member of the audience were immediately posted on an online blog, simplemormonspectator.blogspot.com. The text has since been removed from the website. However, digital audio recordings are still available throughout the internet. In the meeting an audience member asked “Has the church seen the effects of Google on membership? It seems like the people who I talk to about church history are people who find out and leave quickly. Is the church aware of that problem? What about the people who are already leaving in droves?” Jensen responded, “The fifteen men really do know, and they really care. And they realize that maybe since Kirtland, we never have had a period of, I’ll call it apostasy, like we’re having right now; largely over these issues. We do have another initiative that we have called, “Answers to Gospel Questions.” We are trying to figure out exactly what channels to deliver it in and exactly what format to put it in. But we want to have a place where people can go. We have hired someone that’s in charge of search engine optimization. We realize that people get their information basically from Google. They don’t come to LDS.org. If they get there, it’s through Google. So, we are trying to create an offering that will address these issues and be available for the public at large and to the church leaders, because many of them don’t have answers either. It can be very disappointing to church members. And, for people who are losing their faith, or who have lost it, we hope to regain to the church.”

members were streaming from its doors, becoming “apostates” and “ex-Mormons,” and seeking new lives outside the religious fold.³

Taylor’s experience of faith collapse, apostasy, and involvement in a burgeoning ex-Mormon movement provides an introduction to several themes that I explore throughout the following chapters. In its most basic terms, Taylor’s story evidences the paradoxical relationship between intimacy and estrangement that is at the heart of Mormonism’s contemporary crisis of apostasy.

Throughout this dissertation I explore various iterations of this theme: how an overabundance of memory about Mormonism’s sacred history has led to people’s estrangement from its religious life-world; how despite rejecting their beliefs on a cognitive basis the effects of those beliefs can still linger in people’s sense of embodied self; how apostates’ uncanny familiarity provokes current church members’ attempts to expel them from families and neighborhoods; and how the loss of belief is negotiated through attempts to both identity and disidentify with the Mormon community. In this dissertation, I therefore approach apostasy in Mormonism as a jointly human and religious phenomenon that requires ethnographic attention to the transformations of self and subjectivity that unfolds in people’s experiences leaving their faith.

3 This trend has been documented at length in the popular media, including online Mormon blogs, and especially by local and national journalists. Including at http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/m/mormons_church_of_jesus_christ_of_latterday_saints/index.html; <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865583665/Simple-faith-in-a-digital-age.html?pg=all>; http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/mormons-confront-epidemic-on-online-misinformation/2012/02/01/gIQApuLJiQ_story.html.

The Restoration

While Mormonism⁴ is today inextricably associated with the state of Utah - home to the church headquarters and the greatest geographic concentration of church members - the LDS faith has its origins on the east coast of the United States, first in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and later in Missouri and Illinois. While the "true" historical narrative of the church's founding is much debated (the topic of chapter one), a brief, "faith friendly" version of events is as follows: Although Jesus Christ brought his gospel to the world as depicted in the New Testament, shortly thereafter his teachings were forgotten and the world fell into a "Great Apostasy." False teachings were introduced into the church as the apostolic authority to receive divine revelation was lost. "Without priesthood authority or the full gospel, people had to rely on human wisdom to interpret the scriptures, principles and ordinances...and much of what we know about the true character and nature of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost was lost. Essential doctrines like faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost became distorted and important doctrines were lost entirely."⁵

However, following centuries of spiritual confusion, God began to restore the true gospel to the world in 1820 through a young fourteen year old boy named Joseph Smith.

4 Throughout this dissertation I routinely use various terms that are endemic to Mormonism that I do not explicitly define in each chapter. My usage of these terms reflects, to the best of my knowledge, local definitions and practices. When referring to the institutional LDS Church, including its ecclesiastical leaders, church members often use the umbrella term "the Church." This term may at times also refer to the church community as a whole, including local lay leaders and members of the congregation. When referring to the religion proper, including its theology, belief system, and ritual practices, I use the term "the LDS faith." In contrast, the term "Mormonism" is a moniker of more cultural beliefs and practices that are not necessarily reflective of official church doctrine or institutionalized practices.

5 <http://www.mormon.org/beliefs/restoration>

As the story goes, confused about which church to join, Joseph Smith prayed for guidance and was visited by Heavenly Father and his son, Jesus Christ, who directed him not to join any of the churches. A few years later, Joseph Smith was again visited by a heavenly messenger who told him where he could find the lost pages of an ancient text, written on thin sheets of gold, buried in a hill near his home. The book, which Smith was tasked with translating, tells the story of an ancient people's struggle to live gospel teachings and their visitation by Jesus Christ. In it was the scriptural seeds through which Joseph Smith would bring about the restoration of God's one true church. Over the next several years, Joseph Smith was again visited by John the Baptist, and the apostles Peter, James, and John, who granted Smith the "power and authority" to receive divine revelation and restore Christ's true church in full.

Although Joseph Smith was eventually martyred in Illinois in 1844, just prior to the church's exodus to Utah, he had by then successfully built a church with thousands of followers, united by their belief in the "restored gospel." That gospel, as Smith professed, and subsequent church leaders have expanded upon, is primarily centered around the idea that God is our flesh and blood Heavenly Father and we are all his spirit children. Connected in a great kin network of mortal and divine beings, Mormons believe that it is each person's duty to follow the "path" Heavenly Father has laid out for his children - including living gospel teachings and performing sacred ordinances - in order to return to live with him in the Celestial Kingdom.

This story has elicited interest and skepticism for the past century and a half, provoking some to convert to, and others to outright condemn, this new iteration of Christian themes. Its bold reinterpretation of the nature of God, its early insistence on

practicing polygamy, and its stories of ancient civilizations living on American soil who wrote scripture on gold tablets, has at times resulted in the persecution of believers. Branded heretics by mainstream Christianity, the early Latter-day Saints were successively forced to flee further west in search of a place to practice their peculiar brand of Christianity in peace. Eventually reaching relative isolation in what is today the state of Utah, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century they remained largely cut off from the rest of society, creating their own Latter-day Zion in the intermountain west, little seen or understood by the rest of America. Yet, this was all soon to change.

The Mormon Moment

A main protagonist in this story is the phenomenon colloquially referred to in the popular media and the press over the past decade as "the Mormon Moment."⁶ This "moment," which began sometime around the turn of the century and peaked in 2012 with Mitt Romney's presidential campaign, has marked Mormonism's rise to popular ascendancy in the American imagination - a series of public relations triumphs, gleaming profiles of its members, and an overall increase in interest in all things Mormon, reflected in *Newsweek* cover stories, op-eds in the *Washington Post*, the television series *Big Love*, and a smash Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*.

The Mormon Moment was at its core the beginning of a period of heightened visibility and scrutiny for the church (commentators often referred to this as a "spotlight"

6 "Mormon Moment" was a term popularized throughout the 2000s in various news outlets, including Newsweek, The New York Times, and the Huffington Post. <http://www.newsweek.com/mormon-moment-67951>. <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/07/04/are-republicans-ready-now-for-a-mormon-president/a-new-mormon-moment>. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/emma-lou-thayne/the-mormon-moment_b_1259873.html.

put on the church). As Mormon academics and commentators began to feverishly write about, Mormonism was in the midst of trying “to see ourselves as others see us, and to have to think harder about our beliefs and commitments” (Hardy 2012),⁷ a transformation of self that was articulated in terms of going through a “learning experience,” out of which Mormonism would “grow up,” as it learned to “speak more to outsiders” by “learning to talk about faith in the language of the American public sphere” (Bowman 2012;⁸ also see Lythgoe 1968). Responding to this media firestorm, and hoping to present a new image of Mormonism during Mitt Romney’s presidential bid, the church notably launched the “I’m a Mormon” campaign, in which it sought to portray to the world an image of church members as global, ethnically diverse, and thoroughly modern. For the institutional church, its leaders, and average members, the Mormon Moment in effect manifested as a burgeoning hyper self-conscious, a self-reflexive orientation brought on by the emergent gaze of Mormonism’s global others.

In the midst of my research this pervasive talk of Mormonism’s maturation, burgeoning multi-cultural self-image, and acquisition of a new language amidst its incorporation into a larger American public sphere, revealed the extent to which Mormonism was busy negotiating a new sense of collective self. In the midst of all this, the issue of disenchantment and apostasy was revealed to me, not simply as an embarrassing sideshow threatening to detract from Mormonism’s growing popularity, but

7 <http://www.patheos.com/Mormon/Blessing-Conversation-Grant-Hardy-12-07-2012.html>

8 <http://www.patheos.com/Mormon/What-Mitt-Romney-Did-Matthew-Bowman-12-03-2012.html>.

as an epiphenomenon of deeper cultural tumult broiling underneath Mormonism's pastoral public veneer.

As the crescendo of Mormonism's century long integration into mainstream American society, the Mormon Moment thus figures prominently in what follows, not only as the historical and cultural backdrop for the events I describe, but as a motivating force for Mormonism's contemporary self-conscious introspection and subsequent reactionary defensiveness over its troublesome relationship to its own history, identity, beliefs, and modes of belonging. It is what has begun to force Mormonism to attempt to tactfully reconcile its historical and theological peculiarity with its more recent desires to fully enter into mainstream American life. It is what has compelled Mormonism to deny its more incongruous historical figures, events, and beliefs, and assert itself as a wholly benign Christian faith.⁹ And it is, ultimately, what has compelled church members to begin the capricious process of asking who and what their faith really is all about as they begin to look at themselves in the mirror of American public opinion.

The construction and manipulation of the Church's self-image by both church leaders and the membership at large during the Mormon Moment also thereby points to Mormonism's increasingly split and fragmented subjectivity as it sought to modify the image it presented to the world while also attempting to stay true to its "peculiar" traditions and heritage (Bowman 2012; Maffly-Kipp 2012; Mauss 1994).

9 As I discuss further in chapter one, in the face of accusations from mainstream Christian denominations that Mormons are not "true Christians," the LDS Church has increasingly attempted to emphasize that which they share in common with other Christians, while carefully obscuring its more peculiar tenets of faith.

As I discuss in chapter one, Mormonism has in part attempted to mitigate this threat of fragmentation through the creation of an ever-more simplified historical narrative as the basis for a coherent self-identity in the present, all of which is the product of a combination of strategic forgetting and selectively remembering of only those pieces of its past that “fit” the spectral image it has created of itself in the American public’s eye. As I argue, the contemporary church now finds itself in a double bind as it on the one hand attempts to reclaim and hold onto foundational pieces of its past (including the church it once was, and in some sense imagines itself ‘deep down’ still to be) while at the same time disavowing, and defending itself from, the pieces that no longer fit into the image it now presents to the world. In light of this, I argue that apostasy exists here as both a symptom and manifestation of what Žižek (2007) refers to as the “excess,” or “indivisible remainder” of processes of collective self formation. Indeed, apostates are the indivisible remainder of Mormonism’s entrance into the American public sphere, as religious disillusionment, I argue, results from wading into this uncanny zone of half-forgotten history and thereby disturbing the *gestalt* of contemporary Mormonism.

In sum, this dissertation approaches apostasy as a social phenomenon and analytic through which I hope to show how religious disenchantment is related to larger histories - namely the century and a half of cultural antagonism and acculturation leading up to the Mormon Moment - and not merely a reflection of personal or spiritual pathology, or a matter of “personal choice.”

Religious disaffection

Nationwide surveys conducted by the PEW research forum in 2012 put the number of "nonreligious" people in the U.S. at 46 million (just under 20%), up five percentage points from five years prior. While more than 13 million Americans (6%) now describe themselves as atheist or agnostic.¹⁰ But what social and cultural changes do these numbers reflect?

Religious disaffection is, as many commentators have suggested, an immanently social phenomenon, the product of a constellation of political, economic, historical, and social transformations (Bromley 1998; Roof & Landres 1997). Indeed, disaffection often acts as a barometer of wider patterns of change, reflecting deeper cultural tensions in the larger society (Berger 1998). As those studying recent drops in overall "religiosity" in the United States and abroad suggest, the waning numbers of people filling places of worship is in part a reflection of the growing incommensurability between religious principles, ideas, and values, and those found in the wider "secular" society.¹¹ As Robert Putnam and David Campbell argue, the growing numbers of nonbelievers in the U.S. can be attributed to a backlash against the increasing politicization of religion by the religious right. As "[r]eligiosity and conservative politics became increasingly aligned, and abortion and gay rights became emblematic of the emergent culture wars" religion has been increasingly viewed as "judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political" (Putnam & Campbell 2012:120-121).

¹⁰ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

¹¹ http://www.salon.com/2014/03/25/calling_the_christian_right_soon_you_will_be_outnumbered_partner/. Also see <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers/Chaves.pdf>.

Others equate these falling numbers as reflective of various effects of secular modernity, including the tendency for people in industrialized countries to live increasingly segmented and separate lives, thus having less interest in the inherently communal nature of organized religion. Or, to simply have less of an existential need for religion, as they live in places where health, wealth, and overall security is generally guaranteed (Norris & Inglehart 2004).

Through my research, however, I found that Mormonism's "crisis of apostasy" cannot be reduced to the economic, political, and social factors typically discussed in various theories of secularization. Religious disaffection in Mormonism is neither the result of irreconcilable tensions emerging from people's involvement in both public secular and private religious spheres (see Gooren 2010), nor the inevitable result of their social marginalization or cultural alienation from the religious community (see Brinkerhoff & Mackie 1993). Instead, my research demonstrates that apostasy in Mormonism reflects local and culturally specific tensions internal to the LDS church dealing with issues of religious authority, contemporary modes of faith, and institutional trust.

While trends in declining religiosity and secularization are typically discussed in broad institutional and socio-historical terms (Streib et al. 2009), I argue that for ex-Mormons disenchantment is an intimate experience of radical personal transformation (Barbour 1994). As I found in my research, following their disaffection from the Church, ex-Mormons in Utah were attempting to reframe in secular terms the beliefs and practices that once informed their daily lives and reorient themselves to a world divorced from religion. Whether congregating together on Sunday mornings to watch science based

educational documentaries, or discussing one's body, not as containing an everlasting spirit, but millions of eternal atomic molecules, ex-Mormons were both collectively and personally working to reconfigure their conceptions of self, truth, and morality separate from Mormonism. In doing so, however, they faced new sets of anxieties and uncertainties as they made their way in a world now drained of the confidence and clarity provided by their former religious convictions. Apostates are therefore ideal groups of people for investigating modern secularization, as not simply a process of socio-historical and institutional transformation, but a "social-psychological revolution" (Bellah 1970:66) unfolding in the lives of people undergoing personal religious disenchantment.

For ex-Mormons in Utah, religious disaffection is indeed not a straightforward process. Despite rejecting their faith, ex-Mormons continue to reengage with Mormonism in both conversation and daily practices. As I discuss in the chapters that follow, they have created groups in order to continue to discuss Mormon history and scripture, tell stories about life in the church, and even sing traditional Mormon hymns together. In this dissertation I therefore analyze apostasy and disenchantment, not as linear progressions, but as recursive processes of negotiating both intimacy and estrangement from that which has been ostensibly rejected.

Along this line, I also challenge the notion that those who leave religion do so because they have found a "better fit" either in another religion or within a "secular culture" writ large (Gooren 2010). The apostates I discuss in the pages that follow did not, as popular stereotypes and some academic descriptions suggest, already have "one foot out the door." They were instead committed, involved, and faithful church members, fully entrenched in their religious lifeworlds before experiencing an utter collapse of

faith. Given these experiences, I argue that apostasy, and the corresponding processes of disillusionment and disenchantment, is best understood as a traumatic experience of loss during which a former sense of identity, self, place, and purpose is stripped away, leaving religious disaffectors in a culturally induced state of existential vulnerability.

My data, analysis and theoretical formulations draws heavily on the research I conducted with a comparatively small group of people, yet is reflective of wider patterns of experience in a quickly growing ex-Mormon community. However, gathering accurate data on the actual numbers of "apostates" from Mormonism is a near impossibility, the reasons for which are many and varied.¹² First, while the LDS church publicly touts its global membership figures, it does not publicize the number of people who are leaving its fold. Second, due to the bureaucratic nature of church membership, in which members are "officially" added to or taken off "church roles," even if such figures were made available they would not necessarily accurately reflect how many people are actually "leaving the church" since otherwise nonbelieving people may still be counted as "members" if they have not "officially" requested their name to be removed from these lists. Third, while the term "apostate" may, in much of the academic literature, refer to a clearly defined categorical identity of voiced oppositionality to one's former faith, the semantic heterogeneity of the term inevitably leads to epistemological ambiguity. For example, the LDS church officially states, "When individuals or groups of people turn away from the principles of the gospel, they are in a state of apostasy" (LDS.org). While

¹² See Phillip and Cragun (2008) for a brief discussion of changes in Mormon membership and demographic patterns over the past two decades. <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/12/Mormons2008.pdf>.

the Oxford Dictionary defines apostasy as an "abandonment" or "renunciation" of one's religious beliefs.¹³

The problem then becomes one of deciding which of the various attributes - apostasy as a decisive act, a categorical identity, a religious positionality, or a state of being - to adopt when discussing this particular phenomena unfolding within Mormonism. I do not plan to achieve any sort of conceptual clarity on this. Instead, I take the ambiguity of the term as a starting point to discuss the areas of overlap and intersection between the binary oppositions of member/non-member and believer/non-believer implicit in each of these definitions. I therefore am guided not by a desire for categorical specificity or definitional accuracy, but rather by questions of how people living "apostasy" experience inhabiting these zones of spiritual, ideological, cultural, and social liminality, intimacy and estrangement (Biehl 2005). This therefore leads to different sets of questions, such as what might it mean to have a mind intellectually opposed to one's former faith, but live with a body that somatically "remembers" the ostensibly rejected religious beliefs, practices, and morals? And how can one reject the idea of God, yet be an active participant in the religious community? It is these types of questions and lines of inquiry that I turn to in the following chapters.

While this dissertation is a study of apostasy and religious disaffection as it manifests and unfolds in a particular time and place, this phenomenon is nevertheless

13 The term "apostate" has historically been a pejorative term used to ostracize those who reject their former faith, and is often used in an accusatory manner to identify those who stray from orthodoxy. As such it has historically not been a term of self-description. However, as I argue in chapter five, my findings show that ex-Mormons are increasingly co-opting and rallying around the term in Utah. Throughout this dissertation I therefore use the term apostate, not as a disparaging moniker for those who disaffect, but rather as a means of identifying a particular positionality vis-a-vis Mormonism.

reflective of more widespread transformations taking place on the national and global religious landscape. The historical and social drivers of religious disaffection that I identify in chapter one - conflicts in historical narratives, the influence of technology as a carrier of challenging ideas and information, and the increasing interpenetration of contrasting religious and secular ideologies - are transformative, to some extent more than others, of a host of other faiths.

Similarly, in other chapters I describe the consequences of disaffection - dealing with psychological trauma and existential duress, negotiating social stigmas and ostracization, and attempting to identify and inhabit a new secular form of social personhood. Each of these issues, while taking unique manifestations in Mormon culture, are not isolated to disaffection from Mormonism. With the advent of increasingly widespread and affordable information technology, an interconnected global citizenry, and science based knowledge, religious beliefs in every corner of the globe face the challenge of retaining members. So, as the number of non-religious people around the globe increases, there are ever increasing numbers of apostates, atheists, and otherwise secular people attempting to navigate their departure from religion and stake out a life divorced from their former churches. What struggles they face, and what strategies they rely upon in making this transition will largely be shaped by their particular cultural contexts, and are therefore ripe for anthropological investigation.

The secular subject

The study of religious institutions, beliefs, and practices has long been a central concern

within anthropology. Early anthropology paid particular attention to the role of religion in cultural groups, whether to understand the historical development of cultural difference (Boas 1914; Malinowski 2004[1948]), or how it functioned within and helped maintain social systems (Dumont 1981; Durkheim 1995; Evans-Pritchard 1937; Mauss 2001[1902]). However, in the wake of studies of modern disenchantment (Weber 1993), and the attenuated role of religion in political and social life (Berger 1980; Casanova 1994; Luckmann 1967), anthropologists have begun to investigate the changing role of religion and the concomitant spread of secularism itself as a historically contingent worldview in modern societies (Asad 2003; Cannell 2006; Martin 2005; Taylor 2007). I contribute to this literature – responding to Asad’s call that “any discipline that seeks to understand ‘religion’ must also understand its other” (ibid. 2003:22) – by ethnographically investigating how apostates who, while situated in the interstices of the religious and the secular, go about disembarking from and reframing their religious worldview.

In the academic literature the secular is a concept with varying definitions, formations, and implications, manifesting variously in terms of the division between church and state, conceptions of a secular public sphere, a basis for nonreligious identity making in a religiously pluralistic society, and an ideological position of nonbelief replete with its own set of moral codes and values (Bellah et al 1985; Berger 1967; Casanova 1994, 2006; Habermas 1992, 2008; Luckmann 1967; Martin 1978; Taylor 2007; Wilson 1982). While this dissertation nominally deals with "secular" topics, including issues of religious disenchantment, atheism, and nonreligious identity making, it is not an

ethnography of the secular or secularism(s), per se.

Understanding how such secular issues unfold in and imbricate with other political, legal, economic, social and cultural facets of modern society is indeed an important, and burgeoning, area of study in anthropology and elsewhere (Asad 2003; Bowen 2010; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Navarro-Yashin 2002). While many of the people I worked with in Utah may thoroughly denounce religion, describing themselves as secular humanists, atheists, or freethinkers, this is not an ethnography of them only as "secular subjects." Making such categorical and epistemological distinctions would mistakenly reify the very positionalities and subjectivities my findings confound, for within the communities I worked, for someone to simultaneously identify as atheist and Mormon was not altogether uncommon. Rather, I have found that ex-Mormon religious/nonreligious subjectivities are ambiguously in-process, in a state of indeterminate liminal flux, as they individually and collectively worked through their lingering attachments to, identifications with, and memories of life in the church. As such, I analyze emerging secularisms, not in terms of a de facto godlessness, but as inter-subjectively produced cultural achievements.

In this dissertation the term "subjectivity" refers to people's thoughts, sentiments, anxieties, desires, fears, and, especially, their senses of self and self-world relations (Hallowell 1967; Holland and Leander 2004; Ortner 2006). Specifically, I focus on apostate subjectivities as socially, culturally, and historically embedded formations taking shape in the wake of religious marginalization and disenchantment. Related to this, I analyze "disenchantment" as the "exiting of God" from daily experience, the

disembedding of life's meaning in myth, and the uncertainties and anxieties such transformations pose to one's sense of self. While sociologists and cultural theorists have long contemplated the tenor of life in a "(post)modern" secularized world (e.g. Giddens 1991; Jameson 1991), there has been a lack of ethnographic research that grounds such theories in local contexts, and more specifically, explores their manifestation in, and influence on, people's experiences of apostasy. In this dissertation I therefore analyze these newly emergent "disenchanted subjectivities" by describing Mormon apostates' changing relationships and understandings of self, others, and the world in the wake of disenchantment and religious marginalization.

While anthropologists have successfully investigated the dialectics of identity making within feminist, critical race, and queer theory, my project draws on anthropological adaptations of phenomenological theory, which argues that the continually shifting and intimate experiences of subjects' lives must be the starting point of such analyses (Heidegger 2008; Husserl 1970; Merleau-Ponty 2002). Specifically, I mobilize this methodological and theoretical approach by emphasizing apostates' lives as textured, dynamic, and embedded within ever shifting socio-cultural horizons (Jackson 1996; Turner & Bruner 1986). So rather than starting from a static notion of apostates' roles or social positions, I argue that ex-Mormons' changing and multiple senses of self, subjectivity, and identity arise intersubjectively in, and are used to navigate the exigencies of, life on the margins of Mormonism.

My research deploys interdisciplinary studies of apostasy that focus on the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of people's departure from religious communities (Bromley 1998; Winell 1993). This literature, coming out of a long scholarly tradition

focusing on tensions between religion and the larger society in “new religious movements” (Barker 1998), has fruitfully discussed issues of apostate narratives (Johnson 1998; Payne 2013), gender (Jacobs 1989), apostates’ changing social roles (Mauss 1998; Wright 1998), the complementarity of conversion and deconversion processes (Beckford 1983), as well as studies on apostasy within Mormonism (Albrecht & Cornwall 1998; Albrecht & Bahr 1983, 1990). Although these studies have shed light on the sociological implications of apostates’ disengagement from their former religions, they tend to emphasize in/out-group distinctions and characterize apostates as rebellious deviants from an idealized and normative religious standard. However, as my research shows, the predominant narrative coming from ex-Mormons reveals an ongoing emotional, psychological, social, and cultural attachment to Mormonism (Beck 2006; Morin & Morin 2004; Ure 1999).

My study therefore also draws on literature that investigates the meaning of belief and practice separate from its manifestations in institutionalized religions (Luckmann 1970). As anthropologists have begun documenting the intersection of spiritual and secular practices outside of mainstream religions, the conceptual delineation between religious belief and dis-belief continues to blur (Heelas 1996, 2008; Hodgson 2005; Mahmood 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Pike 2001). My work builds upon this literature by investigating Mormon apostates’ continued engagement with and reframing of their former religious beliefs, morals, and practices, while offering a new perspective on the diverse ways in which ostensibly secularized people’s sense of self and identity is constructed specifically through an ongoing relationship to religion. By starting with people’s experiences of apostasy and looking at the process of leaving a religious

community from multiple perspectives, I avoid artificially assuming a predetermined divide between the religious and the secular, and the effects of apostasy on ex-Mormons' beliefs, practices, and sense of self and identity. Instead, I analyze when, how, and to what effect people move between religious and secular lifeworlds, as evidenced in ex-Mormons' self-descriptions as "spiritual-atheists" or "cultural Mormons."

In an effort to theorize the largely unexplored anthropology of apostasy, I draw upon and contribute to anthropological studies of religious conversion (Keane 2007; Rambo 1993). In doing so, I follow those studies that emphasize personal religious transformations as gradual and partial (Anderson 2003; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Hood et al. 1996; James 2013; Priest 2003), often taking place on group margins (Buckser & Glazier 2003; Di Bella 2003), and involving a change in embodied worldview and identity (Robbins 2004). Further by disaggregating the categories of believer and non-believer, my work addresses the multiple, contingent, and ongoing ways in which apostates reconfigure their life-worlds after leaving a totalizing religious community. Anthropologists studying conversion have indeed established that personal religious transformation always entails a "looking back" to a former faith, even as a new one is entered into (Austin-Broos 2003; Norris 2002). While I contest drawing too close a conceptual link between processes of religious disenchantment (or "deconversion") and religious conversion, my analysis extends the notion that new "moral worlds" (whether secular or religious) are always made in tension with and response to those that preceded them (Glazier 2002). And like studies of conversion, I argue that apostasy is a transformational process shaped by the socio-cultural dynamics of the society from which the apostate leaves, thereby facilitating and contributing to cross-cultural comparison.

This stands as a critique of popular conceptions of “secular culture” as separated and cordoned off from the religious worlds from which it sprang. Thus, my work not only contributes to understandings of how apostasy is reframing notions of religious belief and practice, but also broader anthropological conceptions of how apostasy reshapes people’s everyday subjectivities, experiences, and relationships.

Previous studies of secularization, atheism, non-theism and de-conversion have indeed analyzed shifts in people’s worldview, political practice, and social organization following religious disenchantment. Researchers have increasingly asked about the changes in cosmology, mythology, and ritual that accompany processes of individual and collective secularization, and have interrogated how the resurgence of Enlightenment rationality has shaped contemporary forms of individual, social, and cultural praxis (e.g. Asad 2003; Casanova 2006; Connelly 2006; Zuckerman 2011). In such cases, atheism and other non-theisms have typically been approached as primarily intellectual stances based on the Enlightenment values of science, rationality and reason. Attempts to explicate the cultural logics underpinning these new non-religious subjectivities have, however, drawn attention away from the emotional, psychological and embodied dimensions of disenchantment and non-religion.

While religious conversion is often talked about in bodily, affective terms - coming to be inhabited by God, feeling his love, feeling a sense of ‘wholeness’ (Harding 1987; Luhrmann 2012) - this type of approach has been less explicit in work on disenchantment and atheism. The explicitly non-religious subject is depicted as almost disembodied, reduced to a calculating thinker who is wholly defined by a scientific mindset and a rationalized body.

In the academic literature, disaffection from religion is likewise discussed in nominally cognitive, rationalized terms. Former church members across various faiths are asked about the *reasons* they left, how did they *decide* to leave, and what was it that *convinced* them their former religion was false or somehow lacking (Albrecht and Bahr 1988; Bromley 1998). A recent survey conducted among ex-Mormons asked responders to rank the reasons they left the LDS Church in order of importance. Topping the list was “intellectual or spiritual reasons,” disbelief that Joseph Smith was a prophet, disbelief in the Book of Mormon as a religious and historical document, and issues with the linguistic, archaeological, and genetic evidence for the Book of Mormon.

But what goes left unexamined in the isolated focus on *reasons* for leaving are the ongoing attachments, overlaps, and vestigial remains of Mormonism that hang onto the disenchanted despite their intellectual denunciations, and how it is through people’s embodied subjectivities that they are ultimately dealt with.

In focusing on people's psychological, emotional, and embodied experiences of religious disillusionment, and the steps they take in departing religion, this dissertation is therefore in some sense an ethnographic prolegomenon to studies of the secular and secularization in more explicit terms. Recent studies of "nonreligion" in the United States, having identified an influx in the number of religious "nones" in American society, suggest that most people now "without religion" were not born into "secular households," but were instead raised religious and at some point left their faith (Pew Forum 2012; Zuckerman 2011). To be nonreligious it seems is also to be mnemonically laden with a lifetime of incorporating (to varying extents) the religious beliefs, morals, identities, practices, and conceptions of self from a former faith. This dissertation is therefore a

reminder that religion, while cognitively compartmentalized, disavowed, or rejected in the formation of secular subjectivities, nevertheless exists in latent form as memory, for many if not most, secular subjects. It is my hope that by reappraising our understanding of contemporary secular institutions, identity politics, and social organization in light of people's intimate experiences of rejecting their religious pasts, contemporary formations of the secular will be revealed as less determined, less stoic, and less aseptically detached from its religious other.

However, in recognizing the lasting connections between the secular and religious, this is not meant to wax nostalgic over an idyllically more spiritualized past, a period of "porosity" to the sacred in Charles Taylor's (2007) words, now lost to the ravages of secular modernity. Indeed, much of the literature on "the secular" - as cultural formation, historical epoch, existential condition, or phenomenological orientation - depicts our "present age," as Kierkegaard (1940) phrased it, as caught up in a spiritual malaise, a hopeless materialism, or again to borrow one of Taylor's terms, an "immanent frame" in which spiritual passions, transcendent experience, and periods of mystical wonder have all but shriveled into an unimaginative, myopic empiricism. That there is not a breakdown of "ontological security" (Giddens 1991) amidst traumatic experiences of religious disenchantment I do not contest. But we should be weary of prematurely foreclosing the possibility of numinous experience outside of "religion" or in the absence of belief in a divine presence.¹⁴

14 See Landy & Saler (2009) and Bennett (2002) for discussions of secular "re-enchantments" in the wake of religious disenchantment.

My Own (Non)Religious Subjectivity

No study, especially this one, resists being informed by the particular life experiences and subjectivities of the people who conduct them. Writing on the fraught hermeneutical process that is ethnography, Vincent Crapanzano (1992) reminds us that the anthropologist is inevitably, and forever, caught up in a double (triple...) bind of competing desires. This desire in fact informs (distorts?) the coordinated acts of listening, interpreting, and conveying information in unpredictable, though often surprisingly productive ways.

I am the product of Presbyterian grandparents and Methodist parents. Some of my most vibrant memories from childhood are ambivalently tinged with the pride of counting myself among "the saved" as I looked down to a world forlorn and lost to sinful pleasures, contrasted by arresting guilt and shame as my Baptist friends at the private Christian school I attended portended my eternal damnation because I had not received the saving graces of "baptism by immersion." That the world was a divided place, broken up into factions of believers and nonbelievers, I learned through Sunday school lessons and Wednesday "youth group" meetings. I was a child of Christ, and as such had a faith to defend. During a lecture on evolution in my AP high school biology class - at the public school I transferred to - I routinely put this faith into action, stubbornly questioning the validity of Darwin's theories, much to my instructor's chagrin.

It was not until my sophomore year of college, while taking my first anthropology course (oddly enough), that I experienced my own crisis of faith. The world, it seemed to me then while gaining my first glimpse of life through the intellectual lens of social science, was ever more terribly complex (and frightening, and provocative, and

engrossing...) than my Christian upbringing had led me to believe. I felt a growing sense of control as I consumed myself in the study of philosophy, sociology and anthropology. As I felt my intellect grow, faith, ritual, and myth were rendered as social-cultural-psychologically constructed phenomena ripe for critical analysis and deconstruction, stripped of their mystical wonder and power over my life.

I make these confessions not only in an attempt at self-reflexive disclosure, but rather out of acknowledgement that in some way or another my memories of these experiences shaped my approach to and interpretation of apostasy and ex-Mormonism. Were it not for them my capacity for empathizing with ex-Mormons would have inevitably been different.

The costs and benefits of my own affinity with their experiences (as I saw it) are apparent to me now only in hindsight. As one of my ex-Mormon friends once told me, early in my research, "no one can understand what we're going through unless they've been there themselves." The possibility (and potential foreclosure) of intersubjective dialogue and discovery perhaps hinged upon, in a pragmatic sense, my ability to say with all honesty, "I've been there too." Attempting to bridge this experiential and existential divide is however what anthropology, and it turns out, apostasy, is made of.

Communication across religious or cultural boundaries requires reference to common experience, something the ex-Mormons I worked with found themselves frustrated with as they left the church and tried in vain to explain their experience to their faithful friends and family. "I've been where you are, but you haven't been where I am" one ex-Mormon man I knew told his brother who was attempting to show him the err of his ways. My

having at one point "been where he was" perhaps allowed me to converse with him, paying closer attention to his words and his experiences, in a way otherwise not possible.

My empathy for ex-Mormons' plight, however, had its limits. I often found myself frustrated at their seeming inability to "let go" of the church, annoyed at what seemed to me at the time their continued willingness to be a victim at the hands of the church. While sitting in ex-Mormon support group meetings that lagged on for three or more hours during which members shared their experiences of religious disbelief and personal disarray, I often grew anxious, my leg shaking with foreboding as story after heart-wrenching story was told with nothing seemingly achieved. Couldn't they 'buck up' and just get over it, I sometimes thought to myself.

In part, I think, I was discouraged by and reacting to my (assumed) inability to enter into the discussion and provide whatever guidance or support I thought might help their situation - in these meetings I mostly stayed quiet, intently listening. I felt torn by contrasting desires to on the one hand attempt to heal them (myself?) through whatever therapeutic form of engagement I could offer. And on the other hand, to maintain a stoic, clinical distance so in order to better apprehend and analyze. Yet, my anxiety in these situations (which inevitably bled over into all sorts of other engagements) I think revealed the extent to which I was channeling my own experiences of religious disillusionment and repressed anger. Research with spiritually and emotionally traumatized ex-Mormons became an ongoing visceral reminder of my past Christian life, the mnemonic violence they posed for me emerging from (or amplified by) my inability to "fix" them through a critical/therapeutic engagement with their personal situations.

This dissertation (like all others), and the ethnography from which it stems, thus in some ways contains as much of “me” as it does “them.” In the end, whatever insights and interpretations I’ve been able to achieve are because of (or in spite of) these contradictory experiences of intimacy and estrangement I experienced with my ex-Mormon friends.

Fieldwork among the Saints

I was initially drawn to the study of Mormonism as an undergraduate conducting my honors thesis on the topic of masculinity and religious rites of passage among returned LDS missionaries. Having vacationed in Utah as a child, I had been exposed to Mormonism from an early age, yet its people and religious practices remained a mystery to me. The widespread popularity and discussion of the LDS faith brought on by the Mormon Moment was in its early stages in 2006 when I began my undergraduate research, and I found myself fascinated by what was to me, at the time, a relatively little understood religious minority living in the mountains of Utah. Over the next several years, as Mormonism's notoriety in the media and popular culture escalated, I was increasingly drawn to the stories of several men I interviewed who had not successfully completed the missionary rite of passage, and who had instead rejected their faith.

Anthropologically, the phenomenon of apostasy fascinated me, in part, because it works against many of the themes of traditional ethnography. While anthropologists have previously studied marginalized subjectivities within a range of contexts - e.g. the mentally ill, economically disenfranchised, or refugee populations - it has yet to address

apostasy as an object of analysis. I think this partially stems from anthropology's historical fascination with religious belief systems and communities as extensions and expressions of "culture." Apostasy, and the accompanying forms of religious disenchantment I document here, however, are less easily observed as a mechanization of culture. Rather, the act of doubting, questioning, and rejecting religion is about the abatement of culture. And the anthropology of apostasy less about observing and analyzing how culture works, than about seeing how it collapses in on itself - how people struggle to make sense of their lives in its absence. Rather than working amongst a group of people who were either in the act of creating or existing within a communally constructed system of meaning, conducting ethnography on apostasy is therefore about attuning oneself to the dissolution of systems of meaning and the disarticulation of people away from a group.

In search of this phenomenon of apostasy taking place among the Saints, I conducted fieldwork in the Provo and Salt Lake City metropolitan areas, located in the central "Wasatch Front" region of Utah. This area sits in between the towering Wasatch mountains to the East, Utah Lake to the South, and the Great Salt Lake to the North. It is here that over 80% of Utah's population lives.

Utah is indeed a unique cultural-religious environment in the United States. While the relative proportion of LDS faithful has been steadily declining over the past several decades with the influx of non-Mormon immigrants into the state, over fifty percent of

Utah's population still claims membership in the LDS Church,¹⁵ the only U.S. state with a single religious group making up the majority of its population.

However, while the LDS faith is a rapidly growing *world religion*, with significant populations in other U.S. states, including Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona, and around the globe in Central America, South America, and parts of Africa, Utah Mormonism is in many ways unique. Settled in 1847 by Mormon pioneers escaping persecution in the east, Utah soon became the nucleus around which Mormonism began its cultural, political, and religious domination of the intermountain region west of the Rockies (Sells & Berman 2005). In this area, dubbed by social geographers as the "Mormon Culture Region," most church members are "born in the faith," living in neighborhoods where they enjoy near absolute religious dominance. As sociologists Ryan Cragun and Rick Phillips (2011) note, the distinction between Mormons in the Mormon Culture Region and those outside it has prompted scholars to describe two different "species" of Mormons. As they write, "One 'species' inhabits a place where the tenets of Mormonism are axiomatic and an LDS identity is inculcated from birth. Their colorful and sensational history...is inextricably intertwined with their geography and genealogy. The other species practices an esoteric faith in pluralistic environs with little or no support from kin" (Phillips & Cragun 2011).

In Utah County, where I lived during fieldwork, over 88% of the population claim membership in the LDS Church. In 2013 Gallup ranked the Provo-Orem area the most

15 <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/home3/53909710-200/population-lds-county-utah.html.csp>

religious metropolitan area in the United States.¹⁶ It is here that the LDS Church's flagship school, Brigham Young University, and its Missionary Training Center are located. As with the rest of Utah, the demographics are largely homogenous - white and middle class is the outright norm. Together with my wife, I lived in a small one bedroom house, seven blocks south of Brigham Young University. And as is typical in Utah, my neighborhood also functioned as a church "ward," a geographically determined ecclesiastic unit whose residents all attend the same church "meeting house." In this way, wards are in effect extensions of the institutional church. Living in this neighborhood, surrounded by faithful church members, I was able to participate in and observe the everyday happenings of a typical Mormon community, including attending weekly sacrament meetings, baptisms, ward picnics, and brief, yet always jovial, conversations with the local bishop who lived a few doors down the street.¹⁷

However, the bulk of my research took place away from my Mormon neighborhood and unfolded over the course of two phases throughout 2012.

Phase one of my research was carried out over five months, between January and May 2012.¹⁸ During this period I examined how ex-Mormons negotiated and redefined

16 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/161543/provo-oreem-utah-religious-metro-area.aspx>

17 During my fieldwork I also had the unique opportunity to serve as an adjunct instructor teaching anthropology classes at Utah Valley University, a school with an overwhelmingly Mormon student body. While not an official research site, my interactions with students in the classroom afforded me many insights into contemporary Mormon culture, and through class discussions, provided many opportunities to discuss political, social, and religious matters with my students. In conversation with them I was often able to check the validity of my insights, ask for clarification on church related topics, or be introduced to previously unrealized issues in Mormonism.

18 I made my initial forays into the ex-Mormon community in 2009 after contacting several ex-Mormon support group facilitators and gaining permission to attend their meetings. Revisiting again in 2010, and then finally moving to Utah full-time in 2011, it was therefore relatively easy to begin more intensive observations as I was readily invited to more informal get-togethers and introduced into more exclusive friendship networks.

their relationship with Mormonism. I primarily conducted participant observation in ex-Mormon support group meetings, public events, and social activities and collected twenty-two “apostimonies.”

Among ex-Mormons throughout Utah, the “apostimony” constitutes a local discourse genre through which people explain their reasons for and experiences of leaving the Church. Marked by tearful renditions of personal troubles and regrets, despair and resentment over the past, and ambitions and hopefulness for the future, they are a key site through which apostates’ discursively negotiated attachment and separation from their former religion. More specifically, I was interested in and gathered apostimonies in the way that they constituted a form of “life-story” (Ahearn 2010; Crapanzano 1984; Frank 1996; Peacock and Holland 1993), through which ex-Mormons both accomplished and reflected upon the act of leaving the Church; attempted to reconstruct notions of self (Capps and Ochs 1995; Linde 1993; Ochs & Capps 1996; Stromberg 1993); and, as an aesthetic form of narrative “emplotment,” how they served as “collaborative, sense-making practice[s]” by which speakers reconciled disconnects and inconsistencies in their personal and shared experiences of leaving Mormonism (Ochs & Capps 2001:207).

I collected these apostimonies from ex-Mormons I identified at informal gatherings, support group meetings and large-scale ex-Mormon conferences. In order to account for patterns of difference across and between people’s varying perspectives, I spoke with both men and women, and people of varying ages, from 18 to 68. During apostimony interviews I started by asking each individual to tell me about their experience leaving the Mormon Church, letting the interviewee respond freely, as I was interested in seeing the kinds of topics people brought up on their own. However, I also prepared a checklist

of topics to be covered in the conversation, and if needed, would ask probing questions. The topics I asked specifically about included the persons' reasons for leaving; perceived challenges and benefits of leaving; and their fears, expectations, and hopes for the future.¹⁹

I was primarily interested in analyzing how through the performative telling of apostimonies ex-Mormons came to understand the significance of their disaffection from Mormonism and reflect upon their former life in the church. In particular I was interested in ascertaining how apostimony narratives utilized shared meanings and understandings (particular phrases, words, gestures, or stories), such as, listing reasons for leaving the Church, voicing complaints about Church leaders, or criticizing formerly accepted religious truths.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, during this initial phase of research I conducted participant observation at social gatherings and support group meetings where I investigated how apostates' conceptions of self and subjectivity were inter-subjectively constructed.

Historically, would-be Mormon apostates kept their doubts silent, fearful of Church teachings that suggest doubters, skeptics, and “faith killers” “are to be shunned” (Asay 1981:67). In the past decade, however, various highly visible, organized, and active Mormon apostate groups have emerged in Utah. Involving a social network of thousands of members, they organize conferences, advertise on highway billboards, and hold regular support group meetings (Joffe-Walt 2005). The creation of these groups has thus

¹⁹ Each of these apostimony interviews were tape-recorded – with my interviewee's permission – and transcribed.

actively reshaped the meaning of apostasy for many of those who have left the Church by providing a community of support and an open forum for voicing spiritual doubts and grievances. It is within these groups that I gained entree into the ex-Mormon community and identified my key informants.

There were three main groups I worked with, including a community that coalesced around the “Mormon Expressions” (ME) podcast, a support group who met under the name “Religious Transitions Group” (RTG), and an Atheist community largely made up of current and former Brigham Young University Students who referred to themselves simply as “the Community.”

The Mormon Expressions community originally formed around a weekly podcast hosted by a small group of ex-Mormons in Utah County. Recording their first hour long episode in 2009 (now nearing 300 episodes in 2015), each episode of ME involved discussion and commentary on topics such as Mormon history, theology, culture, and current events, in addition to interviews with notable Mormon and ex-Mormon leaders. In addition to the podcast, the ME community existed as a thriving social network and Facebook group - ME leaders routinely hosted BBQs, camping trips, speaker events, and holiday parties (all of which I regularly attended) where those who had left, or were in the midst of leaving Mormonism could meet and form friendships outside the church. During the first few months of research I also attended several recordings of the podcast, and thus formed relationships with the show's producers and guests, and gained further connections in the ex-Mormon community. As these relationships deepened, I was routinely invited to private parties and family events where I gained a deeper, more “backstage” view of people's lives that complemented the public discussions I was

hearing on the podcast and at community events. It was primarily through my participation in the ME community where I was able to investigate how processes of subject formation and the negotiation of people's marginality to Mormonism unfolded through people's collective negations of former moral proscriptions (e.g. displays of sexuality, drinking alcohol, telling vulgar jokes, etc.), nostalgic singing of Mormon hymns, or reading and debating scriptures. It was therefore primarily in the ME community where I witnessed religious and secular subjectivities in flux – the transition from Mormon to ex-Mormon - as people negotiated their lingering attachments to the church, and created new “secular” habits and perspectives.

For the first six months of my research I also worked with the Religious Transitions Group, where I routinely attended bi-weekly, Sunday afternoon support group meetings held at a Unitarian Universalist church building on the outskirts of Salt Lake City. Unlike the Mormon Expression group, RTG's activities were largely limited to the two hour informal support group meetings where upwards of two dozen people sat in a circle of chairs and talked about the hardships of leaving the church. There was never an agenda at these meetings, and after brief introductions, participants were free to discuss whatever topics they chose. Over the course of my research I found these meetings particularly somber and disheartening, as participants regularly talked about problems with spouses, parents, children, church leaders or neighbors, or the emotional toll of losing their faith. During the meetings I either took notes in a small paper notebook, or simply listened as people spoke. Although I did not typically talk during the meetings, I routinely stayed afterwards to get to know some of the regular attendees or ask questions about something someone said during the session. This included asking for more detailed backstories, or

for them to expand upon, a particular experience they referenced in the session. Unlike the other groups I worked with, RTG participants' relationships typically did not extend beyond the bi-weekly meetings.

Finally, I worked with “the Community” off and on while in Utah, which consisted of current and former BYU students who had lost their faith in Mormonism and had subsequently adopted an atheist perspective. The Community's activities largely consisted of holding meet ups at a local coffee shop located several blocks from the BYU campus where people gathered to talk, drink coffee, and play chess. Conversations there typically took a philosophical bent, as people discussed the intellectual merits of atheism and deficits of Mormonism, while interspersing their conversations with frequent references to scientific research on astronomy, astrophysics and the writings of notable “new atheists,” such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins. While conversation was often marked by a no-nonsense intellectual seriousness, it was also frequently supplemented by post-adolescent musings on love, dating, sex, drug use, and pop culture. I was often astonished by the marked contrast between the deep philosophical contemplation on topics of death and eternity being held over a chess game in one corner of the room, and the light-hearted abandon of others dancing and singing only a few feet away. As I came to see, however, this was the truest expression of the group's collective ethos. Those few hours in the coffee shop constituted a period of intellectual and spiritual release for these atheist students who otherwise spent their days pretending to be faithful church members in their BYU classes, at church, and in front of their church-going roommates.

Although I was for the most part wholly welcomed into these communities, I was at times questioned about my religious background and my motives for studying ex-Mormonism. At times, people were skeptical of my institutional affiliations and ideological allegiances. While my reserved demeanor, conservative appearance and white skin to some extent afforded me unique entree into the community, it also meant I was indistinguishable from the surrounding Mormon population. After several months in the field, one man confessed that he initially thought I was a Mormon spy of some sort, secretly documenting, on behalf of the church, what his group of friends were up to. I remember feeling uncomfortable, when upon first meeting, he told me "You'd make a good Mormon." From then on, always aware that I might be misidentified as an agent of the church, I was more proactive about distancing myself more explicitly from Mormonism, always making sure to have an alcoholic drink in hand at ex-Mormon gatherings - quietly, yet unmistakably signaling my non-Mormon status.

Phase two of my research was carried out over the next five months, between June and October 2012. During this time I conducted participant observation in half a dozen key informant's homes and neighborhoods (selected from informants encountered during phase one), as well as countless in-depth conversations. While I met hundreds of ex-Mormons throughout my fieldwork, I primarily relied on my intimate relationships with this handful of people to gain the kinds of in-depth understanding of the apostate experience I was after. Throughout my dissertation I draw extensively on conversations I had with this relatively small group of people.

By this time I had developed relatively intimate relationships with my key informants, and spent increasing amounts of time with their close group of friends or one-

on-one at their homes. Because of this I was able to observe people negotiate their transition out of Mormonism in more intimate and personal domains, such as when I accompanied them to family events (including church services, baptisms, and camping trips), observed everyday issues occurring in the normal course of the day (such as neighbors stopping by, family members calling on the phone, or arguments at the dinner table), or was made privy to more private issues, such as people's marital problems, sexual activities, and bouts of depression and anxiety.

I no longer conducted formal interviews at this stage in my research, and instead increasingly engaged people solely through informal, in-depth conversation occurring over shared meals or drinks or coinciding with support group meetings, book club meetings, or other ex-Mormon group events that I and my interlocutor attended together. I found that such conversations provided for an organic emergence of salient topics, and that my interlocutors were more apt to talk openly and at greater length than in the often stilted format of a formal "interview." Through these conversations I was able to learn about people's life histories, including about their childhood experiences growing up in the church, relationships with their parents, marriages, and more existential questions around the meaning of life, death, morality, and happiness. Drawing upon the notion of "psychoanalytic listening" (Luttrell 2000), I paid close attention to recurrent, though often veiled, secular and religious themes in people's responses by identifying patterns in key words and phrases, metaphorical imagery, emotional tone and embodied affect.

In addition to participant observation and interviewing, I conducted archival research during the latter stages of my research in order to situate my informant's experiences within a broader historical and cultural context, including analyzing how

Mormon apostasy was portrayed in the historical record and contemporarily “from the pulpit.” Specifically, I drew on an assortment of online databases, church produced magazines, church leaders' spoken addresses, LDS scripture, contemporary news articles and secondary literature on Mormon history. Much of this research was facilitated by the Church's recent efforts to create a digital database of church publications on its LDS.org website. My archival research also entailed an analysis of ex-Mormon YouTube videos, online blogs and publicly accessible list serves.²⁰

Chapter Overview

I approach apostasy over the course of these six chapters as a constellation of experiences, orientations, transformations, and negotiations, following a narrative arc similar to that of Taylor's story described above, moving through the various transition points of faith, doubt, disillusionment, disenchantment, deconversion, stigma, and emergent “ex-Mormon” identity.

Chapter 1 situates the phenomenon of Mormon apostasy in a historical and cultural context. I frame modern Mormonism's issue of apostasy in terms of the church's historical attempts to selectively remember and strategically forget key pieces of its past, leading to what I refer to as a crisis of memory for contemporary Mormonism. This includes not only institutional attempts at internal censorship but also the emergence of a “mode of faith” that attempts to stay on the “surface” of church history and defend itself from doubt. I examine people's disillusionment as resulting from a historical convergence

²⁰ This includes postmormon.org; exmormon.org; mormoncurtain.com; lifeaftermormonism.net; mormonthink.com; iamanexmormon.com

of, on the one hand, Mormonism's attempts to mitigate the threat of its past, coupled with on the other hand, the contemporary church's growing self-consciousness as it seeks entry into the mainstream American religious landscape, leading to a condition in which the parameters and foundation of faith have become the object of internal and external scrutiny. What results, I argue, is once faithful Mormons begin "digging too deep" into their church's past, eventually bringing about a collapse of faith as the image of self they developed throughout a lifetime of church membership is undermined by their exposure to incongruent pieces of the church's past.

Chapter 2 explores the phenomenological and existential dimensions of religious disenchantment from the perspective of the people who endure it. Though I draw heavily on the perspectives of a single person who I befriended during the early "stages" of his disenchantment, I frame disenchantment as an experience erupting at the intersection of culture and personal biography. My interest is in showing how disenchantment entails certain forms of traumatic loss that are compelled by people's movement out of Mormonism's all-encompassing religious life-world. These losses, I argue, complicate theories of secularization that approach changes in religiosity as driven by people's attempts to maximize personal benefit through (de-)conversion. More broadly, this chapter addresses the possibilities and problems of recovery by drawing attention to religious disenchantment as an increasingly pervasive, though largely unrecognized, form of social suffering.

Chapter 3 examines the embodied subject as a site of religious deconversion and transformation. Here I contend with studies of deconversion that focus solely on aspects of belief or identity to argue that religious deconversion must be understood as a jointly

corporeal and psychosomatic transformation of mind and body. I first conceptualize the body - its affects, sensations, and orientations - as containing residual remainders of a 'former' religious subjectivity that linger even after "belief" is gone. Then, I discuss how embodied experiences of sexuality offer the possibility for a critical reconception of religious self and subjectivity. Finally, I examine how the ideology of atheism serves, not only as an intellectual positionality contra religion, but as an instrument of self inoculation against predispositions to "feel the spirit."

Chapter 4 examines the stigmas and stereotypes surrounding apostasy and apostates in Mormonism. Specifically, I discuss the social and political context of apostasy, focusing on how through the circulation of rumors, gossip, and explanations about why apostates leave the church Mormons create and police internal divisions within the church. I examine how the stigmas attached to apostates function as a projective fantasy through which church members expiate tensions and frustrations circulating within contemporary Mormonism. I then discuss how these stigmas create a condition of social alienation and marginality for people leaving the church. I argue that church members occlude apostates from everyday life in order to maintain these projective fantasies and as a defense against the existential threat they pose to the community of faithful.

Chapter 5 explores several ways ex-Mormons attempt to negotiate the stigmas and social marginalization discussed in the previous chapter. It examines the micropolitics of self-labelling, a "mass-resignation" march, and a series of "I'm an ex-Mormon" testimonial videos circulated on YouTube. I situate these events within the context of the "Mormon Moment" and relate ex-Mormons' efforts to achieve visibility

and acknowledgement to the LDS Church's own attempt to enter into the mainstream American religious landscape.

Chapter 6 explores the complex dynamics of nonbelieving subjectivities. I compare two case studies of a "middle-way Mormon" and an "angry ex-Mormon" to discuss how religion is variously identified and disidentified with in the wake of religious disenchantment. I juxtapose how middle-way Mormons attempt to "make it work" by maintaining an intimate engagement with the church, thus blurring the boundary between member and non-member, to the way "angry ex-Mormons" come to personify and perform anger as a way of creating and policing boundaries between them and their former faith.

I conclude by pointing to some of the most recent attempts made by the LDS Church to stem the tide of disaffection. I also offer some critiques of Mormonism's current strategy of "pastoral apologetics" by pointing to key dimensions of apostates' experiences that the church must begin to recognize if relationships of mutual recognition and respect are to be restored between it and its erstwhile members.

This dissertation will ultimately do little to remedy the pain and suffering endured by the countless numbers of people who have left, or will leave, the church under such spiritual and emotional duress. What I hope this work can provide, however, is an addendum to the narratives circulating in the church about who its apostates are and why they disaffected. Similarly, on a broader level, I hope that this dissertation forces the issue of disenchantment and apostasy, and the effect it has on the people who are living it in their everyday lives, to the forefront of academic and popular discussion about religion, resurrecting it from the forgotten recesses of our collective conscious that all too

frequently nostalgically glorifies religious belief and belonging as a quaint refutation of the alienating and disintegrating effects of secular modernity.

Ch 1: Digging Too Deep: History, Faith, and the Crisis of Memory

"Suppose your youth receive their impressions of church history from "pictures and stories" and build their faith upon these alleged miracles [and] shall someday come face to face with the fact that their belief rests on falsehoods, what then will be the result? Will they not say that since these things are myth and our Church has permitted them to be perpetuated . . . might not the other fundamentals to the actual story of the Church, the things in which it had its origin, might they not all be lies and nothing but lies?"

- Truman G. Madsen²¹

When Ryan told his parents he was leaving the church his mother cried. He tried to explain to her why he was leaving, why after twenty-five years as a faithful member, he could no longer believe its teachings. "But she wouldn't listen" he said. "The only thing she could tell me was that I had *forgotten who I am.*"

Like Ryan, most of the former church members I spoke to in Utah had been "living the gospel" their whole lives. They were born, and planned to die, members of the church. However, in the course of participating in church activities, and developing their "testimony" of the church's "truth," they discovered things about the church that eventually drove them to disbelief. That is what their friends and family did not understand, they said. As one woman told me, "Everyone thinks if you leave the church you were somehow not doing what you were supposed to, but that's not right. We were

²¹ From *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 363.

doing everything we were taught, as much if not more than anybody else...*It's really the best of us who leave.*"

While a faithful testimony is ostensibly built upon members' study and pondering of stories regarding Joseph Smith's visionary encounter with divine personages in a shaded grove, his discovery of golden plates, and the subsequent translation of those plates into the Book of Mormon, for the ex-Mormons I spoke with, "digging too deep" into this past paradoxically inverted these stories' faith promoting potential. When ex-Mormons began "researching the church" beyond what was depicted in church lesson materials and over the pulpit, they began uncovering long hidden pieces of its history that undermined the sanitized narratives they had been taught. Theirs was then not a problem of forgetting, as Ryan's mother intimated, having a *lack* of memory about who they were as members of the church. Rather, as I began to understand after hearing dozens of similar stories of religious disillusionment spurred by encounters with Mormonism's repressed history, ex-Mormons were afflicted with an *excess* of historical memory, having discovered pieces of the past that refused to fit within the highly abridged narratives they had once relied upon as a foundation for their faith in the church.

This chapter then is about "digging too deep," and the paradox of living in a contemporary church in which faith seems ever more precarious and doubt pervasive as the ghosts of Mormonism's past are increasingly resurrected in the present. Yet, this is not a story of ex-Mormons "losing their faith." "That pisses me off when people say that about us" an ex-Mormon friend of mine asserted. "People think that somehow I lost my faith. But I didn't. It lost me." His faith "betrayed" him he said. The church - its history,

its teachings - betrayed him. So this chapter is also about faith losing you - how intimacy, knowledge, understanding, inverts and subverts itself, imploding under its own weight.

Most of the literature on religious leave-taking, exiting, disaffiliation, or deconversion is often framed in terms of the language of apostasy. Such studies have attempted to explain people's rejection of faith in individualistic terms – a person's marginality from the group, their upbringing in the church, unique life changes that spurred a change of faith, how they were drawn away by the enticements of “the world,” or how their less-than stalwart incorporation of or adherence to church teachings predisposed them to doubt (Bromley 1998; Mauss 1998; Carter 1998). In essence it was they who individually lost their faith, made an autonomous, personal decision to stop believing.

In this chapter I would like to shift the terms of debate. I argue that apostasy in Mormonism can also be understood in light of, and as a response to, larger historical and cultural shifts in the faith itself. So rather than discussing apostasy in terms of the movement of people, or the beliefs they hold, *away* from a former faith, in this chapter I focus on apostasy in terms of a religious disenchantment effected in a movement *through* faith, as resulting from an overabundance of intimacy *with* faith - in this case one founded upon a certain historical narrative of a sacred past - ultimately bringing about what I term a *crisis of historical memory*. So while in some sense this chapter seeks to tell the history of apostates and apostasy by detailing some of the reasons people leave the church, it is not a history of apostasy in Mormonism. Rather, it is a particular telling of the history of the church itself, of the developments and transformations in faith, memory, history, and doubt that have fueled the so-called “mass apostasy” over the past

decade and a half. My aim then is to investigate how apostasy has erupted as a cultural phenomenon within the contemporary church, and in doing so point to the historical, cultural, and religious underpinnings of that eruption.

The historical backdrop of contemporary apostasy is in part Mormonism's ambivalent relationship with and fumbling attempt to render innocuous the vexing aspects of its past as it seeks a place on the contemporary U.S. religious landscape as a thoroughly “modern” church. Mormonism is in fact a religion predicated on – and articulated through the narration of – historical events such as Joseph Smith's “First Vision” and the historicity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient document describing the pre-Columbian history of North America. Yet, Mormonism no longer envisions itself as the beard wearing, hand-cart pulling, isolationists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They now strive to foster an image of thoroughly modern, business savvy, proselytizers preaching the gospel with cleanly shaved faces, wearing a suit and tie, and harnessing the power of the internet to reach ever more “investigators” of God's “one true church.” What arises is an enduring tension at the heart of contemporary Mormon identity that seeks to be simultaneously both modern and historical; a tension expressed in policies and pronouncements that at once attempt to draw on the power of historical memory to unify and distinguish its ever growing collective body, while also disavowing and disassociating from those aspects of the past that threaten the image of a church united around and validated by its unique heritage.

The first part of the chapter looks at how Mormonism has created a stratified “sacred history” and propagated a distinct mode of faith that is fostered and maintained through a practice of staying on the surface of church history. The second half of the

chapter looks at how during the so-called Mormon Moment, Mormonism's attempts to foster a modern image of itself, ambivalently distanced from its own past, has provoked increased scrutiny and questioning of that past from curious outsiders. Faithful members, rising to defend their faith and protect its image have gone searching for evidences that will answer their critics, only to find themselves “studying their way out” of the church by revealing long repressed evidence that challenges those very claims to truth.

Sacred History/Nostalgic Identities

In order to understand how “digging too deep” becomes a possibility in the contemporary church we must first understand what “church history” consists of in the first place.

As a product of American Christianity's Second Great Awakening, Mormonism emerged out of a tumultuous period of religious revivalism sweeping the country in the first few decades of the 19th century.²² Mormonism was unique, however, in that instead of positing itself as pushing Christianity into new directions, it was instead envisioned as a “restoration of the gospel” and a return to a form of Christianity as originally intended by God. These early “saints” (as they often referred to themselves) modelled their restoration movement as a return to Old Testament forms of religious authority and worship. They went about restoring the priesthood, building temples for worship and conducting ritual, and looking to divinely inspired patriarchs and prophets who would

22 Key studies of the history of Mormonism include Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (2007) and *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (2001), Terryl Givens' *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (2003) and *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, Jan Shipps' *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (1987), Matthew Bowman's *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (2012), and Leonard Arrington's *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (1992).

receive revelation directly from God on behalf of “the elect.” They indeed saw themselves as Heavenly Father’s modern day “chosen people,” living in what was then the western frontier of the United States alongside Native American tribes, who as the Book of Mormon claimed, were in fact remnants of a lost tribe of Israel. They in fact saw themselves as inheritors of the Old Testament mandate to Moses to wander the wilderness, divinely tasked with building the Kingdom of God on earth, a new “Zion” as they called it, in which the righteous would live together while awaiting Christ’s second coming.

Yet during these early days Mormonism was also theologically inventive and spiritually charismatic. Speaking in tongues, giving blessings, and experiencing ecstatic visions of angels and spirits was common. During these early years Joseph Smith also received continuous revelations “correcting” contemporary Christianity’s understanding of the nature of heaven, God, and human existence. Heaven was thought to consist of a tiered domain of hierarchically aligned “kingdoms” reflecting different levels of exaltation in which the righteous could achieve varying degrees of glory. God was posited to be a man, who though divine, still consisted of flesh and blood, and had once lived as a mortal being. Everyday people, on the other hand, were thought to have once lived as spirit children with a Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother in the pre-existence. As beings with a divine potential, people are believed to have the potential, through eternal progression, to likewise become Heavenly Parents, able to populate their own planetary realms through the procreative endeavors of celestial marriage. These ideas indeed directly informed the establishment of plural marriage (polygamy) as a restoration of and means of perpetuating these divine familial relations, taught to be a necessary

component of achieving exaltation.

Mormonism's peculiar practices and beliefs, however, brought them much persecution from an American populace leery of their increasingly insular society and polygamous marriage practices. The church, seeking religious freedom, moved several times over the course of just a few decades, from New York to Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri. However, after the murder of Joseph Smith at the hands of a mob in Carthage, Illinois in 1844, the Saints eventually found their Zion in Utah, a land of bounty where they could practice their religion in isolation and peace, and develop a theocratic mode of self-governance separate from the United States. Indeed, throughout the latter half of the 1800s Mormonism's temporal horizons extended forward into a future defined by the inevitability of messianic redemption, an event which early church leaders preached would happen before that very generation passed away.

Christ did not come, however, and those days of messianic religious exuberance soon came to an end. So too did the prospect of self-governance, cultural autonomy, and unlimited religious freedom. Forced to make amends with a U.S. government weary of the Saint's military, economic, and political domination of the inter-mountain West, and faced with an American populace intolerant of the practice of polygamy, the church was eventually compelled to denounce plural-marriage in 1890, and in 1896 Utah became the forty-fifth state with a secular constitution and government. Over the next several decades the Saints tried to seek incorporation and inclusion into mainstream American life, accepting ever more numbers of non-Mormon "gentiles" into the state, rather than leading a life of sacred self-imposed exile.



Figure 1: Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, NY.

The time of miracles, prophecy, revelation and charismatic worship had in many ways come to an end. Only a handful of divine revelations of doctrinal importance were made after Joseph Smith's demise in 1844.²³ It was in these days then that Mormons became no longer simply a people remaking history. They were now forced to think of themselves as a people with their own unique sacred history that they were both at risk of losing, yet at pains to hold on to, as their latter-day Zion was increasingly inundated with and threatened by non-church members moving into the state.

What parts of that history they chose to remember became a matter of critical importance as they sought to maintain their "peculiarity," distinct from the "gentiles" in American society. During this time church history was increasingly narrativized, formalized, and objectified as Mormonism began to engage in nostalgic attempts at historical reclamation. "Church history" became a standard course of study in Sunday school lessons and reflected on in church published periodicals and monographs. Starting in the 1930s, elaborate outdoor "pageants" dramatizing key historical events depicted in the Book of Mormon and elements of the church's institutional establishment were performed for the public, their educational and faith-promoting dimensions closely

²³ In the early days of the church, as self-appointed "prophet, seer and revelator," only Joseph Smith received revelation on behalf of the church as a whole. After he passed away, the "mantle" of prophet would be passed down to subsequent presidents of the church.

coinciding. Indeed, during this era, portraying a coherent and consistent depiction of the church's history began to become a primary means of reinforcing collective identifications while simultaneously providing a potent source of spiritual guidance. As historian Jan Shipps has written, "Mormonism, unlike other modern religions, is a faith cast in the form of history." Church history became "sacred history."

"Sacred history...is stripped down – in artistic terms, stylized – so that the story is told in blacks and whites, with no grays. The persecuted and persecutors, the people of God and the people of Satan, good and evil are locked in mortal combat in which compromise is out of the question. All the ambiguity and complexity of human existence is shorn away. Moreover, the context is left ambiguous enough to keep the narrative from being either time bound or culture bound; it functions as scripture.... By its very nature it can only be retold and defended; not reinvestigated, researched."²⁴

As Shipps' characterization of "sacred history" suggests, church history was for the most part off-limits to critical debate or secular scholarship and was instead increasingly treated with sacred deference. As such, it functioned for Mormonism then, as it does today, as a quasi form of scripture. Tales of pioneers' perseverance, early members' devotion to the prophet, sacrifice, fortitude, and piety, were looked to for the spiritual lessons they convey for modern members, while also serving as models and guides for living righteously in the present. As has increasingly been the case, the empirical truth of the church's history came to stand for the very foundation of the church's religious truth, as modern day members look to their history as "inspired," "proof" that Heavenly Father is indeed "steering" the church.

However, over the past half century, as Mormonism has drastically grown in numbers and influence across the United States and around the globe, this historical

²⁴ Jan Shipps "The Mormon Past: Revealed or Revisited?," *Sunstone*, v. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1981), p. 57.

narrative has been subjected to even more intense forms of routinization (Ludlow 2000). This is in part the result of rapid transformations during the 1960s and 70s, as church membership swelled in the wake of domestic and international missionary efforts, and the church increasingly found itself attempting to maintain the consistency and coherency of its theological positions and ecclesiastical administration across an ever widening, geographically disparate and culturally diverse congregation (Allen & Leonard 1992).^{a25} With people of widely varying cultural and religious backgrounds converting to Mormonism, church leaders began to worry that unorthodox teachings, ritual practices, and modes of administration would enter into circulation (Bowman 2012). During that time under the presidency and prophetic leadership of David O. McKay, church leadership instituted a program later officially and popularly referred to as “correlation,” tasked with fostering a uniformity of cultural-religious consciousness by standardizing church teachings, rationalizing its bureaucratic administration, and routinising worship practices (Allen & Leonard 1992; Prince 2005).

This identification with history, however, has proved ambivalent. Its sacrality has made it powerful, and formidable, thereby requiring the creation of an official or “true” history that could serve as a collective narrative for internal cohesion and also be defended, on religious grounds, from challenges to its faithful rendering from either outside or inside the church (Shipps 1985). During the 1960s, under the authority of the newly formed Church Education Committee, class curriculum and lesson materials were simplified, standardized, and shortened, which paralleled an increased emphasis on

²⁵ By 1971 there were over three million church members worldwide and over sixty-five thousands missionaries, living and operating on every continent (Bowman 2012).

teaching gospel principles and righteous living over scriptural exegesis (Bowman 2012). "Correlated" materials also increasingly emphasized correct moral behavior and adherence to church authority over theological reflection or innovation, and largely avoided mentioning or going into detail about the more unseemly aspects of church history, including early conflicts, debates, and controversies (Duffy 2005). To these ends lesson manuals admonished Sunday school teachers from incorporating materials or texts from outside sources, stating that teachers should avoid "substitut(ing) outside materials, however interesting they may be" (Perkey 2011). Simplification and standardization became strategies of insuring both pan-Mormon harmony and personal happiness through a "correct" interpretation of church teachings. Yet it also effectively created a stratified church history in which some segments of the past were "strategically forgotten" by the institutional church, provoking a wider form of cultural forgetting throughout the church ranks. The true version of Church history, and the spiritual truths it testified of, were limited to that which appeared in church published lesson manuals and other church approved texts. As a result, moral and spiritual lessons superseded obligations to historical accuracy.

What correlation and the creation of an institutionally legitimized and defended "sacred history" also reveals is a growing sense of vulnerability in Mormonism, an increasing awareness of the potential power and threat of its past to disrupt faith in the present. Mormonism effectively becomes self aware in a way it had not been during its early years as an upstart faith in the east, and a burgeoning isolationist theocracy in the west. Although beginning as a schismatic movement breaking away from mainstream Protestantism, Mormonism now risked having its own internal schisms. Correlation and

incorporation into mainstream America together marked this self reflexive transformation and collective awareness that its tenuous sense of internal coherency was at risk.

Deep history as dangerous

“My duty as a member of the Council of the Twelve is to protect what is most unique about the LDS church, namely the authority of priesthood, testimony regarding the restoration of the gospel, and the divine mission of the Savior. Everything may be sacrificed in order to maintain the integrity of those essential facts.”

- Apostle Dallin Oaks²⁶

“Church history can be so interesting and so inspiring as to be a very powerful tool indeed for building faith. If not properly written or properly taught, it may be a faith destroyer.”

- Apostle Boyd Packer²⁷

"Indeed, in some instances, the merciful companion to truth is silence. Some truths are best left unsaid."

- Apostle Russel M. Nelson²⁸

The notion that certain materials, especially "uncorrelated" narratives of the church's past,

²⁶ *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, Introduction p. xliii

²⁷ "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," 1981, BYU Studies, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 259-271

²⁸ "Truth—and More," Ensign, Jan. 1986, page 69

should be considered “dangerous” and distanced from as a matter of institutional policy and individual practice emerged during the middle decades of the 20th century. This was in part a response to a period of historical scholarship referred to as “New Mormon History” during which professional, academic, and church historians were granted unprecedented access to church archival material in what historian Richard Bushman has described as a “quest for identity rather than a quest for authority.”²⁹ This quest for identity in the pages of history was in part a reaction to Mormonism’s deepening incorporation into mainstream America, during which the anxiety was not over the introduction of orthodox teachings from without, but rather the loss of a sense of historical distinctiveness within.

However, New Mormon History soon proved unpopular among church leaders who asserted that interest in church history could be counter productive to “the work of the church.” Such calls came in response to various publications that, in their unabridged and unflinching depiction of historical figures and events, implicitly challenged the central tenets of Mormonism. These include Fawn Brodie’s (1971) critical psycho-biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, Juanita Brooks’ (1991[1950]) *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, Linda King Newell and Valeen Avery’s (1984) study of plural marriage, *Mormon Enigma*, and other works that either tacitly or explicitly challenged the sanitized version of historical events espoused over the pulpit and in church lesson materials. New Mormon History’s “quest for identity” was increasingly threatening to dissolve the basis of that identity altogether.

29 For more on this topic see Robert Flanders’ “Some Reflections on the New Mormon History” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Spring 1974): 34-41, and D. Michael Quinn, Ed. *The New Mormon History*.

In response, in an essay titled "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect," a dogmatic censure of church historical writing, apostle Boyd Packer counsels that historians' "objective should be that they [those who study Mormon history] will see the hand of the Lord in every hour and every moment of the Church from its beginning till now" (Packer 1981:262).³⁰ His words are worth quoting at length for what they reveal about this shift in orientation towards church history and its intersection with an emergent modern form of Mormon faith anxious about its own past:

Church history can be so interesting and inspiring as to be a very powerful tool indeed for building faith; [however], if not properly written or properly taught, it may be a faith destroyer. (There is a)...temptation for the writer or the teacher of Church history to want to tell everything, whether it is worthy or faith promoting or not...Some things that are true are not very useful.

Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow and heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning...the scriptures teach emphatically that we must give milk before meat.

In the Church we are not neutral. We are one-sided. There is a war going on, and we are engaged in it. It is the war between good and evil, and we are belligerents defending the good. We are therefore obliged to give preference to and protect all that is represented in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we have made covenants to do it.

Those of you who are employed by the Church have a special responsibility to build faith, not to destroy it. If you do not do that, but in fact accommodate the enemy, who is the destroyer of faith, you become in that sense a traitor to the cause you have made covenants to protect. Those who have carefully purged their work of any religious faith in the name of academic freedom or so-called honesty ought not to be accommodated in their researches or to be paid by the Church to do it (Packer 1981:261-263).

30 *Church History In The Fulness Of Times Student Manual*, (2003), 646–649

Elder Packer's words reflected a growing nervousness in the church over the increasingly antagonistic relationship between the past and faith in the post "New Mormon History" era. Indeed, this ethos of historical insecurity eventually culminated in the notorious "September Six" ex-communication and purging of six Mormon scholars in 1993 who published scholarly work criticizing the church (Ostling 1999; Toscano 2007). History was "correct" then only inasmuch as it served to increase faith, and as such, must be protected from misrepresentation that detracts from that goal. As one of Packer's contemporaries argued, "No true Latter-day Saint will ever take a stand that is in opposition to what the Lord has revealed to those who direct the affairs of his earthly kingdom. No Latter-day Saint who is true and faithful in all things will ever pursue a course, or espouse a cause, or publish an article or book that weakens or destroys faith" (McConkie 1984),³¹ thus effectively drawing a line between faithful membership and honest, critical inquiry. Mormonism's collective identity was indeed increasingly constructed through a foreclosure of threatening memories from the church's past and an institutionally legitimated mode of faithful forgetfulness. To do otherwise was to, in the words of Elder Packer, "accommodate the enemy." Such phrasings thus reflected a growing apprehension in the church that its own history now constituted a tool, even a weapon, that in the wrong hands could be used against them.

The battle between faith and doubt was now quite literally being waged on the pages of history, a battle that has continued into the 21st century. In 2002 fourth generation Mormon, Church Education System instructor, and three time director of the LDS Institute of Religion in Utah and California, Grant Palmer, wrote a book titled *An*

31 <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1984/10/the-caravan-moves-on?lang=eng>

Insider's View of Mormon Origins (2002). In the book Palmer traces the theological ideas and scriptural events depicted in the Book of Mormon to the religious environment of upstate New York where Joseph Smith lived, including the local revival evangelism movement, Smith's parent's own dreams and visions, the King James Bible, and a story by a German Romantic author named E.T.A. Hoffman, ultimately concluding that the foundational writings on which Mormonism is based are nothing but myths and fictional stories.

Indeed, Palmer suggests that his intentions are to counteract the systematic occlusion of historical truth from Mormonism's canon, saying that he is "salvaging the earliest, authentic versions of these stories from the ravages of well-meaning censors who have abridged and polished them for institutional purposes" (Palmer 2002:20):

We like to hear confirmations that everything is as we assumed it was: our pioneer ancestors were heroic and inspired and the Bible and Book of Mormon are in perfect harmony, for instance. We never learn in church that the Book of Abraham papyri were discovered and translated by Egyptologists or that researchers have studied American Indian genes and what the implications are for the Book of Mormon. Questions about such topics are discouraged because they create tension; they are considered inappropriate or even heretical. This approach has isolated many of us from the rest of the world or from reality itself in those instances when we insist on things that are simply untrue (Palmer 2002: vii).

Mormon apologists have, predictably, bitterly contested Palmer's claims, attacking Palmer's professional credentials as a historian in lieu of contesting the validity of his scholarship.³² This is in part an attempt to slander authors like Palmer, effectively

³² See Mark Ashurst-McGee, "A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins," *FARMS Review of Books* 15, 2 (2003): 310, and, Davis Bitton, "The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn't Tell Us)," *FARMS Review of Books* 15, 2 (2003): 257.

branding them as “anti-Mormons,” in order to ward off church members who might otherwise unwittingly read their texts and have their faith compromised. Such ad hominem attacks, characteristic of many church apologists who publish their scathing dismissals of dissenting figures like Palmer in church periodicals, magazines, and online blogs, however, also reveal the extent to which historical study and debate constitutes an existential threat to the imaginary church body, a threat perceived and responded to with combative metaphor and imagery. For example, Davis Bitton, former president of the Mormon History Association, after attacking Palmer’s character and credentials, wrote, “For some reason, I am not inspired by this knight in shining armor. He may appear mild mannered, but he is not doing the Lord’s work. He has lived a life of deceit for many years. *His lance is broken*” (Bitton 2003:257).³³

Such reactionary responses are not uncommon in Mormon communities, and as I discuss in the next section, have created an environment in which only a particular form of “shallow” faith can survive.

33 Importantly, as Bitton’s comments reveal, the threat of Palmer’s “deep” study of history is perceived in explicitly phallic terms. In response to this threat, Bitton fantasizes a metaphorical castration of Palmer, effected through ad hominem attacks that break Palmer’s “lance” and thereby mollifies the threat of his deep memory. Palmer’s book indeed invokes a reactionary response in Bitton (and assumingly, other church leaders and apologists). The book effectively challenges both the church’s, and his own, religious authority and reveals a latent phallic anxiety in Bitton that stems from his position president of the Mormon History Association. If Palmer is perceived in some sense as an authoritative rival, it is perhaps only because he provokes in Bitton a remembrance of his own thinly veiled castration anxiety, that in psychoanalytic terms, emerges not primarily out of fear of losing one’s own member, but of guilt arising in the wake of having seen and desired that which has been made forbidden.

One has to wonder, to what extent Bitton and other such high ranking Mormon apologists with unrivaled access to the historical materials Palmer writes about in *An Insider’s View*, have seen the “real” truth of Mormon history all along, and have harbored their secret knowledge (and guilt) over the course of a lifetime in the church, attempting to purge its effect from their memories - through such expiatory attacks - lest they in turn risk being dethroned from their positions of power and influence as the self-appointed autocrats of church history?

Staying in the “shallow end” of faith

When I first began researching apostasy in Mormonism, I talked to Robert, an ex-Mormon man in his mid forties, who described the average Mormon’s faith as “thin” and “fragile.” This at first came as a surprise to me. Having listened to so called average Mormons speak about their faith at length during sacrament meetings, while doing missionary work, or in interviews, their faith seemed to me, on the contrary, to be quite genuine and deep. However, Robert disagreed. “Oh sure, they believe everything they say. And they’re awfully committed to it. But start asking them questions and poking around a bit, and see what happens. They’re comfortably talking about the church and giving their testimony, but only if it’s in certain situations where they feel safe and in control. Start asking them about topics they’re unfamiliar with or really hard questions, and you’ll see, they start to squirm.”

It was only later in my research that I witnessed the “squirming” Robert spoke of, when I began to challenge church members’ assessments of ex-Mormons as spiritually lazy or morally corrupt with my own explanations of the many historical and theological issues ex-Mormons had found with the church. My attempts to talk about Joseph Smith outside the conceptual parameters of a divinely inspired prophet who single-handedly brought about the “restored gospel” provoked immediate avoidance reactions. My interlocutors would become agitated, defensive, and quickly offer a glib response and attempt to change the topic of conversation. When I brought this up with Robert later in my research, he explained that for these faithful church members “Everything’s okay as long as you don’t venture out of the shallow end of the pool.”

What does it mean though to stay in “the shallow end” of faith, and how is such a mode of faith achieved and maintained?

In the LDS Church one sacrament service every month is set aside as a “fast and testimony” meeting, during which members are invited to speak to the congregation from behind the lectern and “bear their testimony.” Typically this entails telling a story of a particularly faith affirming experience, such as how prayer or an instance of “listening to the spirit” averted an otherwise certain disaster, and ends with the routine rehearsal of some version of the statement, “I know this church is true.”

Making the statement, “I know this church is true,” in part signals to the congregation that the speaker has achieved a maturity of faith and fully accepts the central tenets of the Mormon religion. The phrase “I know this church is true” is often followed by any number of other normative statements such as “I know Joseph Smith spoke to God,” “I know the Book of Mormon is the greatest book ever written,” “I know Thomas S. Monson (the current president of the church) is a prophet of God,” or “I know that we have the restored gospel.” The maturity of faith signalled, however, is also one that is conspicuously free of doubt, question, or equivocation. Proclaiming “I know the church is true” is to rhetorically join in lockstep agreement with the authoritative position of the institutional church, and the “official” and canonical version of theology and church history espoused by its leaders.

As I sat through close to a dozen of these fast and testimony meetings during my time in Utah, I quickly noticed that there was little variation between people’s testimonies, in terms of form, structure, or content. Even the vocal patterns and tone of delivery was fairly consistent, with people speaking in measured, solemn phrases, their

narrative periodically and predictably interrupted by an eruption of tears or a choking off of the voice, effectively punctuating the emotional and spiritual gravity of their address. Yet, despite the symphony of voices unhesitatingly proclaiming “I know this church is true,” I found these declarations of faith interesting for exactly what they did not say, what they refused to say, yet what they went out of their way to forcefully, and repeatedly, draw attention to and discuss in the act of ostensibly saying the very opposite.³⁴

That the frequently repeated practice of bearing testimony constitutes a symptomatic manifestation of spiritual doubt and confusion, is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the standard advice given to those in the church experiencing doubts is to “bear testimony.” Melanie told me that when she first began entertaining doubts about the church, she approached her bishop who confessed that he too sometimes questioned, but that anyone in her situation should strive to bear their testimony as much as possible. “He told me to bear my testimony to my neighbors, to my family, anyone who would listen,” Melanie explained. “He didn’t want to have to actually deal with any of my questions about the church...just bear my testimony.”

Yet, bearing testimony not only reflects the tacit presence of doubt, it is also a ritualized means of dealing with that doubt. As Talal Asad (1993) suggests, rituals are

34 Repetition, it must be understood, stems in part from both a desire to keep at bay a fundamentally disturbing thought that has long been unacknowledged and must stay repressed, or to conquer an otherwise anxiety inducing experience (Freud 1914). As Calvin Hall suggests, such repetitions can, like I am arguing is happening in Mormon “fast and testimony meetings,” seem exaggerated, compulsive, or inflexible, evidencing a neurotic set of behaviors that “must be constantly on display as if any failure to exhibit it would cause the contrary feeling to come to the surface” (Hall 1954). In Mormonism, the collective compulsion to give testimony and the obligation to publicly proclaim “I know the church is true” I think have developed as a ritual means through which members mediate the ever present threat of doubt circulating within the contemporary church.

meaningful not only for the “content” which is communicated through them, but for the ways in which the ritual “disciplines” particular emotive states and affective predispositions into practitioners as they perform the set of actions repeatedly over the course of a lifetime. In this way ritual allows participants to symbolically “remake themselves” into the ideal version of a person in that culture. In the case of giving a testimony, the church member is made into one who “knows the church is true” inasmuch as they acquire and perform the appropriate bodily techniques and behaviors - the solemn tone, the pensive moments of whispered phrases and the drama of fighting back tears.

“Knowing the church is true” is therefore unlike other forms of knowledge based on empirical evidence or rational argumentation. Church members do not gain a knowledge of the church’s truth through intellectual study, but rather, through repetitive, embodied practice. As one church apostle advises, “We gain or strengthen a testimony by bearing it...testimonies are better gained on the feet bearing them than on the knees praying for them” (Oaks 2008).³⁵ A “strong testimony” then is as much evidenced and experienced in a normalized and naturalized performance as it is a reflection of a cognitively based “inner conviction.” Those able to render more convincing, heartfelt performances are often thought to be more intensely “feeling the spirit” and thus to have a “strong testimony.” Giving a testimony, and more importantly repeating the phrase “I know the church is true,” as I am arguing here, is then best understood as a self-disciplinary practice that effectively inculcates a sensation of absolute spiritual

35 <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2008/04/testimony?lang=eng>.

confidence through rote repetition, and crucially through which members “stay in the shallow end” of faith.

Having a testimony then constitutes what Raymond Williams describes as a “structure of feeling,” an affective state reflective of institutional discipline and constraints, that collapses a distinction between affect and cognition. In doing so, bearing testimony constitutes a unique form of psycho-physical experience, as Williams describes it, “thought as felt and feeling as thought” (1978:132) seen most evidently in the way Mormons emphasize having a testimony as a unique spiritual subjectivity characterized by embodied sensations, a “burning in the bosom,” over, or at least not reducible to, more explicitly cerebral or cognitive modes of knowing. In fact, in Mormon parlance “knowing” emerges primarily as a product of “feeling.” “A testimony is what we know to be true in our minds and in our hearts by the witness of the Holy Ghost. As we profess truth...we invite the Holy Ghost to confirm the verity of our words” (Bednar 2009:19). Or as a church member once explained to me, “When I read the Book of Mormon, or sing at church, or hear the prophet speak, *that’s when I feel the spirit and I know the church is true*. It’s this overwhelming feeling of warmth and peace, like I’m filled with the Holy Ghost at that moment. It’s hard to describe. But that’s how I know the church is true.”³⁶

While testimonies are ideally “strong” they are also tacitly recognized as fragile and susceptible to corruption. Members must therefore be vigilant in order to avoid

36 What I find interesting about the Mormon testimony and its relation to the broader issue of historical disillusionment, is how the particular logic of the testimony, by conflating cognition and emotion, perpetuates an illusion of false equivalency between depth of feeling and depth of knowing. By learning to “feel the spirit” and “bear testimony” the average church member is led to believe that they actually “know,” in some empirically verifiable way, the “truth” of the church. The effects of this will be seen further below when I discuss particular examples of this logic collapsing on itself in the midst of church members’ acts of historically “digging too deep.”

thoughts, actions, and most importantly texts, which may threaten their testimony. During my fieldwork one of my ex-Mormon contacts told me about a church event her daughter attended where the topic of discussion was “avoiding doubt.” The stake president advised everyone to only read information about the church supplied by church leaders as found in publications and on the LDS.org website, to avoid “exposing [themselves] to contrary information” and avoid “delving into church history unsupervised.” He then read an article written by a church general authority stating that reading anything that provokes doubt in Joseph Smith would put them at risk of losing the spirit altogether, an unthinkable condition akin to “going mad” (a topic I return to in the next chapter). And in an even more ambiguous instruction, they were told that when they confronted a “troublesome question or concern about the church” to “doubt your doubts” before doubting the church.

This authoritative discourse has shaped everyday membership and faith in the church, resulting in a cultural pattern of anxious avoidance of perceived threats. I remember on one of my initial fieldwork trips I worked shortly at a sandwich shop in southern Utah where most of my coworkers (and customers) were members (or former members) of the church. During one of my breaks I pulled out a book I was reading about Joseph Smith (Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History*), a large paperback with a well-known painting of the prophet's face printed on the front. One of my co-workers, a young woman attending the local university, seeing the text in my hands, slid down next to me on the counter on which we both were leaning. “Can I see what you're reading?” she asked enthusiastically, hoping, I thought, to start a conversation about the church, as she frequently did, much to some of my ex-Mormon co-workers' dismay. She took the book

in her hands, recognizing the painting on the front, but not the title of the text. Flipping to the back, she perfunctorily scanned the synopsis and blurbs before growing agitated and hastily handing it back, asking me where I bought it and if it was “church approved.” “Church approved?” I asked. “Ya” she said, “or is it one of those 'anti-Mormon' books?” I must have looked perplexed; a few minutes later one of my ex-Mormon co-workers explained what had happened. “She didn't recognize the book, so she checked for the church's stamp.” Later, as I began to collect books from local yard sales and thrift shops, most came with a prominent inscription of the church's logo printed on the back. The church logo symbolically testifying to readers that the contents of the book would not challenge the stories and narratives they learned in church, that their faith would be “protected.”³⁷

There is an array of other coping strategies, what ex-Mormons often refer to as “mental gymnastics,” that Mormons rely upon to maintain faith in the face of doubt. As one ex-Mormon, writing on an online list-serve explains:

Every educated, rational, intelligent, thinking person in the world bends the conclusion to fit the facts, right? If you think the world is flat, but sail off in one direction and wind up back where you started, then you bend your conclusion (the world must actually be round) to fit the facts (since I couldn't have come back here otherwise). Mormonism does the exact opposite: The *facts* are bent to fit the *conclusion*. The conclusion is that the Church is true, and all the facts are bent into the most ludicrous shapes to fit this conclusion....If some contrary evidence shows up which would lead one to believe that the Church isn't true, for

37 The stamp of church approval written onto books is not a marker of that texts sacralty, it is a stamp assuring the would be reader that all of of the necessary ritual safeguards have been used on the text, assuring that the reader can wade into it and expect to emerge unscathed. So called “anti-Mormon” texts are identified as dangerous exactly because this ecclesiastical oversight has not been applied. There has been no careful selection, editing, and narrativizing of the material to make it faith promoting.

example, all types of illogical arguments are postulated to discredit or reinterpret the evidence.³⁸

Throughout the course of my research I heard several of these arguments used by faithful church members. When faced with irreconcilable evidence, they would employ an array of defensive measures to allay their angst. "There are some things we weren't meant to understand in this life," they might say, implying that an answer to the problem, while not immediately available, will only be revealed if one maintains faith until they reach their next life. Explaining something as 'not meant to be understood in this life' also suggests that the problematic information, in its very irreconcilability with conventional logic, testifies of a higher-order, supernatural, and divine logic at work. It thereby effectively transforms faith challenging problems into faith promoting points of spiritual fascination, as the desire for an immediate satisfying answer is forever displaced into a deferred time in the future when "all will be made clear." "That's ok with me" one church member told me, "I don't need to have all the answers right now. It's the devotion to spiritual searching, and pondering, and praying that I enjoy."³⁹

Another response, "God doesn't give us all the answers since he occasionally wants to test our faith," functions along a similar logic. In the face of challenging information (which in itself is understood as a test from God, thereby affirming the belief that God indeed pays attention to and cares about his people), fighting off doubt and

38 Found on PostMormon.org, November 23, 2008.

39 Žižek argues that the "very elevation of something into impossibility as a means of postponing or avoiding encountering it" is an expression of ideology in one of its most virulent forms. Ideology in this case becomes an "impossible dream" in which the desire is not necessarily to overcome impossibility, but rather, to sustain the impossibility in an acceptable way. This in a more basic form is what Lacan identifies as the true object of desire, not to obtain that which is desired, but to sustain the pleasure of desire itself.

maintaining faith is turned into an intimate, and gratifying performance of obedience and righteousness to a coy and capricious Heavenly Father who, in the event that the church members “passes the test,” will dole out his divine countenance on the now “worthy” believer.

When I mentioned to my faithful friends that apostasy was in part driven by people’s discovery of issues with church history, they often employed a strategy of self-inoculation or sensitization by claiming to have already been aware of the “historical issues” and emerged with their faith wholly intact. When I asked them about the sources of such information, they inevitably recounted their brief perusals of various Mormon apologist websites, or an article written by a church leader that ostensibly “dealt with the issue.” However, much of the Mormon apologist writing, when I read through it, consisted of little more than reactionary obscurantism in response to perceived “attacks” on the church - the evidentiary logic and overall narrative at times incomprehensible. I was later told by one of my ex-Mormon contacts that “that’s how [Mormon apologist websites] work. They overwhelm people with nonsense and make them feel as if ‘someone’ in the church who is smarter than they are has dealt with the problem. They can then go on with their life, and feel more secure in their faith.”

Members who do inadvertently come across troubling information or have nagging concerns about church history, however, find themselves with little recourse to alleviate their doubts. They are told to pray, read their scriptures, and pay tithing, while researching, asking questions, or openly discussing doubts and questions is discouraged. “I really felt like if I said anything I’d immediately turn into an outcast, so I stayed quiet.

That's what you learn to do. You keep it to yourself, and you hope those thoughts go away," an ex-Mormon woman told me.

Finding themselves without an outlet for expressing doubt, church members who are forced to "keep it to themselves" have created a unique cognitive space to hold their doubts. "Everyone in the church has a *shelf in their mind* where they put all their questions," Robert once told me. "They may not talk about it, but its there. It's what everyone does to survive. See, you don't have time or energy, or even the courage to address all the little problems you come across in the church. Like for me, I never understood how celestial marriage (polygamy) could be a part of God's plan. But see, you can't dwell on stuff like that. So you put it on the shelf and tell yourself that it'll eventually be explained, because right now there's more important things to worry about, like making sure you get all of your family into the celestial kingdom. Everything else comes second to that, so you just ignore it." The shelf, it seems, holds all the doubts and questions which might otherwise "weigh on" members' testimonies and minds, effecting an internal split of subjectivity in believers. However, as I discuss below, in the contemporary church members' shelves are becoming overburdened. Laden with unanswered questions, and unresolved doubts, the shelf begins to crack, the internal boundaries protecting the believer from becoming fully aware of what they on some level already know, begin to falter.

Staying in "the shallow end of faith" as I have discussed so far has, however, given rise to a new form of Mormon personhood. It is one that confidently looks to the past with nostalgia, maintaining an often belligerent devotion to the centrality of church

history in the contemporary Mormon consciousness, yet is at pains to prove its ability to emerge unfazed by such historical sojourns.

In a parade I attended during the annual “Pioneer Days” celebration, I watched several hundred of the church’s “young men” march together as a battalion of “stripling warriors.” Clad in an assortment of leather skins, plastic molded “steel armor,” wielding swords and shields, scores of adolescent boys marched in scraggly rows down the streets of town. A commemoration and dramatization of church history, the boys were easily recognizable from the Book of Mormon scripture story about the 2,000 “stripling warriors” who though woefully experienced youth, fought in many great battles, persevering unscathed, for as “they had been taught by their mothers...if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.”⁴⁰ Every few hundred yards or so they would stop their forward movement, find their place in line, and begin a foot stomping, sword waving chant, before crying out in unison, “we do not doubt,” much to the delight of the thousands of onlookers cheering from the sidewalks. This dramatized superimposition of militant zeal, boisterous faith, and historical memory is somewhat of a hallmark of modern Mormonism’s “true testimony” mode of faith, a reflection and expression of a shallow mode of faith made impassionately impervious to doubt.

Faith and doubt are not inevitably irreconcilable conditions. As theologians and religious philosophers have long contended, “the confession of doubt is in fact the beginning of philosophy...part of a very difficult road to theism” (Lloyd 1907:27). However, if there is any truth to Nietzsche’s suggestion that “Madness is the result not of

40 See Alma chapters 53-56 in The Book of Mormon.

uncertainty but of certainty” (1882:62), such an emphasis on an unequivocally confident mode of faith conceals the extent to which faith is also made dangerously frail and susceptible by virtue of its obstinate rigidity. The shelf in the mind breaks not because it was not strong enough, but rather because it was made too unyielding - ill-equipped to withstand the weight of a deluge of doubt inducing information rising from the depths of Mormonism’s hastily forgotten past. Under the weight of the past the shelf breaks, and faith is broken.

Digging too deep

Common understandings of religious faith posit that the "closer" one is to the religious teachings, the "deeper" faith will be. Being deeper in one's faith is opposed to a more superficial understanding or appreciation of religious truth claims. Ideally, when deep in faith, clarity and order prevails, spiritually transcendent meaning is understood, and the veil that separates the sacred from the profane is thin, giving everyday life an enchanted sense of divine purpose and significance. However, well meaning church members are increasingly turning to that supposed faith promoting history for inspiration and answers only to find that they “dug too deep.”

That ex-Mormons' disenchantment from Mormonism should be described in terms of digging too deep, an excess of depth and intimacy, involves a transformation that cannot be described simply in terms of belief, but rather through the language of seeing, experiencing, and interacting with once taken for granted truths, ensconced in religious rhetoric, sacred symbols, and historical narratives, in a now fundamentally different way.

Digging too deep entails a transformation of the dominant modes of signification upon which faith is built; contrary to stereotypes surrounding apostates, disenchantment is not characterized by a paucity of vision and insight, but rather a debilitating overabundance of meaning and significance that disrupts the faith promoting coherency of surface level appearances.

In what follows I present several common trajectories, or case studies, of religious disillusionment that stem from “digging too deep” into church history. Though the outcome is the same for each case - a loss of belief, a collapse of faith in the “sacredness” of history - the paths people take out of the church differ. For each, there was a different impetus to begin the process of research and questioning, a reason to no longer accept church history at face value, but rather to start digging deeper. Similarly, each case illustrates the different “issues” that ex-Mormons commonly say “flipped the switch” for them, a revelation about church history that struck a discordant note with their personal mode of faith, and that ultimately caused the “shelf” in their mind to come crashing down. Ex-Mormons commonly said they felt “betrayed” by the church, by what was “hidden” from them, or the “lies” they were told. Indeed, betrayal is a powerful way to think about what those leaving the church experience, because it points to the way in which Mormonism’s own particular modes of faith, and its own sacred histories (and attempts to manage that history), have become paradoxically antithetical to the maintenance of members’ testimonies.

The Mormon Moment and digital depth

As I briefly discussed in my introduction, over the past several decades the LDS Church has faced both increasing popularity and heightened visibility in American media in what has popularly been referred to as “the Mormon Moment.” In response, over the past two decades the LDS Church has increasingly taken to television and the internet to negotiate its public image. For example, the stylishly produced “I’m a Mormon” ad campaign, consisting of the Mormon.org website, billboards, tv ads, and hundreds of short online video clips of “average members” describing their life and their faith in the church, sought to “change the face of Mormonism” and to combat the often “wildly distorted” image of the church, as public relations officials described it.⁴¹ In the wake of the church’s growing popularity, fostered by these new forms of digital media, the hope was, as a spokesman for the church said, to shift public interest from “what Mormons believe,” which Church leadership viewed as problematic, to “what Mormons do” by showcasing their acts of charity and all-American Christian character.⁴² Indeed, in the wake of this public relations shift, church members have increasingly gone online to share their faith and explain to the world who Mormons “really are,” uploading digital videos of their testimonies and blogging about their faith. I spoke to one woman who hoped that church members would use the “Mormon Moment” to “view themselves in the world’s mirror” in order to better “present” themselves to curious outsiders.

However, the LDS church’s desire to be accepted as a mainstream Christian religion on this now highly visible, public stage, has required it to publicly deny specific

41 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/election-2012/wp/2012/11/06/mormon-press-office-churchs-image-survived-the-campaign/>

42 *ibid.*

“peculiar” aspects of religious doctrine that are at odds with “traditional” Christian sensibilities. At an institutional level, church leadership was thus faced with a dilemma. They could either work at achieving mainstream acceptance - which meant essentially abandoning many of their most fundamental beliefs, as they had done in the 1890s when disavowing polygamy - or retain a sense of religious peculiarity and distinction at the risk of again falling into the margins of Christianity.

This institutional attempt to “step back” some of the church’s more distinctive beliefs was acutely evidenced in a 1997 interview, Gordon B. Hinckley, the president of the church at the time, did for Time magazine. When asked if the church taught God was once a man - a particularly ubiquitous and distinctive teaching in Mormonism, President Hinckley - the foremost religious authority in the church - was uncharacteristically at a loss for words, awkwardly waffling in his response. “I don't know that we teach it. I don't know that we emphasize it. I haven't heard it discussed for a long time in public discourse. I don't know...I don't know a lot about it and I don't know that others know a lot about it.”⁴³ A similar episode transpired again several years later. During an appearance on the Larry King Live Show King asked Hinckley, “What happens when you die?” Hinckley paused before responding. “When you die? Well, I’m not fully conversant with that. I haven’t passed through that yet.”⁴⁴

Public statements like these have spurred many average members to be confronted with a contradiction between the doctrines they have learned throughout their

43 San Francisco Chronicle 13 April, 1997. Also see Whitefield (2009).

44 *ibid.*

life growing up in the church and what contemporary church leaders are now professing.

One person, after coming across a transcript of the Time magazine interview on the internet and watching a YouTube clip of the interview wrote on an ex-Mormon message board:

I was taught we go to spirit world or spirit prison. Those in spirit prison will be taught the gospel and if temple work is done for them, they can be together. If not they remain single. As for God once being a man, we teach that if you live the laws of the gospel and reach the highest levels of exaltation that we can become like God. How is that for an answer? It was what I was taught at Church for 50 years.⁴⁵ So how come GBH [Gordon B. Hinckley] can not explain that to Larry King. It just goes to show how the people at the top expect the people at the bottom to push the gospel, but those at the top are not going to say a word. How can they do that? How can they just deny everything we've all been taught? Do they not think someone's going to start asking questions?⁴⁶

These issues have also become compounded over the past decade by messages from church leaders which contradict the admonitions to “be careful” when wading into church history, which I discussed earlier. While members on the one hand are warned against digging too deep into the past, they also observe church leaders testifying to a national audience that church history is indeed infallible, transparent, and ultimately innocuousness. In a 2005 interview with the Associated Press, President Hinckley was directly asked about the discrepancies between the historical record (culled from primary documents) and official church history and how he “reconcile(d) the differences.” Hinckley responded by saying, “Well, we have nothing to hide. Our history is an open

45 The theological tenet that God and “man” share a similar substance and being has been firmly and repeatedly asserted by “prophets of God” throughout the church’s history.

46 ExMormon.org, December 27, 2004.

book. They may find what they are looking for, but the fact is the history of the church is clear and open and leads to faith and strength and virtues."⁴⁷

Faced with growing confusion about what exactly faithful members of the church were supposed to believe, many members have thus begun asking questions and doing research in order to resolve this growing awareness of the incongruity between public pronouncements and private teachings for themselves.⁴⁸ Another online commenter wrote:

I saw what the church was doing and I felt like something was wrong. I thought, something must be up. What else is out there they haven't been one hundred percent honest about? I started getting curious and doing my own research. I wanted to know what the truth was, you know...Had I believed something that was really just a false doctrine all along, or was the church just trying to cover up the truth?⁴⁹

While only a few decades ago church members would have turned primarily to local church leaders or church produced texts for information, the internet has provided a new medium through which members can investigate doctrinal discrepancies and discover long buried pieces of their church's past on their own. As I saw with scores of ex-Mormons questioning, researching, and eventually rejecting their beliefs, the internet is increasingly undermining the institutional church's authoritative control over how church history and doctrine are both depicted and consumed by its increasingly tech-savvy and intellectually curious membership.

47 <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/635171604/Pres-Hinckley-answers-myriad-questions-about-the-LDS-Church.html?pg=all>

48 Such instances of public denials function for many believing church members as what Žižek refers to as a "Hitchcockian blot" that disrupts the habitual reality in which we previously, and comfortably, lived. Žižek describes this as an incongruous "stain" in an otherwise idyllic or undifferentiated field of view, whereby "What we actually see becomes nothing but a deceptive surface beneath which swarms an undergrowth of perverse and obscene implications, the domain of what is prohibited" (Žižek 1990) and signals the immanence of an inescapable "chaos world or shadow world" (140)

49 Found on ExMormon.org, April 2012.

The internet is the primary player in the transformation of access to and circulation of historical information, and it increasingly seems, has its own form of ecclesiastic agency separate from and counter to the church's as it allows for accidental and unmitigated access to alternative histories through search functions that are not geared towards providing only faith promoting renditions of sacred history. As an ex-Mormon friend named Tom once jokingly told me, "You want to know the biggest threat to the church? Google." Tom's disillusionment, like most of the people I talked to in Utah, had primarily unfolded through his computer screen. "I was glued to my computer for three weeks. That's all I did when I wasn't at work. I'd come home and just start reading, sometimes all night. I was obsessed. Every time I read about one thing I'd come across three more I had no idea about. I just kept clicking. That's how I lost my faith, one click at a time." As Tom's case illustrates, the internet has begun to democratize access to and control over historical memory in ways not previously possible. Members with questions about church history are no longer restricted to asking church leaders or referencing church produced publications for information. The internet is now filled with websites, blogs, Wikis, discussion list-serves, and YouTube videos, where research on the church's past is readily available, replete with hyper-linked citations linking curious investigators to digital copies of primary documents and source material.

I often heard ex-Mormons describe this period of obsession as driven by the need to "see what else I didn't know," a phrase one woman used to describe her experiences obsessively clicking the embedded hyperlinked bold faced words or phrases in the text she was reading. After clicking one link, driven by a curiosity to learn more, she found herself faced by exponentially more links, her search for truth driven as much by the

structure of web pages as her own volition. The internet in this way hinders attempts to present history in terms of a linear or unidirectional narrative. Such experiences of religious disillusionment are in fact made possible by the mechanics of the internet's essentially web-like structure, networked by an endlessly interconnected chain of hyperlinks.⁵⁰ Such features allow for experiences of what ex-Mormons call "digging too deep" or "studying your way out of the church" in which the sacred historical system of meaning upon which peoples lives and shared existence is made possible becomes bloated and overdetermined.

Similarly, it also hinders Mormonism's ability to adjust its theology, doctrines, or historical identity to fit the circumstances of the present. After hearing a church leader make a claim about Mormon doctrine or history that is either unfamiliar or conflicts with what the church member previously learned, they now have the ability to authenticate those statements like never before. The internet functions then as a digital form of memory that does not allow for the kinds of "strategic forgetting" necessary in order for Mormonism to transform and incorporate itself into the mainstream American religious landscape and indeed actually provokes other pathological forms of remembering. In this way the internet renders Mormonism's collective memory more rhizomatic in nature, decentralizing voice, and subverting church authority by introducing readers to alternative facts and explanations.

Ryan: Betrayed by deep faith

50 In Deleuzian parlance, such structures allow for unmediated "lines of flight" into an essentially "deterritorialized" terrain of the church's past.

I met Ryan early in my fieldwork at one of the monthly support group meetings I attended. A tall, lanky man with shaggy blonde hair, Ryan worked as a freelance musician and producer in Salt Lake City. I often met with him at his house a few hours before the meetings started. Sitting in his living room, amidst various guitars and other musical instruments, we talked about life in Utah, fishing, our shared love of craft beer, and from time to time, his former life in Mormonism.

Ryan always had a deep love for the church. His love, however, was not the effusive, teary eyed kind you often see at testimony meetings, he told me. In fact, Ryan's emotional and spiritual sensitivity is contrasted with, or perhaps complemented by, his ever curious and penetrating intellect, a fraught combination in a religious culture which values adherence to rather than critical discussion of religious truths. Ryan remembers going to church and seeing others in the congregation who were “really into it.” At “fast and testimony meetings” others would pour out their hearts, he said, telling wonderfully faith building stories of blessings Heavenly Father had given them, then testifying how much they “know” the church is true. “That wasn't me,” he said. “How could they know the church was true? For most of them it was good enough if they got around to reading their scriptures every once in a while.”

Instead, Ryan connected to Mormonism primarily as a theological tradition with a wonderfully vibrant past. “I loved the gospel. I loved studying the scriptures and reading about the prophets.” As a young missionary, he prided himself on having read every assigned book given to him at the Missionary Training Center ten times each during his two years of service. He was the “go-to” guy on his mission when a particularly inquisitive investigator had a question no one else could answer. As an adult member in

his home ward he was the local authority on church history and scripture, eventually called to serve as a Sunday school teacher and later on the bishopric.

Ryan indeed once had a strong testimony of the church, contrary to how those who leave the church are stereotyped by active members. Ryan's testimony, however, was strengthened not by giving his testimony, but by “getting into history” as he phrased it. He liked to see how things “fit together,” how church history and the gospel “made sense.” Reading church lesson materials and “faith promoting” histories provided the sense of seamless progression of history church leaders often touted as evidence of a church whose prophets were indeed led by the hand of God and divine revelation. “For me reading stories about the early church was my way of having a spiritual experience, I guess you could say. I loved reading about how Joseph Smith received almost daily revelations. I’d then go and read that alongside the Doctrine and Covenants and literally see how the gospel was unfolding as Joseph and everyone else were struggling to build this church. When I read that history it was like I was witnessing how each individual brick of the church was being laid. It was like watching the hand of God shape who we are today.”

Yet, despite his love for the church, Ryan admits that he had always been somewhat unsatisfied with church life. Coming of age in the 1990s, Ryan was a product of the “correlated church.” The lesson materials and texts he was given to read in Sunday school classes or at church bookstores had been “white-washed” as he now describes it, and had begun to feel spiritually unfulfilling. “I always felt like I was missing something. Like there was something more to be learned. I really yearned for that. I was always reading and studying, trying to strengthen my testimony that way. I took it all so

seriously...probably too seriously, really.” Most people's understanding of church history or doctrine was “a mile wide and an inch deep,” he said, “but I wanted more.”

Occasionally during Sunday School classes Ryan would try to introduce a more “intellectual” discussion about whatever topic was being covered that day. For him, such conversation was stimulating and enlightening. But he eventually learned he was fighting an up-hill battle. “I liked to push the issue sometimes. I don't know...I guess it made me feel involved. But no one wanted to hear it. It's weird, you bring up something people aren't familiar with, or start talking outside the lesson plan, and no one knows what to say.” Discussing points of Mormonism's history that were “unclear” or potentially controversial was typically avoided in Ryan's Sunday School classes and he quickly found himself marginalized, his interest in and invocation of church history outside of the lesson plan marginalizing him from the group. One day in class Ryan said he wanted to discuss a matter of church history concerned with the close relationship between Mormon and mainstream Christian theology in the 1800s, so he began pointing out similarities in the two faith traditions. His bishop called him into his office later that afternoon. He was concerned that Ryan's conduct was disturbing others in the ward – someone had complained that Ryan was “introducing false doctrine.” “He told me that, 'a little history can go a long way,' that most people 'weren't ready for it.'”

Over the previous several months prior to our conversation, Ryan had become increasingly critical of the church. Staying in the shallow end of faith had left Ryan unsatisfied and yearning for something more. Ryan's long felt feeling of lack drove him deeper into church history, the desire to study the church's historical record motivated by

the hope of eventual fulfillment if only he was able to "dig deep enough." "I thought I'd find what I was looking for and be satisfied. But that's not what happened."

Ryan's particular mode of faith pushed him into the footnotes, into tracking down citations and primary documents referenced in the faithful works he read. He wanted to get "closer to the truth," he said. Yet, Ryan found that reading the primary materials upon which these carefully constructed narratives were based, the "Journal of Discourses," diaries and letters, newspapers, magazines, original editions of published scripture, and Joseph Smith's own original History of the Church, revealed discrepancies and contradictions in the sanitized version of the past he learned at church. Ryan was in the midst of a movement not just "in" or "out" of Mormonism, but rather stuck in a paradoxically perverse and inverse relationship between degrees of intimacy and estrangement with the church he once thought he intimately "knew" and loved. As Ryan would later tell me, "the further I dug, the more questions I had, the less I felt like I recognized who I was anymore."



Figure 2: *The First Vision*, by Del Parson

A salient example of this can be seen in Ryan's research into an iconic image in Mormonism, that of Joseph Smith's "First Vision" (figure 2). The story behind this

picture is familiar to every missionary, referenced in every lesson material, retold at every church conference, and in some way invoked in every fast and testimony meeting. In it we see the beginnings of Mormonism. A young Joseph Smith, caught up in a widespread religious revival, confused about which religion to join, goes into the woods near his home and prays to God for direction. Because of the pureness of his heart and the earnestness of his plea, God the Father and his son Jesus Christ appear to him. They tell him that none of the churches are true and that he must instead begin restoring God's true church.

Indeed, for the contemporary LDS church the story of Joseph Smith's First Vision is the bedrock of the faith. In church buildings, homes, scriptures, and lesson materials, the familiar painting of a brown haired boy kneeling in the woods, greeted by two glowing, bearded, white robed "personages" testifies of this visionary event as an undeniable fact under-girding all of Mormonism. That the seemingly straightforward version of the story is also at the core of Mormonism's collective identity is revealed in the extent to which not only its iconography fills the physical, discursive, and imaginary landscape, but also in the way contemporary church leaders have increasingly insisted on its incontrovertibly. As various church leaders have testified:

There is no middle ground. Joseph Smith talked with the Father and the Son or he didn't. If he didn't, then we are embraced in a great fraud, a terrible fraud.⁵¹

Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur...upon that unique and wonderful experience stands the validity of this church.⁵²

51 "Counsel from the Prophet," Church News, 4/27/96, 4

52 "The Marvelous Foundation of our Faith," Ensign [Conference Edition], November 2002, 80.

That becomes the hinge pin on which this whole cause turns. If the First Vision was true, if it actually happened, then the Book of Mormon is true. Then we have the priesthood. Then we have the Church organization and all of the other keys and blessings of authority which we say we have. If the First Vision did not occur, then we are involved in a great sham. It is just that simple.⁵³

That contemporary church leaders should so forcefully defend the story's authenticity is understandable in light of the extent to which this event constitutes the foundation of Mormon theology and doctrine. The First Vision effectively established the necessity for a restoration of God's one true church; reveals the true nature of God as a physical, though divine, being of flesh and blood; and clarifies that God the Father and Jesus Christ are in fact two separate beings (as opposed to mainstream Christianity's conception of the trinity).

Ryan initially began to study the First Vision story after an experience he had while attending services at a family member's ward in Colorado. There was a man there "fired up" about an argument he had gotten into earlier that week with someone on the internet who questioned the authenticity of the First Vision, and who had suggested that Joseph Smith fabricated the whole story. "Here was something I didn't know anything about, so I guess it sparked my interest. At the time I didn't know what I was getting into though. I just thought, here's another thing to learn about, maybe this would." Ryan's long felt feeling of lack was now given a possible avenue of redemption - the desire to study the church's historical record motivated by the hope of eventual fulfillment if only he was able to dig deep enough.

⁵³ *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, 1997, 227.

Yet, his search revealed multiple layers of inconsistencies and discrepancies between the tale illustrated in the First Vision paintings and what is depicted in the historical record. Ryan found that the “First Vision” account he learned from the church was but one of several accounts told by Joseph Smith over the course of his lifetime, each one differing from the others in crucial ways. Instead of the momentous, miraculous, life-changing event described by the church, Smith did not tell anyone of the First Vision until eighteen years after he said it happened. Similarly, though the contemporary church looked to that event as the basis of its unique theology, in Smith’s retellings the number and type of “personages” changed from account to account, ranging from visitation by an angel, to many angels, to Jesus, and finally to God the Father with his son Jesus Christ. And finally, the age which Joseph Smith said he had the vision shifted several times, from fourteen to sixteen years old. “I was devastated” Ryan said. “It’s so different from what we learn. It’s like he was making it up as he went along, adding something here, changing something there. Every time he told the story it changed.”

This type of issue is not isolated to the First Vision accounts. Ryan told me that similar issues have arisen over the method by which Joseph Smith reportedly “translated” the Book of Mormon from golden plates. While church members are led to believe that Smith primarily either read the plates with his bare eyes, or used an ancient device called a Urim and Thummim, to translate the texts from “reformed Egyptian” to English, as depicted in innumerable paintings (see figure 3 below), church history films, and stories, Smith is instead reported to have primarily used the method of placing a magical “peep

stone” in a hat and peering into it to see the words appear in the darkness.⁵⁴



Figure 3: *Translating the Book of Mormon*, by Del Parson

That scores of ex-Mormons have their faith challenged by these revelations reflects the extent to which faith itself in Mormonism has increasingly become founded upon and articulated through an identification with a certain stylized *image* of a sacred historical event. Faith has become dependent on these storied images, their consistency, their reproducibility, and their ability to draw the viewer into them by offering a sense of assurance and intimacy. While images are powerful faith promoting devices that allow church members to “relate” to these foundational events, a faith built upon stylized images is also potentially perfunctory and fragile. Images offer the semblance of understanding, of intimacy, while being predicated on an elision. This is so because the image ultimately contains meaning, not just for the contents which it displays, but for all the other content that it culls out, obscures, and removes. Its power lies in the illusion of multi-dimensionality and understanding, offering the spectator an opportunity to gaze at

54 “Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.” (David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887, p. 12.)

its surface and be drawn into the spectacle, yet its impotency is also found in its static, atemporal, flatness. Viewers must maintain a “faithful” distance from the image, a “fantasmic distance” (Zizek 1989), in order for the fantasy to persist. Total fulfillment of intimacy and knowing is impossible. Coming too close shatters and evaporates the image. Like the individual pixels of paint and color, little drops of detail, which only become visible when viewing an image up close, peering too far into the image of Joseph Smith kneeling in the woods talking to God or translating golden plates reveals details unseen before. And like with pixels, when details only seen up close become visible the coherency of the larger image disappears.

Such problems are in some ways unique to Mormonism. Unlike other world religions, whose foundational events, texts, and figures are veiled behind the fog of time, Mormonism's history is not only rather recent, it is well documented. Gathering conflicting information on Joseph Smith's practice of translating golden plates or the tale of his First Vision is made ever more plausible because of historians' ability to cross-reference diaries, newspapers, journals, and letters written by people who knew and talked to Joseph Smith as these “sacred” events were unfolding.

For many Mormons, the First Vision story is a timeless, unchanging, incontrovertible truth. Yet, since no one, other than Joseph Smith himself, was ostensibly there to witness it, believing in its truthfulness is, as Ryan once described, to place oneself in a long lineage of faithful Mormons who in essence simply trust those who came before them, and those who came before them, all the way back to Joseph Smith himself.

In contemporary Mormonism there are increasingly fewer options for someone

like Ryan to function as both an inquisitive, critical thinking person while also being a faithful church member who is able to maintain these popular images of church history. As Ryan once told me, “I never thought this before, but I really think I am a case of someone who knew too much.” Ryan’s faith, in essence, fell victim to contradictory impulses in contemporary Mormonism - his desire to deepen faith through engaging with history clashed with the cosmetically coherent images of that history he had been provided throughout his life in the church.

Sherri: Betrayed by the Book of Mormon

I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book. – Joseph Smith⁵⁵

Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none. – Joseph Smith⁵⁶

For 179 years this book has been examined and attacked, denied and deconstructed, targeted and torn apart like perhaps no other book in modern religious history—perhaps like no other book in any religious history. And still it stands. If anyone is foolish enough or misled enough to reject 531 pages of a heretofore unknown text teeming with literary and Semitic complexity without honestly attempting to account for the origin of those pages—especially without accounting for their powerful witness of Jesus Christ and the profound spiritual impact that witness has had on what is now tens of millions of readers—if that is the case, then such a person, elect or otherwise, has been deceived; and if he or she leaves this Church, it must be done by crawling over or under or around the Book of Mormon to make that exit. – Elder Holland⁵⁷

⁵⁵ B.H. Roberts, *History of the Church* (1965: 4:461)

⁵⁶ B.H. Roberts, *History of the Church* (1965: 2:52)

⁵⁷ “Safety for the Soul,” Conference Address, 2009

As Joseph Smith proudly proclaimed in the quote above, the Book of Mormon is indeed the “keystone” of the LDS faith. Without believing in its spiritual and historical veracity as inspired scripture one indeed cannot be a member of the church. For church members the book is as proclaimed in its opening pages, “a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains the fullness of the everlasting gospel.” It therefore simultaneously serves as a source of spiritual guidance while providing a literal account of the events surrounding two ancient civilizations’ on the North American continent who had a miraculous encounter with Christ.

However, although the Book of Mormon effectively serves as the keystone of “truth” for church members, those who leave the church describe the Book of Mormon as false and fictitious. They found that when this keystone of their faith began to crack, the rest of the edifice collapsed under its own weight. So while Elder Holland in the quote above proclaims that those who leave the church can only do so by “crawling over or under or around the Book of Mormon,” I found that for the majority of ex-Mormons their disillusionment was effected by travelling straight through the book itself.

A bit of an oddity for Utah, Sherri grew up in a family that relocated to different states every few years, thanks to a father serving a career in the U.S. Air Force. Although raised faithfully in the LDS Church, her semi-nomadic lifestyle brought her into contact with a continuously changing set of school friends and neighbors unfamiliar with Mormonism. Describing her early relationships with non-Mormons, Sherri said, "They asked me questions about the church. Was it true we practiced polygamy? Did we wear magic underwear? What did we really believe? At that time I loved people's curiosity. It

made me feel special....that I was given an opportunity to share the knowledge I had with the world."

As Sherri grew older, married, and had kids, her testimony matured. Yet, she also found that the more visibility Mormonism achieved on the public stage, the more her beliefs were scrutinized by skeptical or outright critical outsiders. She remembers in the run-up to the 2012 presidential elections, in which the Mormon candidate Mitt Romney was often criticized for his faith, church leaders touted the slogan "every member a missionary," encouraging members to share the gospel on the internet and create a positive image of Mormonism to the American public. For Sherri, sharing her conviction of the church's truth on the internet became something of a labor of love. She began to participate in several online message boards and online news outlets defending the church.

Enlisting average members to defend the church's image on the internet has, however, proved detrimental to people's individual faiths as the act of defending the church can easily slip into counter-productive forms of self-reflexive scrutiny and questioning. For example, although the oft quoted phrase "I know this church is true" resonates on a deep emotional level with many church members, for people like Sherri who were attempting to share their faith online, it proved trite and ineffective. "You can't just tell someone you know the church is true and leave it at that, hoping that they'll get the message. People had questions and I wanted to give them answers. I knew we had the truth and I was going to show it to them. Whether they accepted it or not was their problem." The "truth" of the church had to be translated from solely an emotional conviction to something that spoke to the wider populace's more skeptical and evidence

based sensibilities. "They wanted to know how I knew Joseph Smith was really a prophet, how I knew the Book of Mormon was true. They wanted proof, so I went looking for it. That's what ultimately did me in."

How is it, though, that a search for "proof" can end up in a collapse of faith? Likewise, how has the keystone of Mormonism also become its greatest liability?



Figure 4: Image from film "Book of Mormon Evidence"⁵⁸

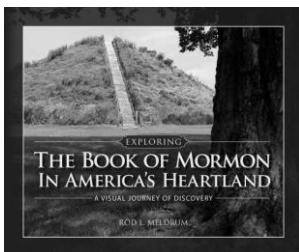


Figure 5: Cover of *The Book of Mormon in America's Heartland*⁵⁹

Members of the church do not learn a history of past church events from which they are temporally and geographically removed. Rather, modern day members believe that the Book of Mormon describes people, places and events whose existence can be verified by looking for evidence in the contemporary world around them. For example, a central tenet in Mormonism is the belief that Jesus Christ visited the North American continent and preached to the two primary groups of people inhabiting the land, the

⁵⁸ BookofMormonEvidence.org

⁵⁹ Rod Meldrum, *The Book of Mormon in America's Heartland* (2011).

Nephites and the Lamanites. A recent instructional video (figure 4) depicts Christ's visit to the Nephites with scenes of earthen mounds and wooden structures spreading across the horizon (similar to the Hopewell Mound Builders who once lived in the middle part of the continent).⁶⁰ The belief that Native Americans once populated the continent as the Lamanite people with great cities, roads, and armies, has prompted religiously inspired archaeological investigations, linguistic analysis, and genetic research attempting to find objective and empirical proof of these scriptural truth claims.⁶¹ I met church members in Utah who periodically took family vacations to South and Central America to visit the Inca, Aztec, and Mayan archaeological sites, equipped with books they bought at the church owned Deseret Bookstore detailing the "factual evidences" supporting these connections. Similarly, LDS scholars have conducted numerous studies of American Indian DNA in order to validate the Book of Mormon's claim that the Lamanites are in fact the "principal ancestors of the American Indians," as stated in the Book of Mormon's introductory page. Similarly, confident in its scientific, much less spiritual, legitimacy, church members have repeatedly sought authoritative authentication from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. that the Book of Mormon is indeed

60 <https://www.lds.org/media-library/video/2014-04-004-scriptures-legacy?lang=eng>

61 *Messiah in Ancient America* - "After many years of careful study, the real importance of Book of Mormon archaeology has dawned on me. It will take but a moment to explain. The Book of Mormon is the only revelation from God in the history of the world that can possibly be tested by scientific physical evidence.... To find the city of Jericho is merely to confirm a point in history. To find the city of Zarahemla is to confirm a point in history but it is also to confirm, through tangible physical evidence, divine revelation to the modern world through Joseph Smith, Moroni, and the Urim and Thummim. Thus, Book of Mormon history is revelation that can be tested by archaeology." - Thomas Ferguson to the First Presidency, April 10, 1953, Ferguson Collection, BYU

"I wonder what really goes on in the minds of Church leadership who know of the data concerning the Book of Abraham, the new data on the First Vision, etc.... It would tend to devastate the Church if a top leader were to announce the facts." - Thomas Ferguson to John W. Fitzgerald, March 6, 1976, John Fitzgerald Collection, Special Collections, Milton R. Merrill Library, Utah State University

historically accurate and has been used to guide scientific research, including identifying and verifying archaeological sites found in the “New World.”⁶²

While evidence for the Book of Mormon is on the one hand sought in its descriptions of Native American civilizations, many Mormons’ faith is supported by the “very reality” of its existence (Nelson 1993). According to church members, the Book of Mormon “speaks for itself” in the “impossibility of its existence” except by divine inspiration. When I would ask faithful church members how they “knew” the Book of Mormon was true they would often explain to me that Joseph Smith could never have written the book “by himself,” and must have “translated” the text from some original (as opposed to having written it originally himself), though now missing, document, as he claimed.⁶³ I only had to look at the first pages of the Book of Mormon to see the statements of eleven witnesses who claimed to have seen the golden plates.⁶⁴ Church members routinely point out that Smith had a lack of formal education and that he “translated” the text very rapidly, as rational evidence that he would have literally been unable to complete the task without his divinely inspired ability to read an actual set of golden plates. Similarly, apologists point to the use of “Hebraisms” in the text as evidence of its ancient Hebrew origins, including the use of “chiasms” (an inverted parallel structure that allows for an author to emphasize key points without the use of punctuation) or the use of Hebrew words with “double meaning” the young Joseph Smith

62 After receiving scores of such letters, in 1998 the Smithsonian Institution was prompted to issue a formal statement that in unequivocal language denies these claims. “The Smithsonian Institution has never used the Book of Mormon in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian archeologists see no direct connection between the archeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book” (Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution; 1996).

63 In the original printed edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith is quoted as saying he “wrote” the Book of Mormon. Subsequent editions were modified to say he “translated” it.

64 The witnesses in fact said they saw the plates with their “spiritual eyes” after much cajoling by Joseph Smith.

is assumed to not have been familiar with while growing up in upstate New York. For many church members, the transcendent value of the Book of Mormon indeed rests on its empirical plausibility.



Figure 6: Exhibit at the Church History Museum

In this way the Book of Mormon is thought to testify to its own authenticity, leading church leaders like Elder Holland quoted above to claim the Book of Mormon “is like no other book in religious history.” In doing so it has the ability to draw readers not only into a world suffused with transcendent spiritual and moral truths, but also into a mytho-historical genealogy made up of ancient Hebrew people, gold plates, and the prophet Joseph Smith. Exhibits at the LDS Church History Museum, for example, attempt to both demonstrate to visitors the material reality of these historical events while simultaneously collapsing the boundary between a mythical and literal historical past, effectively rendering the stories depicted in scripture as “uniquely real” (Geertz 1973). While much of the Church History Museum is dedicated to exhibiting relics of Mormonism’s “Pioneer Heritage,” including collections of early church writings, journals, pictures, and pioneer era tools, another exhibit is specifically aimed at “engaging children in Book of Mormon history.” Through large, colorful, interactive dioramas, visitors are invited to “step into Book of Mormon stories,” board “Father

Lehi's" ship and use the "Liahona" (a magical navigational device) to sail across the ocean,⁶⁵ try their hand at writing in "reformed Egyptian," and even flip through a life-size replica of the golden plates. While primarily geared towards children, the exhibits capture the imagination of young and old alike. One time when visiting the museum I watched as parents and older kids moved from exhibit to exhibit, turning the cold metallic plates and wistfully running their fingers across the "reformed Egyptian" characters stamped into its surface as they achieved the exhibit's expressed goal of allowing museum patrons to "step into scriptural time."

However, relying on the Book of Mormon as material evidence for religious faith brings a paradoxical form of dependency on that evidence. To rely on empirical evidence for bolstering religious truth claims is to play in a high stakes gamble. On the one hand the prospect of empirical evidence leads some people to feel more secure in the inherent rationality of their faith by allowing believers to be confident in the empirical foundation for their religious truth claims. If the Book of Mormon in fact provides an accurate description of ancient peoples and places, and was in fact translated from gold plates, then the religious truth claims found within it are uniquely validated. Yet this is what makes appeals to "evidence" both paradoxically attractive and potentially destructive. Appealing to a logic of "evidences" and "proofs" as a basis of religious legitimacy shifts the burden of proof onto those making the truth claims. So in effect, the same evidence that the contemporary church looks to for confirmation and legitimation of its spiritual

⁶⁵ In the Book of Mormon Lehi is depicted as an ancient Israelite prophet who led his family out of Jerusalem and into the "promised land" of the Americas via sailing a ship across the Pacific Ocean.

truth claims also has the capability of undermining them when those evidences ultimately prove lacking.

Sherri once heard a former prophet say that if church history is true, studying it can only strengthen one's faith. Sherri shared this confidence in church history's authenticity, its potential to serve as its own unique voice proclaiming the truth of the gospel. She knew the church was true - the evidence she assumed was there and had been dealt with by church historians, intellectuals, and ecclesiastic leaders. She had occasionally heard the warnings about "anti-Mormon" literature that "distorted the truth," but her confidence in evidence outweighed the threat of its potential misrepresentation at the hands of the church's critics.

Like many other ex-Mormons, Sherri's journey out of the church began with an internet search in an effort to better answer a critic she ran across on an online "comments" section of an internet news article. "Someone asked, 'if the Book of Mormon is true, then where's the proof. If there had been an ancient civilization on the level of the Nephites and Lamanites, wouldn't we be able to see something of their remains?' I initially thought, of course, that's easy to prove."

However, Sherri's search ultimately provided more questions than answers. A website produced by a group of critically minded current and former Mormons called "MormonThink" that discusses the evidence for and against numerous aspects of Mormon doctrine, history, and scripture popped up on her browser. Intrigued, she began clicking around. Sherri then spent the next three evenings reading its contents, everything from the scientific data which supported or refuted the Book of Mormon's claims to more esoteric discussions of Mormon theological tenets. "I initially thought I was going to find

some answers. I had no idea what was there. Once I cracked open the door I couldn't get out. I was sucked in. For days that's all I did. I couldn't pull myself away."

The evidence Sherri had initially been looking for overwhelmed her, but not for the reasons she predicted. Instead, Sherri's research fundamentally undermined all the evidences that she had thought once supported the Book of Mormon. "The archaeological record is clear," she explained, "during that time in history there were no horses, no steel, and no wheels like it says in the Book of Mormon. Nothing that comes even close. If there actually were Nephites and Lamanites running around, you'd think we'd be able to see evidence of them." The genealogical ancestry the church taught existed between Lamanites and Native Americans also proved to be false. "People have done this research on Indian blood,⁶⁶ and there is absolutely no evidence that they're related to the Hebrews." Finally, the sacred reality of the *Book of Mormon* was undermined for Sherri when she found out that a former church historian once wrote a book, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, detailing the many parallels between the Book of Mormon and another book published prior to Joseph Smith's "translations." In *View of the Hebrews*, Ethan Smith (1823), a Congregationalist minister, argued that Native Americans were descended from the ten lost tribes of Israel, describes the peopling of the New World by sea voyagers from the Old World, and that Christ preached the gospel in ancient America - effectively predating the historical narrative depicted in the Book of Mormon.

66 In 2006 the LDS Church quietly and without explanation changed the introduction to the Book of Mormon where Lamanites are said to be the *primary* ancestors of American Indians. The text now reads "Lamanites *are among* the ancestors of the American Indians."



Figure 7: Original Egyptian papyri and facsimile found in the *Book of Mormon*

Even more damaging, the Book of Mormon contains within it a copy of “The Book of Abraham” which Joseph Smith reportedly translated from an ancient set of Egyptian papyri thought to be lost. Sherri told me that the papyri from which Smith translated the Book of Abraham had in fact been found, and had been studied by several non-Mormon Egyptologists, something the vast majority of church members are unaware of. “They were ancient, and they were Egyptian. The only problem was, they don’t say a damn thing about Abraham.” According to faithful Mormons, the “Book of Abraham” contains a narrative of Abraham’s life along with three facsimiles (i.e. illustrations; see figure 7) containing Abraham’s visions concerning pre-mortal life and the birth of creation, all of which have informed Mormon doctrine and are taught alongside the Old Testament in Sunday school classes, institute courses, and at Brigham Young University. Pressured to provide a full translation of the papyri, Joseph attempted fill in missing pieces of the facsimile, eventually describing the scene as depicting Abraham’s sacrifice on an altar. However, those leaving Mormonism often cite the Book of Abraham as the “smoking gun” that drove them from the church when they found out that the papyri, rather than depicting the life of Abraham, are actually common funerary scrolls depicting Egyptian characters and figures such as Osiris, Isis, and Anubis. “If you compare the facsimiles printed in the Book of Mormon with the originals you can see where Joseph tried to draw in the pieces that were missing,” Sherri explained. Faced with all of this

information, the only conclusion she was able to reach was, "he [Joseph Smith] made it all up...It was all there! It was just that none of us had ever been looking in the right places. So piece by piece I began taking apart everything I had ever been taught."

So what began as a seemingly harmless conversation with an inquisitive outsider turned into an internal dialogue and search for answers to her own growing doubts - and eventually, the collapse of her faith. Sherri's story is shared by many of the ex-Mormons I spoke with. It is instructive as it reveals how "digging too deep" and "studying your way out of the church" historically emerges at the intersection of a constellation of developments in modern Mormonism. Prior to the "Mormon Moment," members like Sherri never had a pressing need to look at the evidences upon which their faith and the church were built. Doing so, however, led Sherri to scrutinize taken-for-granted truths. Under these conditions evidence in support of the church quickly turned into evidence against it.

At the time of our discussion Sherri had stopped going to church for just over three months. She was in the midst of a divorce and a custody battle with her husband. He didn't want to hear anything about what she had learned. "As soon as I began questioning it was like what I thought didn't matter anymore." Now alone and confused at where to go in life, she was angry at what she considered the betrayal perpetrated on her by the church. But as we sat talking at her house the day she told me about her disaffection from the church, more than anything she just seemed sad. "All I was looking for was evidence for what I thought was true" she said, glancing out the window, "I never thought all this would happen."

Chris, Derek, and Beth: Moral Disillusionment

Studying church history can also lead to moral disillusionment. While church members often look to the church's past, to its founding figures and early members' acts of faithfulness, obedience, and charity for moral and spiritual inspiration, digging too deep into the past can also expose church history's dark moral underside. Such revelations undermines church members' faith in a benevolent, divinely led church that is an infallible source of moral virtue.

Chris and the Mountain Meadows Massacre

In a wilderness of pine, sage, and cedar, Chris and I drove mile after mile down a two lane highway looking for the turn-off that would take us to the Mountain Meadows Massacre memorial site. "Have you ever been here?" Chris asked me on the car ride. "You've got to see it" he exclaimed, "this is the biggest scandal in Mormon history and I bet you most of the people in the church don't know anything about it."

"I always thought the whole point of being a part of the church was it made you into a more Christlike person. You listen to church leaders and what do you hear, 'be Christlike, be loving and kind, patient and forgiving.'" Chris told me this as we pulled into the memorial parking lot. "But you don't really realize what people are capable of." Chris explained how church members are taught that the world outside of Mormonism is a dangerous place, how well-intentioned, sweet, and charming church members are made vulnerable to "anti-Mormonism" in a multitude of forms, yet are never held responsible

for their troubles. “Mormons have a persecution complex. They’re always the victims, and never the aggressors.”

The history members learn about the relationship between Mormons and “gentiles” in the early days of the church is indeed twinged with stories of persecution and victimization at the hands of an at times violent, larger American populace. Stories of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum at the Carthage jail (where they were waiting to stand trial on charges of destroying a printing press), an “extermination order” against the Mormons declared by the governor of Missouri, and the Hawn’s Mill Massacre, in which 17 church members were killed by a mob, are retold as evidence of systematic persecution against believers. In each case the Saints are depicted as passive, undeserving victims of other’s malice, a righteous and well meaning people beleaguered by religious oppression.

While the “anti-Mormon” sentiments the early church faced were bigoted and at times violent, the Mormons themselves were also complicit in the growing animosity and violent conflicts with the gentiles. But, the details of the Saints’ complicity have been strategically obscured from church instruction materials, leaving the vast majority of Mormons unaware of the church’s own violent actions and left to assume they were simply hapless victims. For example, preceding the so called “extermination order,” a prominent church leader named Sidney Rigdon gave a speech in which he himself incited violence and further hostility, using the term “extermination,” saying “it shall be between us and them *a war of extermination*, for we will follow them till the last drop of blood is spilled... for *we will carry the seat of war to their own houses and their own families.*” Similarly, in retellings of Joseph Smith’s “martyrdom” no mention is ever made of his

violent attempts to thwart his attackers by shooting a pistol into the crowd of people storming his jail cell, ultimately killing two men. Nor is the Hawn's Mill Massacre placed in the context of escalating and retaliatory violence committed by both gentiles and saints, in which homes and towns were ransacked and destroyed in reciprocal acts of retaliation.

However, at Mountain Meadows the extent of the early church's violent past is undeniable. Chris told me the story of the massacre as we walked across the ground where it occurred. In 1857 the Baker-Fancher party, a wagon train of over 120 people travelling from Arkansas to California, stopped to rest in a grassy valley named Mountain Meadows. Fearful of outsiders encroaching into the Utah Territory, then a theocratic land governed by church president Brigham Young, and incited by religious oratory specifying the need to "avenge the death of the prophet Joseph Smith" a group of local Mormon settlers and militia staged an attack on the travelers, who it was rumored had perhaps been at Carthage jail where Joseph Smith was killed (Bagley 2004; Walker, Turley & Leonard 2011). Hoping to plunder the wagon train's resources without being identified, the Mormons disguised themselves as Paiute Native Americans and launched an attack on the wagon train. After five days of fighting, and having exhausted their supplies of food, water, and ammunition, the Baker-Fancher party surrendered to their attackers. The Mormon attackers soon began to worry that their true identities would be revealed and needed to hide their actions. Looking across the valley below, Chris pointed out to me the spot where the 120 captive men, women, and children were then marched away from their encampment, under the guise of being led to safety, lined up, and shot dead, their bodies hastily buried under a thin layer of sand. "Can you imagine?," Chris exclaimed.

The only people to survive the slaughter were a few children under the age of seven, their lives spared because unlike their elder siblings and parents, they were thought to be too young to remember the events.

The need to cover up Mormons' involvement in the massacre subsequently drove the church to completely deny their involvement for decades after. Even throughout the twentieth century, the event went largely unacknowledged. When pressed to account for the church members' actions, the LDS church maintains that they were independently acting of their own accord and were not directed by then prophet Brigham Young, a point of fact that is to this day hotly contested.

However, as we stood on the hill overlooking where the events in 1857 took place, Chris reflected on the role learning about the Mountain Meadows Massacre played in his religious disillusionment. "I remember reading the reports of how they had all been shot in the head. I was already on my way out the door, but this really solidified it. They were all executed, there's nothing else to it, and they [historians] think Brigham Young ordered it. It's almost unthinkable."

Chris found it difficult to reconcile the image he had of a benevolent church, led by prophets of God, with the undeniable atrocity of mass murder committed by those very same people's hands. He once believed that no other church, no other culture, could instill morality and righteous living like the Mormon Church could. But it was Chris' study of the massacre that had undermined his once earnest conviction that his church was the greatest source of charity and compassion. "That was what was so damning. There was no grey area about it. I couldn't explain it away. I think if you study things like this you really see what religion is capable of. There was no reason for any of this. It

wasn't like these people were doing anything to provoke the Mormons, and still they were hunted down out of fear and a need for revenge."

Derek and the curse of Cain

These types of information not only challenge many church members' moral sensibilities, it also undermines their belief that their prophet will never lead church members astray.

Derek knew little of Mormonism's racist past until a BYU religion professor, Randy Bott's, made incendiary remarks in a 2012 Washington Post article⁶⁷ discussing Republican Mitt Romney's struggles running for the presidency as a Mormon. Specifically, Bott addressed Mormonism's so called "racist past," as evidenced in the Church not giving black people the priesthood until 1978, thus only then allowing them to marry in the church, enter the temple, receive temple ordinances, and in effect participate as full members of the church.

In the article Bott dismisses the charge that the church was racist for not giving the priesthood by saying blacks were not ready for it. "God has always been discriminatory" Bott is quoted as saying. "What is discrimination? I think that is keeping something from somebody that would be a benefit for them, right? But what if it wouldn't have been a benefit to them?" According to Bott, denying blacks the priesthood effectively protected them from the "lowest rungs of hell reserved for people who abuse their priesthood powers." "You couldn't fall off the top of the ladder, because you weren't

⁶⁷ http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXyR_story.html

on the top of the ladder. So, in reality the blacks not having the priesthood was the greatest blessing God could give them.”

In fact, for over a century the LDS church taught that black people were more inferior - spiritually, morally, and intellectually - than white people. This belief in part stems from Old Testament teachings about the “curse of Cain” in which God marked those who turned against him with a “flat nose and black skin.” Mormon scriptures also reflect this teaching. In multiple passages in the Book of Mormon having dark skin is described as a curse from God while white skin is a symbol of righteousness - as in 2 Nephi 5:21 where it states "And the Lord had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them." Similarly, while God is believed to curse with a plague of dark skin, those who confess their inequities and turn to him are believed to have their skins lightened. "And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites" (3 Nephi 2:14-15).

However, these ideas were not restricted to ancient scripture. They informed church lesson materials and church leaders’ teachings well into the twentieth century. Apostle Mark E. Peterson stated in an address at BYU in 1954: "What should be our attitude as Latter-Day Saints toward negro and other dark races? ...We cannot escape the conclusion that because of performance in our pre-existence some of us are born as Chinese, some as Japanese, some as Indians, some as Negroes, some as Americans, some

as Latter-Day Saints. There are rewards and punishments."⁶⁸ In the 1970s President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that "There is a reason why one man is born black and with other disadvantages, while another is born white with great advantages. The reason is that we once had an estate before we came here, and were obedient, more or less, to the laws that were given us there. Those who were faithful in all things received greater blessings here, and those who were not faithful received less."⁶⁹ These teachings indeed informed church doctrine and policy well into the twentieth century. Children in the church grew up learning that in a pre-mortal battle between God and Satan black people were so called "fence sitters," who were then cursed by God with dark skin so as to set them apart from the more righteous and courageous whites.

In the midst of the church's explicitly multiethnic "I'm a Mormon" public relations campaign, Bott effectively unearthed an issue long thought to have been laid to rest in the church's past. Bott's remarks thus threatened to undermine the church's efforts to be seen as part of a diverse global community, and sparked a firestorm of response from BYU students and church leaders denouncing his remarks. But for people like Derek, the commotion that ensued exposed them to an aspect of their religion's past they previously knew nothing about and drove them to begin asking questions. "When you start reading this stuff that Brigham Young said, and everything that was taught for so long, it's disgusting" Derek said.

However, Derek's uncovering of these divisive issues revealed to him not only the extent to which the church's past is filled with moral inequities, but also the contradictory

68 "Race Problems as They Affect the Church," an address by Apostle Mark E. Petersen, delivered at the Convention of Teachers of Religion on the College Level, Brigham Young University, August 27, 1954.

69 Doctrines of Salvation, Vol. I, p. 61

logic undergirding its claims to spiritual authority in the present. The Bott affair is not an example of a lone, misinformed church member propagating long dismissed ideas about race. Rather, he represents a tacit tension at the heart of Mormonism, a tension between doctrinal accommodation to mainstream morality and the idea that the church “is right even when it’s wrong,” as I was once told by a faithful member. However, Derek was unable to accept the idea that God could promote two morally contradictory positions at different points in time. Derek began to reason that, if the Church is indeed led by prophets of God who will never introduce false doctrine or lead the church astray, then how was it that such a morally deplorable doctrine was allowed to persist for so long? “If the church is really who it says it is, then why are they always twenty years behind everyone else when it comes to stuff like this? If it really is led by God, then wouldn’t you think they’d be leading the charge against inequality? No, instead they have to be pulled kicking and screaming on any really important moral issue. So I finally was able to bring myself to the conclusion that maybe the church wasn’t led by God. Maybe God never had anything to do with it.”

Derek's experience, like those of others who shared his disillusionment, is thus the symptom of a larger transformation underway, their disillusionment the consequence of Mormonism’s inability to reconcile contradictory notions of a divinely led church leadership and a morally consistent theology on the one hand, and the undeniable bigotries in the historical record on the other.

Beth and plural marriage

Polygamy is another moral issue that causes some ex-Mormons to become disillusioned with the church. While most believing Mormons are indeed aware of polygamy, or plural marriage as it is referred to in the church, they are largely ignorant of Joseph Smith's involvement in it or the circumstances in which this "new and everlasting covenant" emerged in the early church.

At one time in church history plural marriage was thought to be considered a requirement for celestial exaltation, as detailed in scripture. "For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then *are ye damned*; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory."⁷⁰ Modern day church members, however, for whom monogamy is the only acceptable form of marriage in the church, now consider polygamy to be a somewhat embarrassing though necessary form of marriage when it was practiced. For them plural marriage was, in fact, a commandment from God, albeit one that was isolated to the historical period of the early church as a practical means of ensuring the community's survival. Church members are taught that plural marriage was a pragmatic solution to a "lack of husbands" in the early church, a result of incessant attacks by the "anti-Mormon mobs" and the toils of trekking to Utah, that left many childbearing age women without husbands, and orphans and widows without a family to be a part of. It was also considered a means to "raise up seed unto [the Lord]" (Jacob 2:30) thereby increasing the population of LDS faithful and strengthening the church. Some even say that plural marriage was a Utah centric phenomenon, fully instituted under Brigham Young, and certainly not practiced

70 LDS scriptures, Doctrine & Covenants 132:4–6.

during Joseph Smith's time. The only marriage they know of Joseph Smith entering into was with his first wife, Emma.

Church publications and websites are scant on details concerning the practice of plural marriage, discussing it in generalities without mentioning the historical specifics of its emergence or institutionalization, and none of the controversy surrounding it in the early church. On the church sponsored website JosephSmith.net, Joseph Smith is listed as having only one wife, Emma. So whenever I asked believing Mormons what they knew about the practice of plural marriage they dismissed the topic as a matter of unimportance to the contemporary church. For example, when I asked one woman what she knew of Joseph Smith's involvement she became flustered, before declaring the whole issue "typical anti-Mormon propaganda."

Beth was one woman for whom plural marriage played a prominent role in her disaffection. Beth always looked to the marital relationship of Joseph and Emma Smith as a model for her own marriage. "I always wanted to marry somebody who would be like Joseph Smith. He was a Christlike man to me, kind and caring. I loved the pictures of him and Emma. She looked so happy and content...I wanted a marriage just like that."

Yet when Beth began reading about Joseph Smith's plural marriages to thirty-two other women on an ex-Mormon website, she felt the cracks start to form and quickly widen in her testimony. Most disturbing to Beth was finding out about Joseph's marriage to an adolescent girl of 14 years of age and his alleged practice of sending married men out on proselytizing missions just so he could marry their wives in secret. "I thought, how could he do that? Those men trusted him, and he betrayed them. And then Emma. What she had to go through being married to him..."

As Beth read she found out Joseph Smith began practicing plural marriage in secret several years before he proclaimed it a matter of church doctrine. Once some of his close friends began to find out, he swore a select group of them to secrecy, claiming that his extramarital relationships were a commandment from God which he was reluctantly obeying, having been threatened by an angel with a “flaming sword” to carry out the marriages lest he provoke the fury of the Lord. “That was all an excuse for him to be a pervert and cheat on Emma,” Beth concluded.

Indeed, Joseph Smith began to teach that the principle of plural marriage guaranteed that those who practiced it would have eternal life, even the families of the women he took into marriage. “If you read the diaries written by these young girls you see how manipulative he was” Beth explained. “He’d force the whole family to go along with it. It was basically spiritual extortion. He’d tell them if you don’t go along with it an angel with a flaming sword would destroy them, or something like that.” As we sat talking Beth showed me some of the research she had done into Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy. Various quotes from his young brides she had scrawled onto a sheet of paper, each one bulleted in a long list of incriminating evidence against the prophet. Shuffling through the papers, she pointed down at one written by Helen Kimball, Smith’s fourteen year old bride, “After which he said to me, ‘if you take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation and exaltation and that of your father's household and all of your kindred.’ This promise was so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.”

“I started seeing how much everything we did in the church stems from Joseph Smith’s desire for sex,” Beth explained:

Most of the things we do in the church revolving around the family goes back to plural marriage. Joseph didn't even teach about 'eternal families' until polygamy started. One of the ways he convinced women to marry him was by telling them it would 'seal' everyone in their family together through him, because he was directly connected to God, or whatever....And before that there was none of this "families are forever" stuff - he taught that marriage ended at death. All of it was just a way for him to sell polygamy.

Beth also told me that the contemporary emphasis on "temple marriages" began with Smith's practice of plural marriage. "He started bringing women into the temple and closing it off from everyone else as a way to make sure polygamy stayed secret. Only people who had been initiated into plural marriage could be a part of or even know about the ceremony." Smith further ensconced plural marriage in sacred secrecy by creating the "temple endowment." What today is considered simply an oath to not disclose the details of what happens in the temple to non-members, began with men and women engaged in plural marriage to take "blood oaths," swearing to keep the marriages secret lest they be subject to a number of "penalties," including dismemberment and disembowelment, each of which was ritually performed in the endowment ceremony. "Even the garments church members wear" Beth concluded, "they were only worn by those who had entered into plural marriage. They wore them so they would be able to tell if someone 'knew' the principle or not."

While a faithful member of the church, Beth had looked to her "celestial marriage" with her husband, and the "eternal family" they created together as the most important and cherished element of her life. After she began researching the history of plural marriage, however, everything she once considered to be at the core of her faith was stripped away. Her research into plural marriage had effectively deconstructed the

key symbols, rituals, and principles of Mormonism, rendering them but disenchanted vestiges of what now seemed like to her Joseph Smith's insatiable desire for sex and power. Perhaps more importantly, Joseph Smith himself was no longer the much admired religious prophet, moral icon, and object of romantic desire Beth had once loved. Her identification with Joseph Smith had been the lynchpin of her testimony, the foundation upon which her faith in everything else rested. Removing him from his position of symbolic ascendancy undermined the entire edifice of her belief:

When I started finding out about all of that I think I finally saw Joseph for what he really was. For the longest time, as I was leaving the church, I held onto my belief in Joseph. I had let go of God and the Bible, and even Jesus. Those weren't so bad to get rid of. But I still held onto the thought that maybe there was some truth to [Joseph Smith], you know, maybe he really was a prophet. But once I saw he was just in it for the sex...how manipulative he was, how he treated the people who trusted him and loved him...I couldn't do it anymore, I just let go of everything.

The stories of digging too deep presented in this chapter are the product of a constellation of factors: a historical record marred by people and events whose qualities are antithetical to modern sensibilities; increasingly unfettered access to uncorrelated history via digital technologies; a self-conscious desire to research the past during the Mormon Moment; and the irreconcilability of a hitherto dominant, "shallow," mode of faith largely reliant upon a simplistic and unidimensional rendering of the past, with a historical record filled with complexity, conflict, and contradiction.

In the next chapter I move away from a cultural-historical perspective, and turn to the effects religious disenchantment has on people's emotions and psyches. While I focus primarily on one ex-Mormon man's experiences with disenchantment, I argue that his

experience of faith collapse and subsequent ontological and existential destabilization are corollaries of his, and many other ex-Mormons', exit from the particular cultural life-world of Mormonism.

Ch 2: Disenchantment, Loss, and World-Collapse

The day I met Jacob was also the first day Jacob attended an ex-Mormon support group meeting. I remember watching him walk into the darkened living room of the ex-Mormon woman's house where meetings were held, his face held low, avoiding people's greetings. I attended these support group meetings off and on throughout my fieldwork, eventually withdrawing from them altogether in the latter stages of my work after the stories of existential dismay and spiritual disillusionment became too emotionally burdensome for me. Jacob's first meeting was actually one of my last. I remember him sitting down on the cracked and faded leather couches next to me, nodding hello, and waiting quietly for the meeting to begin. With almost two dozen people in the room that night the proceedings were slow. As was customary, people took turns introducing themselves around the room, telling their stories of a crisis of faith, their strained relationships with family members, or how they were doing now that they were six weeks, five months, or a year and a half out of the church - "it gets better" the veterans would say, "just hang in there" they sympathetically counselled the new arrivals.

Jacob's turn did not arrive until two hours into the session. I was growing restless. For two hours we had all sat patiently listening to how Rick's wife was threatening to take the kids and leave, how Peggy's parents told her "it'd be best if we had some distance for a while," Leann's confession of long repressed sexual abuse, and Jeremy's guilt for "putting my kids through all this." When it came to Jacob's turn he introduced himself to the room with an awkward smile:

I don't really know what to say. I don't know what I'm doing here. I just found out about this group like forty-five minutes ago online. I actually just found out

the church isn't true two days ago, so all of this is real new to me right now. I'm still trying to figure out what's going on and what I think about everything. All I can say for now, I guess, is that I feel like I've lost everything. It's like my whole world is slipping through my hands like sand. I guess I came here tonight because I just didn't know where else to go. Thanks for having me.

Over the course of my fieldwork I would hear some version of these sentiments repeated time and again. Ex-Mormons described how "finding out the church wasn't true" had left their world in disarray. While sentiments of anger, sadness, guilt, or disappointment were more common in the later stages of disaffection, people's initial experiences of disenchantment were eerily inarticulable, at times manifesting only as vacant stares or silent, wistful contemplation. Attempting to explain their condition, ex-Mormons often spoke in abstract and apocalyptic metaphor. Jacob would later tell me that life in the church felt like climbing up the side of an enormous rock wall, the vast expanse of its stony face consuming his vision, its craggy holds supporting his weight as he dutifully climbed ever skyward, laboring upwards towards the promised destination of the celestial kingdom. But when he lost his faith it was as if that wall had suddenly collapsed beneath him, and he found himself terrifyingly suspended in nothingness. A proficient rock climber, Jacob's choice of analogy was informed by and reflected the very real possibility of falling from a great expanse he no doubt experienced before. The logic of that analogy, however, was not his alone, and seemed more apropos than I think he was aware. Many people spoke of feeling like they were "floating," that their "world" "literally shook" or felt to be "crumbling beneath my feet." Others described it as if being in a dream where "nothing seems real," while some intimated that they were instead "waking up from a dream" only to find that "the world I thought I had been living in was all make believe."

Common to each of these descriptions is not only the expression of an abrupt, unexpected, cataclysmic change, but also the emphasis on a disruption of "vital contact" (Minkowski 1970, in Spiegelberg 1972) to a plane of existence or "lifeworld" (Schutz 1967) - the background competences, practices, and attitudes (Habermas 1985) - in which they once comfortably existed. To use another metaphor, the symbolic scaffolding that once constituted the entire system of meaning in which they existed, and the social relationships, everyday routines, and sense of self which emerged from it, had collapsed. They found themselves living a life stripped of its familiar anchor points, in which they were forced to "pick up the pieces" of their former existence, as one man put it, and "figure everything out again from the ground up."

Such an experience of world collapse is possible only in unique situations in which a singular ideology, institution, or belief system encompasses and informs a large swath of a person's existence. And indeed, this is the very kind of world in which ex-Mormons once lived. For them church was not just a place you went to on Sundays, nor religious faith something isolated to nightly prayers or belief in a benevolent God and a utopic heaven. Being "a member of the Church" had intimately informed every facet of their existence, from their everyday routines and life goals, to their personal relationships and collective identities.

As Kierkegaard argues, to "be" entails an ontological awareness of the reality in which we exist, a continual act of "doing" situated within familiar ontological reference points, points that for Mormons are provided by their incorporation and participation in the LDS faith. However, in the absence of such ontological anchoring points, people are thought to experience acute and often severe forms of anxiety - what Kierkegaard (1941)

terms a fear of “nothingness,” the threat of “meaninglessness” - experienced as a disintegration of the self, or a “dissolution of the existence of...personality” altogether (Goldstein 1940). In such cases of "existential anxiety" the experience is not one of being afflicted by something that someone “has,” but rather, is characterized by an overwhelming sensation that is it what someone “is” in that their entire "being" comes to “personify anxiety” (May 1977).

Attempting to observe and describe what others have described as an experience of “world collapse” in the midst of religious disenchantment is somewhat akin to trying to catch a shadow. The reality of its existence cannot be denied, yet it is intangible, indescript, and elusive. It is a phenomenon that exists in the negative. What I am attempting to analyze here is therefore not the presence of “culture” or the cultural workings of religion - the practices, identities, or systems of belief that together make up the “lifeworld” of a people, and which often serves as the “stuff” of which traditional anthropological analysis is made of - but rather the consequences for people's sense of self and subjectivity when the ontological foundations of culture crumble away.

To analyze these issues, I primarily focus on the experiences of one individual, Jacob, in the immediate wake of his personal disenchantment. I describe Jacob here as he appeared to me in the weeks and months following his disaffection as we discussed his experiences in in-depth "interviews" and in fleeting conversations. Jacob's experiences are both uniquely his own and in some sense shared among all ex-Mormons who were once "true believers" in the church. Jacob was a single man in his late twenties, who had served a two year proselytizing mission, and envisioned himself one day marrying and building a life in the church. Some of his experiences were therefore different from either

women or men who had already built a family for several decades before disaffecting. However, Jacob's experience of loss of the primary functional attributes of religion - ritual, a sacred identity, spiritual wonderment, etc. - are not unique to him alone and were widely shared among the ex-Mormons I worked with.

But, that leaving the LDS church is not solely an experience of loss and emotional turmoil. Many ex-Mormons experience a great sense of psychological and social liberation as a result of their disaffection. All of a sudden they no longer have to reconcile the church's teachings with the secular rationality that existed in the larger society, make sense of a morally ambiguous world within a Mormon binary framework of sin and righteousness, nor are they subject to feelings of guilt and self-doubt when the church's promises of spiritual enlightenment or divine blessings do not come true for them. Nor do they feel subject to Mormonism's restrictive codes of behavior, including the imperative to wear sacred garments in the hot summer heat, participate in church activities for dozens of hours a week, or fit their sense of self into Mormonism's conception of appropriate gender roles.

However, such experiences of liberation are countered by equally powerful experiences of *loss*, and this is what I am primarily interested in. For ex-Mormons, the church had fulfilled their basic needs and more as it provided an ever present church community and social support network, a coherent worldview, a sense of meaning and purpose for their lives, an organized assortment of social and ritual activities to attend, along with a real sense of spiritual and emotional comfort. Having lived in this "world" for their entire lives, a world they shared with friends, family members, co-workers, and neighbors, deciding to leave the church proved to be a daunting, isolating, and immensely

stressful experience. In this chapter I therefore explore people's experiences of loss in the wake of disenchantment by not only describing the effects of loss, but also by contextualizing what was lost within the particular religious lifeworld in which ex-Mormons in Utah once lived.

Beyond mere psychologizing, the anthropological analysis of this kind of experience has the potential to serve as a subtle critique of several dominant tenets of contemporary secularization theory. First, experiences of ontological collapse are indeed possible in a pluralistic, secularizing, modern world, and are not isolated to only those groups of people who experience cataclysmic trauma at the hands of violent warfare or imperialistic conquest. Secularization in the U.S. has not fully resulted in a mode of life in which a metaphysical conception of reality is partitioned or cross-cut by the secular, relegating religion to a matter of "individual persuasion" or isolated to church buildings on Sunday mornings. For ex-Mormons, disenchantment entails equally disturbing experiences of "world collapse" because their religion - its teachings, principles, values, practices, institutions, and relationships - once informed everything about their world. Second, movement between, or in this case, away from religion(s) cannot be understood using the increasingly popular terminology of "rational choice theory" in which the secular logic of the capitalistic marketplace is transposed into theories of "serial conversion" or "religious leave-taking" (Sherkat 1991), thus rendering religious believers as profit maximizing shoppers in the imagined marketplace of the U.S. religious landscape. The ex-Mormons I talked to did not leave Mormonism because life in the church no longer provided enough "benefits" such that they left in search of greener pastures. Their *loss* of faith was not immediately recompensed by a relative *gain* in

converting to something else. Instead, their loss of faith was at first existentially, psychologically, socially, and culturally traumatic, entailing an acute sense of loss of "fit" not only with the religious institution in which they once felt at home, but also a loss of comfort and connectedness with themselves and the world at large.

An unsheltered existence

I met Jacob at a pizza joint a few blocks away from another support group meeting he and I attended one Sunday morning. This was the first time Jacob and I had met outside of the context of a meeting. We were almost unable to locate a restaurant open on a Sunday where we could go to have lunch and talk. The streets through town had been hushed under the solemn cloak of the sabbath. Groups of families walking to or from church in their Sunday best strolled down sidewalks, towing their scriptures along with them in miniature briefcases. "It's weird being on the other side of things like this," Jacob said as we stepped through the door into the restaurant. "We never went out to eat on Sunday. I'd see people who weren't dressed up and know that they hadn't been to church. We felt sorry for them. We thought how lonely they must be on a Sunday when everyone else was at church."

Jacob's memory of seeing those on "the other side" of church membership as lonely and forlorn objects of pity seemed especially prescient now that he inhabited this place of "otherness" himself. Divisions between those inside and outside the church had been created and solidified in his mind while he was a member. These divisions between people, religiously defined categories of personhood, had constituted a primary feature of

Mormonism's religious worldview. He learned to think about them as marking the boundaries between moral (un)righteousness, and danger and safety. Specifically, people in the church were thought to be following the "plan of happiness" while people who had left or never accepted its teachings were stuck in a life of sin and guilt. Falling away from the church meant falling into "the world" as a place of loneliness, isolation and evil, an existence cut off from the warm embrace of church membership. Worse yet, those who left were perhaps complacently unaware of their spiritually corrupt condition, having been deceived by Satan into following a path of self-destruction.

Listening to active members give their testimonies of belief and obedience to church teachings, I often heard people exclaim how "thankful" or "blessed" they were to have the church, their appreciation punctuated by stories of the stark contrast they saw between themselves and those who they knew who left. For example, I watched a woman one Sunday afternoon exclaim to her fellow ward members, "Looking at all of you gathered here, I just know this is where I belong. I see my sister-in-law who lives in Colorado [who left the church] and I know she doesn't have this. It seems like she's running around confused all of the time, making bad decisions and whatnot. I know that personally, if I didn't have this church my life would be like that."

The effects of this logic creates what ex-Mormons refer to as a "bubble" around people's lives in the church in which the meaning and value of everyday existence only makes sense within its enclosure. "I always thought that somehow life wasn't really worth living outside of the church" Jacob explained to me as we sat down at our table that first afternoon. "You think that everything that's worth anything only exists in the church. I mean really, you feel like its the only source of good or happiness." Leaving

the church thus meant losing a community of moral, spiritual and social support outside of which life was feared to become unbearably chaotic and unfulfilling.

Thinking in binary terms about group membership and categories of person has the effect of fostering individual's allegiance and obedience to the institution and its teachings. In such a way Mormonism, as it exists in Utah, creates for its members a total worldview that actively defines and controls the very reality it teaches its members about, parcelling out an enchanted "reality" in which ultimate "truths" are thought to reside.

There is a sense of "givenness" about the world such a mindset affords. Everything from the meaning of past, present, and future events, the purpose of life, the moral code members are supposed to live by, and individuals' place in the order of existence are laid out and rendered comprehensible. This cultural-religious cosmology is then overlaid with a sense of eternal significance, in which conformity produces divine blessings, while disobedience brings both temporal and spiritual consequences. All this affords members a sense that their worldview is the only one possible, while everything outside of it is nonsensical and unsafe.

Like other ex-Mormons I knew, Jacob talked about the cumulative effect of this comprehensive and all-encompassing worldview as leading Mormons to live a "sheltered" existence. Indeed, the Mormon world is one in which predictability and ordinariness are mechanically reconstructed through the routinisation of everyday activities, and standardization of institutional practices and ritual conventions. On a personal level, Jacob's weeks had been structured around his church duties and activities such that each week was filled with a combination of prayer, scripture study, family home evening, sacrament meetings on Sunday, time devoted to "service," organizational

meetings with other ward office holders, and visiting the temple. Institutionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, church lesson materials, the schedule of sacrament meetings, and the bureaucratization of church leadership had all been subject to the standardizing logic of “correlation.” In such a way practical engagement in these day to day routines supported and reproduced a sense of predictability, effectively bracketing otherwise pervasive forms of existential anxiety and fostering a sense of social stability.

The effects of living for years with this binary logic had already begun working on Jacob as he contemplated the repercussions of his disaffection. Once having lived that sheltered life, Jacob now feared what it would be like for him to lead a life outside of his former religious enclosure. He had already begun to feel isolated from friends and family and worried what he would do if he faced a problem that was insurmountable by himself, such as contracting a debilitating illness or suddenly losing his job and finding himself out of money. His family warned him that he was “making things harder on himself,” that he could turn back if he wanted to and “make things right.” The warning Jacob received from his parents and the church, that he was “making things harder on himself” indeed seemed to be coming true. In some ways their warnings had been a self-fulfilled prophecy. Friends stopped calling and his family treated him as an object of pity - they made him into the social pariah they predicted that he would become.

Mostly, however, Jacob described feeling vulnerable and exposed. He no longer felt comfortably “sheltered” and was forced to come face to face with the inherent unpredictability and ambiguity of life, the dimensions of which I discuss further below. He feared he would prove incapable, unable to cope with a life that was proving foreign and perilous outside the church. Potential obstacles found in everyday life now took on a

paralyzingly inflated significance for him. “I wonder sometimes, what if all this doesn’t work out? What if I can’t deal with it all, you know?” The vague ambiguity in Jacob’s pronounced fear of “it all” referencing and encapsulating the entirety of his existence which could ultimately prove problematic “outside the church.”

All of this weighs heavy on those who leave the church. While instances of ex-Mormon and apostate pride, which I discuss in a subsequent chapter, ostensibly portray a brash confidence among former members, people’s initial experiences amidst disenchantment were anything but self-assured. As we sat eating our meal at the pizza shop, the den of noise in that restaurant on that Sunday afternoon in stark contrast to the reverent silence outside, Jacob worried whether he was in fact “making a mistake.” A lifetime spent living in a world in which only two modes of being, two categories of personhood, existed stymied Jacob’s ability to think outside “the bubble.” “What if they’re all right about everything?” he said, “sometimes I just can’t shake the thought that maybe Satan really is deceiving me, and I’m making a mistake. I guess I’ll only really know after I die.”

Divine emplacement

Jacob often visited the majestic and rugged landscape of southern Utah where, staring up at the cragged red rock of Zion’s canyons, he could ponder how God had created and set aside this place especially for the saints to flourish in as they busily set about restoring His “one true church.” Once while on a walk together through Jacob’s childhood neighborhood, he pointed up to a tree-filled hillside overlooking us where a tiered

concrete edifice stood cascading down the slope. “That’s the ‘dream mine’” he told me. “I was always told there was tons of gold left in the mines, but it would only be found in the end times.” The dream mine would, during the economic calamities that would ensue during the apocalypse, provide the saints with enough riches to see them through the social turmoil. For Jacob, it had always served as a potent reminder that the present and future prosperity of the saints was intimately connected to this land as a gift from God.

This feeling of divine emplacement, however, situated Jacob not only within his immediate Utah surroundings, but extended out into a cosmological realm as well. In the church Jacob was taught that science would eventually prove what Mormons already knew about the pre-existence, the afterlife, and other tenets of Mormon cosmology. Jacob remembers camping in the wilderness of Utah's backcountry mountains, the stars gleaming in the darkened sky, wondering if he could catch a glimpse of the star Kolob, the star fabled to sit closest to the celestial kingdom, where Jacob had once believed he had lived alongside Heavenly Father as a spirit child in the pre-existence. He remembers longing for the day when Heavenly Father would provide “further light and knowledge,” explaining the mysteries of the universe, granting his followers a “pure intelligence” through which they may understand the riddles of existence and their role in its supernatural unfolding.

In disenchantment, however, the world seemed drained of its vibrancy - placid, imminently material, and dull. As enchantment fades, a world once transfigured by celestial meaning slips into the harsh banality of material reality. “There's no more mystery,” Jacob complained once when I asked if he missed having those thoughts of an otherworldly existence. “Now I know this is it. This is all we've got. And I think in some

ways there's something sad about that, you know, no mystery." The once four-dimensional world in which Jacob had existed had been reduced to three. There no longer seemed to be an aura of spiritual significance or sparkle of divine transcendence overlapping with the base material world in which he now felt stuck. "Before, anywhere I'd go I was reminded of Heavenly Father. The trees, the mountains, the rivers, all of it gave me peace and comfort because it was as if it had all been put there for me. I mean, everything still looks the same, but now it all just feels kind of dull and dead."

The world, drained of its spiritual significance, had become alien and disquieting in its foreignness. He explained to me once how "In the church you feel like the whole universe is on your side. Like everything fits together and is somehow looking out for you." However, on a recent rock climbing trip he found himself suddenly acutely aware of the change in perspective he had undergone as he hung above the earth, grasping the bare rock. "I got scared. And I never get scared climbing, I'm usually just in a zone. And when you get scared, you have problems. It was like I knew that I could get hurt, like that was a real possibility now. It's weird to say, but I realized that the rock wouldn't care if I slipped and fell."

In disenchantment Jacob was now faced with new questions about the ultimate meaning of human existence that invoked fear and confusion. In the church, he said, "if there's something that doesn't make sense, you always have this hope and confidence that you'll understand it someday. Like if you just hang on long enough and trust Heavenly Father, any question you have will be answered." However, Jacob now seemed unnerved by those questions which, though they had always perplexed him, had been rendered innocuous within Mormon cosmology. "I learned about evolution in school. That was one

thing, I always knew about this other stuff that was out there. But I never really gave it much thought. I never had to think about what it meant to think that we might have evolved from apes or whatever. Now it's like, if we're just like apes, just like any other animals, then really nothing makes us any better or different. If that's the case, we're really not that special, we just do a good job of telling ourselves that. We're just basically animals who eat, shit and die like everything else."

The inevitability and finality of death without the hope of returning to the celestial kingdom also became something of an ever present spectre for many of the ex-Mormons I talked to in the days and weeks following their collapse of faith. The absence of faith in the church bringing a corresponding over-abundance of the awareness of their own mortality.

While in the church people like Jacob had learned that death was not inevitable, that the very materiality of their bodies would be reconstituted in perfect form in the celestial kingdom (footnote on this doctrine being unique to Mormonism), in disenchantment they came face to face with the very mortal frailty of their existence. In disenchantment they not only lost an eternal perfected body, they also gained, and found themselves entrapped within a body hurtling headlong into inevitable decay - eternal spirituality was reduced to a finite and fragile materiality.

I remember Jacob staring down at his hands one evening as we sat talking on my front stoop. With his fingertip he gently traced the contours of the bones, tendons, and veins running down the back of his hands, observing his flesh with an uncanny sense of strangeness, as something mystical, disgusting, and fragile. "It's amazing to think, you know, that someday all this will just rot away. That's it, I'll be gone. It's weird, really. I

never really thought about it like that before... Whenever I used to think about death I always imagined what it'd be like to, you know, be in heaven, or whatever, and there'd be no more pain or anything. It can be really depressing if you think about it too much. We're all just destined to sit underground in a wood box."

An individual's sense of ontological security rests on their incorporation of a culturally manufactured and collectively held framework of reality. Maintaining a sense of comfort, safety, and predictability requires the ability to interpret and respond to questions, events, interactions, and quandaries without questioning that reality. Yet, disenchantment left Jacob in a state of anxiety in which he questioned the ontological status of existence itself, in which the external, material reality of the world had also seemed to have lost its solidity and transformed into something ephemeral and fragile. "I sometimes feel like I'm living in a dream. Like all of this will go away and I'll wake up somewhere else. I don't know where really, but not here. It's like everything is real and not real at the same time."

People Jacob was intimately familiar with no longer seemed "real" in the same way. He experienced disenchantment as a subtle shift in perspective, in which things in the world, though appearing the same, had taken on a fundamental sense of strangeness. Disenchantment had left Jacob disconnected from the intersubjective reality he once thrived in within the church, a feeling that was expressed most fully in his relationships to family. As a believing member of the church he felt united and connected to his family, as if he understood and appreciated each of them on a "deep" sacred level. "I thought we were meant to be together. Like Mormonism teaches, that we knew each other in the pre-existence." However, in disenchantment, that one time deep familiarity and sense of

common origins and substance had turned to a sense of uncanny foreignness. “I looked at my dad and I was just sad. Here was this person who used to mean the world to me, and I guess he still does on some level, but I remember one time catching myself staring at him and feeling like I was looking at a stranger. Here I’ve known him my whole life, I mean, he’s my dad, and all I can think is how distant I feel from him now. It was like I knew him but didn’t know him at the same time.” When I asked Jacob to explain this further, he described how he and his family cannot talk to each other anymore, as they no longer shared in a common language and symbolic order of existence. “We have nothing to talk about. Their whole world revolves around the church, and that’s all they talk about. It’s like they’re trapped in this other universe that only they know exists, and unless you speak the same language they do, and talk about things the same way as they do, you don’t fit in. When I’m with them now all I hear is the church’s indoctrination speaking through them.”

People became in some sense manufactured reproductions or simulations of Mormonism’s teachings, rendered non-existent in any “real” sense by virtue of their “programming” and thus something Jacob felt unalterably alienated from. “Part of me feels like everyone around here is missing something, you know, that makes them fully human. They all look the same, dress the same, talk the same...Everyone thinks they’re an individual. When you’re in the church you think, ‘oh, this person is really good at the piano, and this one likes to cook, how diverse we are!’ But that’s not really the case. Once you get out you see it. We’re all just little robots, trained to think and act the same way. We all have the same programming.” For Jacob, the world and people around him no

longer felt authentic, and instead had re-emerged as a “hyperreality” of mere superficial cultural representations without depth.

The Perils of Uncertainty

In the church, when Jacob felt stressed, confused, or anxious, his faith gave him a feeling of control and security. The ritual of daily prayer and scripture study provided daily opportunities for personal reflection and meditation, an opportunity to commune with God, and to seek guidance from the Heavenly Spirit. Inevitably while reading and pondering over his scriptures an answer would be revealed to his most pressing questions - why his brother died in that car accident last spring, or why his new employers now routinely overlooked him for promotion. "I'd pray about something, ask God to tell me what to do, then flip open my scriptures," Jacob told me one day as we sat in my living room. As we talked Jacob picked up a copy of the Book of Mormon that sat on my coffee table, next to the myriad of other church published texts I routinely referenced in my studies. He opened its cover and flipped through the pages, before pressing his finger onto a random passage of scripture. "I'd always find something that *spoke* to me." In these times of quiet contemplation he found solace, reassurance, and inspiration, a means of understanding the seemingly inexplicable accidents and traumas that afflicted him, and a roadmap for making sense of life when his path seemed uncertain.

Being attentive to the “promptings of the spirit” is another way in which Mormons can mitigate uncertainty. Jacob said he had learned to accept and experience the Heavenly Spirit's presence in his life by the time he was twelve years old, a

supernatural relationship he continued to foster for the next several decades. Gathering in his living room for family prayer, singing hymns at church, or when visiting the temple, he would feel a calm assurance wash over him, a sense of clarity and peace as the “still small voice” of the spirit “whispered” to his heart. Listening to the spirit in this way tapped him into a constant source of divine inspiration and guidance. He would ponder and pray over the significance of every interaction, thought, or experience he had, trying to deduce the message contained within it, what God was trying to tell him. “I used to pray about everything. Big stuff, little stuff, it didn't matter. The church teaches you to listen to the spirit. I took that very seriously. I was always connected.” Eventually, all of Jacob’s emotions, sensations, and feelings became spiritually significant. “Warm feelings” while watching a movie, visiting a friend, or witnessing a sunset were interpreted as a message, a prompting, or inspiration from the spirit, and gave him the confidence that “all was right with the world,” while nervousness, guilt, or apprehension were “reminders that I wasn’t doing something right.”

“Having faith” in this way becomes a means of mitigating the inherent risks built into everyday life and the existential quandaries it invokes. The sense of invulnerability provided by faith is built on believers ability to bracket off negative possibilities and instead maintain a generalized attitude of hope, thereby maintaining their existence in a “protective cocoon” of “unreality.” It also, however, produced in Jacob a propensity to habitually analyze his feelings and sensations as “promptings” from an external divine source without which he felt “lost.” “I remember when I would start messing up, living unrighteously or whatever, I’d feel like the spirit stopped talking to me. That was all it

took sometimes to get me back on the right path, I was so scared of making a bad decision.”

Jacob said that the realization that the Heavenly Spirit did not, in fact, speak to him was one of the most unnerving experiences of leaving the church. "When everything really went to shit was when I realized the spirit was just my own voice inside my head. I realized that for the past twenty years I had just been talking to myself, and there really wasn't anything there helping me. After that I just remember feeling so alone...and then I started to panic."

Without a divine source of guidance, Jacob lost the ability to feel secure and confident. "Things didn't used to phase me. I didn't use to worry about things the way I do now. You know, bad things would happen, but I felt like I could always handle them. Now I feel like the littlest problems quickly blow up into something much bigger than they need to be...Like last month, rent was due, and I was freaking out because I didn't have the money. See, so before I would have been worried, but deep down I knew God would be there, I knew I'd have the money in time. It all worked out eventually, but it's stuff like that that can get to you."

Problems like these began to crop up for Jacob more frequently in the months after his disaffection. He described his life as now stuck in a "harsh reality" that people in the church are "sheltered" from. He now felt as if the future was full of unknown risks he felt ill equipped to handle, a stark contrast to the confidence he felt before. "Reality" now became a chaotic and unpredictable domain from which he could not escape, yet which he felt powerless to effectively deal with. Everyday life had to be confronted in all of its

immediate ambiguities and complexities, leaving Jacob emotionally and mentally exhausted:

That's really hard, you know. I miss feeling like I have something to fall back on. Even if its all just make believe. That's one of the hardest parts about all this and I think what scares me about becoming an atheist. It's like you're stuck in reality and never get a break. I hear other people say that, like after they leave the church. There's no more happy place to run to in your mind. It's so much easier when you can just put your head down and your blinders on and say I'm going to follow the prophet. When I was in the church life was so much easier that way. You don't really have to think about things as much. It kind of just is the way it is. It makes it easier to be hopeful about everything when you believe everything is part of God's plan. Really all you have to do is stay in line, do what you're supposed to, and you're set. People really take that saying seriously, you know, 'hold tight to the iron rod'. You get in this mindset that if you let go everything will go to hell. And in some ways I think that's true. If you can stay trapped inside the bubble life isn't so bad. You always know things will work out the way they are supposed to. You're never really alone because you always have the church or God or someone to look after you.

In addition to providing an everlasting feeling of hope, Jacob's faith had provided him a ritual means of intervening in and mitigating existential anxieties. As a faithful priesthood holder, Jacob was able to tap into and harness God's infinite power and cast blessings onto those in need. Using his priesthood powers, the fear and pain that accompanies sickness and death were tempered by his hand. For example, Jacob told me how once, when his mother fell sick with pneumonia, Jacob anointed her with oil and prayed a blessing over her, an act which he said had brought her comfort and a speedy recovery.

However, in the midst of Jacob's disaffection from the church his father fell gravely ill. He was diagnosed with stage 3 lung cancer and began receiving chemotherapy at the Utah University Hospital in Salt Lake. In our talks Jacob avoided discussing his father and would typically change the topic when I brought him up. I knew

his father's illness disturbed him. Even more so, was the impotency Jacob seemed to feel when confronted with the reality of his dad's mortality and his inability to harness his priesthood powers on his father's behalf. During one conversation when he did open up about his father, Jacob nervously played with a small metal vial hanging from his key ring which contained a small amount of oil used by priesthood holders to give emergency blessings. "It's times like these that I really miss the priesthood. It's like, I can't do anything. I can't comfort him the way he wants. I can't give him a blessing. When he's sick [from chemotherapy] all I can do is sit there and watch him suffer. Every time I go up to see him he looks worse. [weeping] He's skinny and pale and just wants to sleep."

Jacob watched as his father's friends in the ward came over to the house to give him blessings, his loss of the priesthood preventing him from joining in the group of men lovingly huddling around his father's bedside. "I knew what they were doing wouldn't cure him, but at least it's something, you know?" More so, the possibility of losing his father for eternity haunted Jacob. The finality of death hitting him as he described the lost opportunities to connect with his dad, the lost prospect of someday having a relationship made whole after death, all this made grossly evident to him now in what Jacob feared were his dad's waning moments on earth. The pain of the loss of a once promised future weighing heavily on him. "What am I supposed to do? This is it. There's nothing else after this. I wish I could just tell myself it'll all be ok no matter what. But it won't."

Sacred Self and Identity

Religion gives a sense of meaning and purpose to life because it provides a comprehensive pre-packaged identity for individuals to adopt while also directing its

followers' collective labors and activities towards sacred goals that seem to have an everlasting significance. In Mormonism this is articulated in the idea of "eternal progression" and the collective goal of "building the kingdom of Zion," both of which are achieved simultaneously through members' ritual activities and general church participation. Doing temple work, dutifully tithing, converting new members to the church, strengthening others testimonies, and providing service to fellow church members are all thought to contribute to these goals.

In this way Mormonism provides its members with the means of engaging in inspired and eternally significant work that extends beyond Christianity's emphasis on personal salvation. Jacob had learned in the church that his primary station in life was to "do the work of the Lord" defined in scripture as "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Doing the work of the Lord provided Jacob with a daily sense of direction and purpose that was comforting and fulfilling. "You really feel like you're working towards something. Like God is depending on you. It felt good to know there was a purpose to everything I did." Jacob's daily and weekly schedule had been fastidiously planned around various church activities in fulfillment of this goal, a set of labors and duties that he took great pride and satisfaction in while a member. On Monday he met with his parents and young unmarried siblings for "family home evening," where they read scriptures, sang hymns, and prayed together. Throughout the week he worked on his duties as a Sunday School teacher, assisted another ward member in organizing activities for the Young Men's Boy Scout troop, performed proxy ordinances (baptisms and endowments) in the temple, and held his own personal scripture study every morning. On the weekends he attended ward picnics, served as a home

teacher to a family in his neighborhood, and attended Sunday sacrament meetings where he also led Sunday School lessons.

Mormonism similarly bolstered Jacob's sense of collective pride and purpose by providing a mytho-historical narrative of persecution and redemption in which church members were staged as key players in a great struggle to restore Christ's church in these end times. In the church Jacob was repeatedly reminded that the Saints were a persecuted people, subject to being misunderstood and viciously maligned by a jealous and fearful American populace. Yet, they were guided by a prophet of God who revealed God's truth to his chosen people. Jacob believed that the Mormon people served, as he was taught, as a "city upon a hill" (Hinckley 1990) that the larger society would eventually turn to for guidance as the world slipped further into moral decay. "I really thought everyone looked up to us. They may have made fun of us or criticized us, or whatever, but really they were jealous of what we had." Jacob remembers the feeling of quiet confidence this gave him while vacationing with his family on the South Carolina coast. "We'd walk down the street and I'd see people who were obviously not Mormon. If they happened to look at us I would think, 'Ya, they know who we are,' you know, like they could feel something different about us, like we were special." Jacob later told me that he knew one day the rest of the world would come "knocking at our door" for help in the end times. "You get this feeling that everyone will be proved wrong, and we'll be proven right. You know, that someday they'll get what they deserve and then we'll be the ones calling the shots. It's really an addictive thing to believe. It makes you feel almost invincible."

Mormonism also gave Jacob an understanding of the significance of his personal identity. In moments of quiet spiritual contemplation while in the church, Jacob had tried

to imagine what life was like before he had entered into this mortal, temporal world. He would often experience a sense of transcendent wonderment when flashes of "memory" from the pre-existence came back to him, when he felt like he *knew* what it was like to live as a spirit, to have a "full" knowledge of Heavenly Father's plan of happiness, before the veil had been pulled over his memory when he entered the mortal realm.

This knowledge of the pre-existence had not only positioned Jacob in a grand Mormon cosmology. It also provided him with an immediate sense of pride and purpose he could draw upon in everyday life, as it situated him within a continuously unfolding supernatural narrative in which he personally played a central role. Specifically, church leaders had often told Jacob and others in this "chosen generation" of how in the pre-existence they had proven themselves in great battles fought in heaven against the forces of Satan, and how now on earth, they were expected to continue that battle as they "wielded the power of the priesthood" against the "forces of immorality" and "deception" by "restoring" the Heavenly Father's truth to the world. With a slender frame, and a passive, at times awkwardly reticent demeanor, Jacob was hardly a model of strong willed masculine virility, much less a heavenly warrior. But as he told me about the church's teachings on the great "war in heaven," I saw an image of the man he longed to be, and had in part become, through his imaginative play as a heavenly warrior in the pre-existence. "Church leaders would talk about what we had done, and how we had earned the privilege to be born in the end times. I loved hearing that," he said with a self-conscious smile. "I guess because I always felt like I'd done something, you know. Like I was special. I was proud of that."

While he was a member of the church, this cosmological narrative of divine purpose had become inextricable from Jacob's personal biography. Ever since he was a child Jacob envisioned a future for himself in which he was not only a faithful church member, but would also play a leadership role in "building the kingdom." "You know, my parents, they always thought I would end up being some sort of General Authority. Not the prophet, but probably either an apostle or one of the seventy. They were really grooming me for it. I don't know what it was, I don't think they told that to my brothers. Maybe they were just trying to keep me in line, you know? But it worked. That's what I really thought. I was destined to be somebody big in the church. I really took that to heart."

In Mormonism Jacob's autonomous sense of self was indistinguishable from the collective myths and stories shared throughout the church. That is, Jacob had only ever been able to *think about himself*, in some kind of self-reflexive awareness of individuality, through the cultural narratives and symbols provided by Mormonism. His only sense of worthiness, purpose, identity, or selfhood came from the church, and was only achievable through active, faithful membership in the church. Without this, he was, in essence, nothing.

In disenchantment Jacob felt that sense of fearless confidence and purpose fall away. The world no longer felt "given" to him, his place in it no longer guaranteed by stories of being part of a "chosen generation" or a "chosen people" who occupied a "city on a hill." Jacob began to see himself as part of a global society filled with tremendous diversity, in which he and his religious community's position at the center of a divine historical narrative was undermined by the growing awareness of a multiplicity of actors

on a global stage. I first became aware of this while talking with Jacob about his experiences serving as a missionary, in which he reflected on why the people whom he was proselytizing to seemed indifferent to hearing the gospel:

They (church leaders) had always told us that when people closed the door on us it was because their hearts were hardened. They knew we had the truth, they just didn't want to have to hear it, they didn't want to have to change their lives... It was hard having literally thousands of doors closed in your face for two years. But that also kind of gave us confidence. It made us feel like we had something powerful to offer, and people just weren't able or willing to handle it. Thinking back on it, though, I think that was the beginning of all this. I think about all the people I talked to. They were all just living their lives, you know? It was like, here I come, a twenty year old kid, knocking on their door telling them I have the truth. And I didn't even stop to think what their life was like... There are so many people out there, all doing just fine without me and without the church. They didn't care what I had to say, they didn't think I was special. I was just annoying to them.

When a sense of self is totally wrapped up in a religious lifeworld, the loss of religious beliefs results in a loss of self in its most basic terms. "I don't know who I am anymore" Jacob once somberly confessed. "All I've ever been is Mormon. I don't know how else to think about things. I realize now that everything I did wasn't because I really wanted to, it was because that's what the church taught me to do. Everything I was going after I wanted because Mormonism told me to want it. So really, what's left? That's something I'm really struggling with right now. I'm just afraid that I'm nobody without the church. But now that I don't even have the church, being nobody is all I've got."

As we learn from Heidegger (1927), what we may think of as the self (or what Heidegger refers to as *Dasein*) is formed through the practical engagements of people caught up in meaningful labor. While social scientific conceptions of identity and

personhood are externally mediated, the self is that which emerges in the midst of internally mediated goal directed activities and practical engagements with the larger world. Without such activities, Viktor Frankl (1946[2006]) writes, the self risks falling into a state of anxious depression. Existential disillusionment and suffering arises when life no longer seems to have an intrinsic meaning and the self has no purpose for its existence.

Jacob at times complained to me that since leaving the church he had felt an unrelenting cloud of misery hanging over him. "It gets unbearable sometimes. I have to stop myself when I get thinking about it too much. I get really down sometimes, you know." Throughout our relationship Jacob was often difficult to contact, at times it seemed he purposefully avoided my phone calls and emails. When he did respond to my calls (which he eventually always did) he would give a terse apology, saying he sometimes closed himself up at home and "ignored the world" - he had turned ruminating on his purposelessness into a full time occupation which only served to further amplify his misery. It seemed that dissociation had become Jacob's strategy for dealing with a world that no longer was the object of meaningful engagement. He had lost the focused direction Mormonism had given his life. At the end of the day he could no longer feel a sense of righteous accomplishment, the feeling that he had been "part of something" and fulfilled his duties as a member of the church, a steward of Heavenly Father's restored gospel. "That's something the church really does well, it gives you purpose. Because, now, like, what's the point? If there's no celestial kingdom, no reward or anything at the end of the rainbow, you're left having to decide all this stuff [about what to do with his life] on your own. And at that point I sometimes just say who cares."

However, it was not only a lack of a singular direction to follow which unnerved Jacob. In disenchantment he was confronted with a dizzying array of possibilities for his life that paralyzed his ability to choose any one direction over others. The loss of a singular sacred identity meant that he now could do anything he liked. However, facing such an “abyss of freedom” (Kierkegaard 1981) was a daunting experience as Jacob no longer felt comfortably constrained by a prescribed path to follow. “How are you supposed to know which way is the ‘right way’?” he pondered while discussing what he would “do next.” “I don’t know where to go. I feel like I should stay in Utah because this is where my parents are. But really, there’s nothing here for me anywhere. So where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do?” The fragmentation of one “right way” into an infinite assortment of possibilities meant Jacob was confronted with the ability to choose any “way” he liked, though, without a means of deciding which one was the best.

Loss

Jacob and I attended a support group meeting one evening where Nathan and Laura, a middle-aged couple, both of whom were “born in the covenant,” told their story of leaving the church together. “We feel so fortunate to have gotten through it all together” they said to the audience of other ex-Mormons gathered for the meeting. But, as Sarah continued to explain, their disaffection had left them “emotionally scarred.” “There’s so much we feel like we lost though. That has been really hard for us, to see everything we worked towards taken away. I think that’s important for all of us to recognize. Some might say we ‘willingly’ gave our time and money and energy to the church. I don’t think

that's 100% correct though because everything we gave was under false pretenses. And that's how we feel, like we lost everything. The church promises you everything under the sun if you just do what it says. Then at some point you realize, like us, you've given your whole lives all for a lie."

Others in our circle nodded in agreement. The feeling of "loss" encapsulated a shared mode of feeling people experienced in leaving the church. For these ex-Mormons disenchantment was characterized as not only the loss of a unified belief system or a church community, but also in the feeling that their lives had literally been taken away from them. The charmed existence they once saw themselves living, as members of "the one true church," was replaced with a feeling of unmitigated loss as they reflected on the many decades, dollars, and deeds they had selflessly donated to a religion that had now lost its supernatural luster.

In disenchantment people's personal pasts, memories of childhood, adolescence, and momentous life events no longer held a sense of nostalgia, but only regret and disappointment. "When I think about all the years I spent in the church I just get angry" one man said. He described how the church had taken away his youth, something which he knew he "[would] never get back." He said he spent his childhood a "nervous wreck," worried that any little sin would jeopardize his future. "Let me tell you, so many humiliating times sitting in my bishops office telling him about my 'chastity issues'." He felt his adolescence was likewise stripped away from him, "coopted by the church." "I could have gone and done anything. Instead when I was nineteen, I went on a mission and I spent two years, two years when I should have been out meeting girls and enjoying life, instead feeling miserable." Another woman described her marriage in the church as a

“sham,” a relationship that had proved emotionally abusive, entered into only because “we thought we were doing the right thing, we were building our eternal family.” At nineteen, she had no idea that she was “throwing [her] life away” by forfeiting the possibility of going to college or building a career. “We got married and started having kids. That was it. I was living the perfect Mormon life. I guess at one time that meant something to me. Now it just feels like I was living the life someone else wanted for me, not the one I would have chosen for myself.”

The cost of disenchantment could also, for some ex-Mormons, literally be measured. I often met with Tom, a bus driver for the city of Provo, who told me how one day after he left the church he calculated how much money he had given in tithing. At fifty-two years of age, Tom had been giving ten percent of his income for thirty-eight years, ever since he began earning a paycheck at fourteen working at the local supermarket. “I forget how much it was exactly, but it was over a hundred thousand dollars” he said, enough so that, “if I had it all back I could have probably retired in a few years and sent my kids to college.” Instead, on the meager wages and retirement afforded by the city, he said he would probably be working well into his sixties just to make ends meet.

In disenchantment the past then becomes measured in disappointments and lost opportunities such that life in the present becomes an incessant reminder of “what could have been.” “What am I going to do now?” one man asked, “I’m almost forty, and all I’ve known is the church.”

Split-Self and Hyperreflexivity

Human experience oscillates between periods of engrossment in everyday behaviors, thoughts, and reactions, and periods of distanced self-reflexivity in which those same behaviors thoughts and reactions become the object of critical reflection. Religion is attractive not only for the comprehensive worldview it provides, but also, in part, because it gives believers with ready-made responses to everyday situations so that such moments of self-reflexivity can be kept at a minimum, thus granting life a relative sense of ease or coherency. However, in disenchantment, ex-Mormons found that the balance typically struck between immersion and reflection becomes unhinged as the usual taken-for-granted foundation of everyday assumptions and practices disappears, ultimately leaving them in a state of perpetual reflection and alienation from the self and the self-evident. Once routine behaviors, decisions, and interactions now become the object of intense scrutiny and deliberation.

For Jacob, this loss of what Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as a “living spontaneity,” or a preconscious awareness of how to handle once routine behaviors, proved taxing. “It gets really tiring to have to think about everything you did before just kind of naturally. It’s like, you can’t go on autopilot anymore.” Jacob experienced this in part in his inability to engage in sustained conversation with friends and family after his disenchantment. “My mind was either racing all the time, or it was like, nothing, like nothing was there. It was like, what do I say. All these things are going through my head all the time. My whole world was going up in flames, you know, everything I thought I knew for certain was just gone...it was all constantly buzzing through my head, and I couldn’t talk about it with anyone. I knew they wouldn’t understand. And then other

times I felt like, nothing. Just nothing. Numb. Not good, not bad. Just numb.” Jacob said he had to “consciously remind” himself that there were still things he cared about, otherwise he found himself “slipping” into a state of passive removal from everyday life. “I really didn’t care about anything. My job, my friends, or my family. It was like nothing really mattered. I literally had to force myself to kind of just keep on with living, even if I didn’t understand what that meant anymore.”

Jacob also felt unable to deal with everyday social interactions outside of the church. “This sounds bad, but I realized how much I suck at flirting. I mean, dating in the church was awkward as shit too. But at least I kind of knew what to expect. You just make them think what a great priesthood holder you are, and bam, that’s all it takes for half of them to be in love with you.” Outside of the church, however, he found that the typical rules of dating in the church were no longer applicable, resulting in an overly self-consciousness demeanor and ultimate failure on the date. On his last date he said he became awkward and shy, second-guessing every possible move he could make. “I went on a date last week with this one girl I knew from college. She wasn’t Mormon, so naturally I was stoked to see how things went with someone that hadn’t grown up in the church. Then I realized how stupid I am about dating. The whole time I’m just worrying about what to do or not to do, you know. If I hold her hand, what will she think of me? Is that too forward? Or is she expecting something more and I’m just not getting the signals?”

These experiences of hyper-reflexivity lead to what psychologists refer to as a loss of self-affection, or “ipseity,” in which there is a loss of the sense of existing as a self-possessed subject of awareness or activity (Sass 1994). While the logic of

mainstream psychotherapy is founded upon the idea that discursive self-scrutiny will restore a lost sense of self, such that a patient becomes “aware” of the conditions of their existence and thereby gain some sense of control over them, ex-Mormons in the midst of disenchantment often seemed to become counterproductively hyper-reflexive. As Louis Sass has written regarding the psychopathology of psychosis, “[An attempt to] reassert control and reestablish a sense of self by means of introspective scrutiny may end up exacerbating feeling of self-alienation and fragmentation” (Sass 2001:254).

This can manifest in the form of a temporal disruption in narratives of self, in which the biographical continuity of the self becomes fractured and broken into unarticulated discrete moments (Laing 1965). For ex-Mormons this often manifests in the form of a disjuncture between “when I was in the church” and “since I left the church.” For most ex-Mormons I spoke with “when I was in the church” denoted a time in which they were unconsciously caught up in religious enchantment, in which all of their thoughts and actions were shaped by the church. They at times seemed to disown that person as deluded, under the effects of “mind control,” often referring to life in the church as being “trapped in a cult.” While such temporal divides allow for a disavowal of the former person, and in effect inaugurate the birth of a new one, it also sometimes unexpectedly triggers an awareness of the self as incongruent, internally divided, and having the propensity for self-delusion. One woman at a support group meeting worried that if *she* could be “fooled” into believing in Mormonism in the first place, how would *she* know if it was happening to her again. “I don’t really trust *myself* anymore,” she said.

While for some people unshackling Mormonism’s “mind control” resulted in feeling free and mentally unfettered, Jacob often felt paralyzed by his vacillation between

alternative frames of reference, points of view and systems of meaning, what Foucault (1970) has referred to as the affliction of the “heteroclitite.” “I lost my keys the other day and my immediate thought was to pray about it. I didn’t. But then I had this really strong feeling like I should go outside and look for them. And there they were, in the driveway, where I must have dropped them. And I thought, ok, that could be one of those things you say is a blessing, you know, like the spirit told me to go outside. But I also knew it could just be a coincidence, or an intuition, or whatever.” Such instances reflected Jacob’s sense that he was somehow neither here nor there, stuck in-between two modes of reality, two conceptions of self that were fundamentally irreconcilable. A sense of self-continuity was thus disturbed, and the singular, autonomous self that typically functions as the seat of awareness fragmented under the weight of multiple, heterogeneous modes-of-being which seemed to intersect in, and bring about a division of, Jacob’s psyche. “Sometimes I can’t decide who is the real me, you know? How *I* really think about things. You can really drive yourself crazy trying to track it all down.”

In response to all this, Jacob began to dissect his life, looking for remnants of Mormonism, searching for and hoping to parcel out what was uniquely his own and what was “implanted” there by the church. For example, Jacob found himself no longer able to enjoy playing the piano, which he was quite proficient at. “I used to be able to play for hours. That was my thing, you know. Now I sit down to play and all I can think about is the lady in my ward as a kid who taught me to play, or how my mom always said my playing was ‘inspired’. Then I question whether I ever really enjoyed playing the piano at all, or if it was just something I thought I liked because it was what everyone did in the church.” Yet the effect of such self-dissection is a crippling sense of self-alienation, as

becoming conscious of something is to perceive it as separate from the self, an object that can be critically analyzed and deconstructed. It was almost as if Jacob became aware of himself as inextricably a product of cultural determination, and thereby divorced from any real sense of being his own “authentic” self.

For most people, this self-dissecting search for authenticity revolved around the issue of personal morality. Although once guided by a moral code provided by Church teachings, Jacob now found that the once stark contrast between right and wrong appeared unnervingly blurred. Basic questions of morality had to be painstakingly reconceptualized outside of the moral horizons once provided by notions of sin and righteousness. "It sounds silly, but you really go through this process of thinking about everything you ever thought was right or whatever, and asking yourself, 'why do I think that?' Some stuff like not killing is easy, but most of it isn't so cut and dry." Jacob at times worried that without the church he was at risk of unknowingly slipping into amorality. "I really worried that I'd somehow become this horrible person without the church, so it was really important to figure out how I wanted to live my life."

That he should be concerned with things like sin, moral pollution, and personal purity, and the people, places, objects, and events typically associated with them, no longer seemed obvious. Morality and righteousness had lost their “self-evident” truthfulness. Jacob scrutinized every decision he made outside of the church, attempting to analyze its origins and logical repercussions. Deciding whether or not to try drinking alcohol, a habit strictly forbidden within Mormonism, for example, proved to be an exhaustive exercise. Was drinking inherently harmful? Would it “pollute” his body and cause illness in unforeseen ways? Was it giving into his base human desires for

debauchery? Were people who frequented bars or shopped at liquor stores looking for a “way to escape” their problems? Would it change who he was, how he treated friends, or lead to his use of “hard” drugs? As we discussed these issues one night over beers, Jacob grew increasingly dismayed. Then, in a moment of self-conscious crescendo he pointed his finger tip to his head and blurted, “I just want to know when we’re going to be able to measure all this in the brain.” “When are we going to be able to say this is why we should do this thing or not do this thing? I want a quantified explanation of morality.” I was not sure what Jacob meant by “quantified explanation of morality” or how exactly he thought morality could be “measured” in the brain. At the time I was content to take his proclamations at face value and let his anxiety subside. Though, when I think about it now it seems he was looking for a way out of his paralyzing hyper-reflexivity and indecisiveness. He longed for a solid, irrefutable, unchanging explanation and blueprint for life, even if that meant searching for it in the dehumanized recesses of the material brain. Or through another few beers.

Someone to show him the way

In the first few months that I knew Jacob he considered himself an atheist because, as he said, “the idea of God just doesn’t make sense anymore.” And despite his introspectiveness in private, when around other ex-Mormons he at times displayed a bold, unselfconscious bravado.

Despite this, he was at times paranoid and insecure. In the first several months I knew him Jacob often questioned whether I was really, as I claimed, a non-religious

anthropologist studying ex-Mormons, or was, in fact, a closeted Christian - more specifically, a Baptist - surreptitiously infiltrating the ex-Mormon ranks in order to win converts. Though he never articulated what exactly made him feel this way about me, and despite my stalwart disavowals of Christianity, when I asked him about it he told me that it was “just something that I get the sense of.”

“Baptists were always really proud about *being Baptist*” he said somewhat scornfully when talking about his mission in a part of the U.S. where the Baptist Christian denomination was prevalent. When I asked him why he thought I was Baptist, he said because I was “nice to everybody,” seemed “confident” and “sure of myself,” and acted like I “know something that no one else does.” He sometimes teased that he could see me “being a Baptist underneath, sitting back and watching us, then going home at night, laughing with all of your Christian buddies about us ex-Mormons.”

Yet, despite Jacob’s conspiratorial paranoia, he was not entirely dismissive or weary of my presence. After visiting a mosque together in order to “observe” Islamic services, an outing Jacob invited me on as part of a study of world faiths he was undertaking, and coincidentally during which he fantasized about my being a Baptist, he told me about a recent dream. In the dream, Jacob had been at a party at a friend’s house somewhere in Provo where we both lived. When he left the house on foot, however, he didn’t know where he was, and found himself wandering the streets of town. After walking down unfamiliar streets, past unfamiliar houses, he saw my wife and I sitting on our front porch. Relieved to recognize us and our house, he hurried towards us. As he approached, however, we got up from our seats and walked inside, leaving him outside, again, by himself, though now with his bearings returned, and now, thankfully, able to

find his way back to where he had parked his car. Then the dream ended. When Jacob told me the dream, I joked that I was sorry for walking inside without him, and that he was of course welcome over to my home anytime. He laughed, replying that he was just grateful for us “being there to show me the way.”

Together, Jacob’s paranoia about my being a Baptist Christian, and his dream about me showing him “the way,” evidence a subjectivity destabilized by disenchantment and ever grasping for stability and safety. He had projected his loss onto me by creating a fantasy of closeted identity and a hidden agenda that nevertheless reflected his most prescient feelings of lack. I was to Jacob an embodiment of all of that which he felt he lost - pride, confidence, community, and a secret knowledge of truth - when he left the church. In his paranoid, fantasy driven identification with me as the closeted Baptist, I think he demonstrates a continued desire for religiously inspired certainty that the recently disenchanted feel lacking of in their post-religious lives. In fact, many ex-Mormons I spoke to longed to live in the “bubble” of “naive faith” I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. During their transition out of the church they described trying in vain to “make it work,” to bring back the sense of comfort and security they had felt when they were believers, before eventually realizing that “once the bubble bursts, it can’t be put back together.”

Lasting trauma

As a final thought, I want to point to several ways in which the loss and trauma of religious disenchantment is exacerbated in people’s lives even after the initial shock has abated. First, those leaving the church feel isolated by the lack of sympathy or support

they receive from friends and family. While their experience of disenchantment has left them emotionally and psychologically reeling, depressed, and at times suicidal, the only response they get from loved ones is that they should "come back to church," to in effect return to what they feel is the source of their trauma. As Jacob explained to me once, "It was like, ok, my only options are to A) throw away everything and everyone I've ever known. Or B) try to shut my brain off, keep quiet, and go back as if nothing was wrong so everyone else would be happy. But really, what kind of choice is that?" Often, such responses are coupled with dire warnings that if they should choose not to return, they are individually responsible for the eternal consequences, which leaves them feeling even further isolated. When Jacob told his family he no longer had a testimony of the church, his mother made herself into the victim. "She kept emailing me for weeks afterwards telling me how much *I* was hurting *her*. Then my sisters would call and tell me how ashamed they were for me, that I could be this selfish and do this to our family. Somehow I became the bad guy, and all I felt was helpless as was watching my whole world fall apart."

Ex-Mormons are often told or made to feel that they deserve to be suffering, since a lack or loss of faith is interpreted by the church community as a matter of individual responsibility and a reflection of a person's individual virtue and worthiness. Losing faith is seen as a result of spiritual laziness or rebelliousness, and the former member is considered a failure, unable or unwilling to commit themselves to the forms of righteous living that would ostensibly result in them having maintained their faith. Further, the anxiety, depression, and misery former members experience is interpreted as having been brought about by their choice to leave the church. As such, they are labelled as exemplars

of what can naturally be expected to happen to someone who rejects truth. Such forms of religious suffering are therefore suffered in silence and isolation, unseen or unacknowledged by people's former community. Attempts to talk about the suffering result in social marginalization and rejection, while keeping silent sentences the unbeliever to a life of intimate estrangement, perhaps coexisting with friends and family, but unable to express their deepest fears, hurts, and grievances.

Jacob's inability to talk with friends and family about his disenchantment was not just a product of his growing social estrangement. Like other ex-Mormons I talked to, Jacob was often frustrated by his inability to capture the experience of disenchantment in words, despite its profound effects on him, often resorting to the woefully inadequate term "lost" to describe how he was feeling. The lack of a language to describe his experience proved especially unnerving and isolating, thrusting him into bouts of "depression," as he described it at times. My attempts to empathize with his experiences only served to punctuate the near incomprehensibility of his condition. When I prodded him to better describe what he meant by "lost," asking if it made him feel "scared," he replied, "You can't understand what we've been through unless you've been there yourself. How do you describe something like this? It's not like anything I've ever felt. It's not like you're scared. There's times you're scared, I guess, but there's something else. Everything you've ever known changes and no one can see it but you." Unlike other kinds of experiences of trauma, there is not a singular event or object which can be identified as the "cause" of dismay and thus "worked on" through therapy - there is no clearly identifiable object of fear that provokes a recognizable feeling of being scared. Rather, disenchantment manifests as the attenuation of what Husserl referred to as an

“intentional horizon” (Smith and McIntyre 1982) within which certain kinds of experiences had once been possible but now seemed out of reach. As such, the “cause” of the trauma is both everywhere and nowhere at the same time, ever eluding precise identification or description, and thereby only further amplifying its anxiety inducing effects.

The lack of a set of concepts and terms to describe feelings of religious disenchantment, to identify the experience of religious trauma is further exacerbated by the normative status religion holds in American culture. Religion is held up as a bastion of moral values such that those who disavow it and become openly critical are made to feel as if they are short sightedly ignoring the values of goodness, kindness, generosity, etc. that ostensibly stemmed from their religious upbringing. As a result, many former members feel as if their experiences are somehow unique to their personal situation, or tacitly dismissed altogether as a case of them "over reacting." Once one of Jacob's non-Mormon coworkers noticed Jacob drinking coffee, an obvious breach of Mormonism's Word of Wisdom, and they began talking about Jacob's recent disaffection. The co-worker, though not actively church-going, had been raised Christian. He had been sympathetic at first to Jacob's situation. "You could tell he wanted to try to understand. But all he could say to make me feel better was how 'it couldn't have been all that bad,' and how 'you can't focus on the negative stuff.'" The co-worker told Jacob he knew lots of other church members who all seemed to be happy and enjoy being Mormon, which left Jacob feeling personally challenged to “explain” his disaffection and stifle his complaints. “What do you do in a situation like that? I'm not going to sit there and argue with the guy, he doesn't know any different."

Jacob's co-worker is the product of an American culture in which religion is both pervasive and viewed, if not with outright esteem, then as quaintly benign, consequently creating a lack of discursive space for stories of the damage religion can inflict on people's lives. In the U.S. an ethos of individualism and free will holds the individual personally responsible for their "decision" to be a member of the religion in the first place. This can be a tremendous source of frustration and continuing source of alienation, even outside of the religious community. As one man explained, "When I try to tell people what Mormonism did to me, how it made me feel constantly guilty, made me waste two years of my life on a mission, forced me to play mind tricks on myself just to fit in, or caused me to have this anxiety and depression, they say, 'why didn't I just leave before'. 'Before what!?' I want to tell them. It's like they think I somehow chose all this, as if somehow I could have seen it coming and gone somewhere else."

Finally, while the initial shock of disenchantment can be unnerving in the short term, the experience is often prolonged and amplified indefinitely by the ubiquity of religious symbolism surrounding the formerly religious in their everyday lives in Utah. Ex-Mormons living in Utah find themselves inundated with reminders of their former religious life and in some sense forced to daily relive the trauma of disenchantment. They find that the psychological act of "leaving" the church, and efforts to "get over it" are routinely undermined by the fact that they are confronted by the church's pervasive presence. Jacob described this feeling of being hemmed in by Mormonism, "Everywhere you go you see churches and temples...When I meet somebody new you can bet they'll ask if I'm a member...you can try to get away, but it sometime feels impossible. Everyday I'm reminded of what I used to be, of everything I lost."

There is no easy solution to the issues I've discussed here. Finding a sense of purpose, identity, and intersubjectively constituted sense of emplacement in the world (Heidegger 1977) is a lifelong struggle that everyone, not only those who have undergone a "crisis of faith" must contend with. The road to "recovery" for those leaving the church is sometimes long and arduous, involving much "soul-searching" and personal experimentation with new ideas and new ways of living now that they find themselves without the guiding (constraining) influence of the church. How ex-Mormons "recover" from these experiences of loss and disenchantment is a theme I deal with explicitly in the next chapter as I discuss how sex and atheism help mitigate feelings of loss and vulnerability, and to a lesser degree throughout the following chapters when I turn to the politics of identity making outside the church.

Ch 3: Embodied Deconversions: Sex and the Spirit

For the ex-Mormons I talked with, membership in the church had been an all-encompassing and pervasive aspect of their lives. It was not just what they did on Sundays as they attended sacrament meetings, isolated to particular times, places, or events. Instead, membership was the primary basis through which they articulated a sense of self and identity, it defined who they were as mothers, fathers, employees, community members, etc. It was the master symbol through which all else was made relative and the absolute foundation for and basis of daily existence. As such, Mormonism enveloped them within its own peculiar ideas about the body, teaching them to fill themselves with God's divine presence in their daily lives, to "choose the right" in all actions, and to imbue within themselves a permanent disposition towards "righteous living," manifested most evidently in learning to "feel the spirit" and to treat their bodies as sacred temples, to control their sexual desires, redirecting them towards laboriously building "celestial families."

What ex-Mormons find, though, is that these embodied dispositions do not leave them just because they left the church. An intellectually based renunciation of the church's teachings does not coincide or equate with a disembodiment of a real sense of *being Mormon*. While ex-Mormons endlessly talk with each other about why they left the church, about the evils of religious dogmatism, the "evidence" of Mormonism's falseness, and how belief in Mormonism requires committing innumerable "logical fallacies," fallacies that they now say they "see through" as ex-Mormons - they still *feel* Mormon at times. Mormonism "gets into you," they say, it becomes imprinted into your

thoughts and your body in often quite stubborn ways. Religion continues to haunt the disenchanted subject in its very ability to ‘get under the skin’. Even long after they leave, I was told, they are constantly surprised by the things that pop up in their daily life that are reminders that “we’re all still Mormon.” As one man told me, “You’re driving in your car, and you hear a song on the radio, or you go someplace you haven’t been to in a while, and a memory, or a feeling, or a thought will pop up...it might make you feel guilty for leaving, sad, or lonely, and you say ‘wooh, I didn’t realize that was still there’.”

Research on secularization has yet to focus on the embodied subject as a particularly salient locus of disenchantment. Typically, in discussions of secularism and deconversion the body is, as Leder (1990) writes, concealed, hidden, made “absent” in its everyday banality, and I would add, made secondary to the institutional, political and sociological fields in which these processes more readily seem to unfold. Yet, for ex-Mormons in the midst of the psychological, emotional, and existential upheaval of religious disenchantment, the body is also made to “dys-appear” (ibid.), to tacitly re-emerge as the psycho-affective field upon which ex-Mormons begin to negotiate the intimate, and often occluded dimensions of that disenchantment.

The turn from a religious to a secular subjectivity is therefore not as straightforward as believing or not believing. As I found throughout my research, transitioning away from a religious, to a more secularized orientation to the world, is not cleanly demarcated by either people’s assent to or rejection of certain prescribed religious beliefs. Rather, for ex-Mormons, it unfolded through an ambivalent negotiation of ongoing embodied and affective attachments to Mormonism, the morals, values, sensibilities, and habits that continued to inhabit them, even though they no longer

inhabited it. We must therefore look to how deconversion entails the reconfiguration of an embodied and affective sensorium (Hirschkind 2010). It is not just about thinking differently about cosmological issues. But rather, feeling differently, engaging with one's senses, emotions, thoughts, and bodies in new and often anxiety provoking ways. It's about coming into a new relationship with oneself, with the vague palpability of one's emotions, learning to use one's body, to respond to its desires without immediately feeling guilt, and to learn to produce pleasure in new ways.

In this chapter I describe what initially seemed like ex-Mormons' contradictory approaches to embodiment. I first look at how sexuality as an embodied practice and culturally informed bodily hexis⁷¹ serves as an avenue through which ex-Mormons disenchant Mormonism's ideological hold over how they experience their bodies and feel pleasure. That is, I describe how some ex-Mormons turn to a Dionysian absorption in the flesh after years of being told that their body is sinful, dangerous, and must be tamed by following the teachings of the church. Secondly, I describe what seems like an almost inverse relationship to the body – that is, the efforts of some ex-Mormons to regain control over their bodies after leaving the church through employing disembodied, and scientifically informed, reason. In this section, it is the chaos of the body's emotions and embodied disposition to “feeling the spirit” that ex-Mormons seek to rationalize and wrest control of. If religion is written on and in the body, then it is through embodied experience that we must look to see how it is undone.

71 As articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, hexis is a particular, enduring, unconscious disposition.

Sexual Sins

When I began my ethnographic fieldwork on apostasy and ex-Mormonism in Utah, I would often ask faithful Mormons, “Why do you think people are leaving the church?” During my research, as I attended church services and spoke with my Mormon neighbors, the topic of people leaving the church hovered ambiguously underneath a compulsive discourse of “keeping the faith” and “holding tight to the iron rod” (a figurative expression for following church teachings believed to lead members to “eternal happiness”). On quiet Sunday mornings I would walk with dozens of other smartly dressed parishioners down our sidewalks to attend sacrament meeting in the unassuming red bricked, steeple crowned chapel where my “ward” met for services, only two blocks from my house. I often accompanied my neighbor, the ward’s “Elders Quorum” president, who would explain nuances of church doctrine, ward politics, and his personal views on life in the church as we walked. When I asked him my question about the church’s “apostates,” he at first admitted that ‘you never really know why someone leaves. But from what he had seen, most apostates were unwilling to resist temptations to disobey the “law of chastity” - the set of moral rules governing members’ sexuality. They had grown lazy, or worse, licentious, and now sought only the vapid pleasures of the flesh. The former members he knew had given themselves over to carnal desires, tragically misusing their procreative abilities, the “most sacred gift” given to people by God.

As I would learn throughout my research, many ex-Mormons did indeed sexually “let loose” when they left the church. As I sat in ex-Mormon support group meetings, at

parties, and during informal gatherings, sex was a quite frequent topic of conversation. I heard ex-Mormons talk of having felt sexually repressed in the church, and how now, outside of the church, they were actively exploring their sexuality, including different erotic techniques, toys, positions, and partners.

There was an ambivalence to such talk, however. It was often entered into hesitantly, cautiously, as if dangerous. But as conversation progressed it inevitably turned explosive, explicit, and it seemed to me, cathartic; the descriptions of sexual experiences both before and after their disaffection becoming more vivid, emotional, and at times flippant in their increasingly informal treatment of what had been, in the church, a most hallowed, and off-limits, topic. Sex seemed to move from something that was taboo, to be ashamed about and regretted - as when telling stories of rape, addiction, abuse, and repression while in the church - to an object of philosophical and scientific contemplation, and aesthetic source of enjoyment in their ex-Mormon lives.

In contrast to the moral stereotypes that I often heard projected onto ex-Mormons, that their heathenish desire for the pleasures of the flesh drove them away from the gospel, I began to wonder if sex played a more nuanced role in people's deconversion from Mormonism beyond what my faithful friend considered to be apostates' weakness for bodily pleasure. Could their focus on sex outside the church, I asked, be understood not as a cause for, or result of rejecting church teachings, but as foundational to the process of deconversion itself?

In this section I focus on embodied sexuality as it operates at the intersection and overlap of the cognitive/rational, emotive/affective person, and how it serves as the embodied, affective, and symbolically laden conduit through which a religious

subjectivity not only takes shape, but is contested in ex-Mormons' lives. While sex can, on the one hand, be constraining, debilitating, and alienating, it is at the same time for ex-Mormons also potentially liberating, empowering, and a means by which they can begin to make sense of life outside of their former church.

Sacred Bodies, Sacred Sex

While walking down a snow laden sidewalk after church one day, next to a park where children played in the snow, I asked one of my Mormon neighbors (a particularly enthusiastic member with four young children) why it seemed that people in the church got married so young (for women to marry at 19 and men at 21 is quite common), and why sex before marriage was so taboo. All I wanted to know, he said, would be clear if I only understood one thing: "Everything the church teaches, everything it does, is about building eternal families."

Earlier that morning at church, sitting in a classroom full of adult couples, I learned what it meant to think about one's "divine purpose" as a father or mother. "The most sacred of all our divine powers is to become a co-creator with Heavenly Father in providing physical bodies for His spirit sons and daughters" we read, "...nothing is more holy; nothing deserves more reverence; nothing is more central to the plan of happiness. And our very souls are at stake" (Bednar 2001).⁷² As I listened to the lesson, I felt something empowering and portentous about the thought of using one's sex, the most carnal and basic aspect of our humanity, for divine ends. I must not have been the only

72 <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2001/09/ye-are-the-temple-of-god?lang=eng>

one, for several members of the class eagerly recounted stories of receiving great joy and blessings in their lives by heeding these instructions. However, while procreation is certainly at the center of Mormon theology, the mention of sex as anything but “sacred” was conspicuously absent in our discussions. Sex as embodied act was replaced with sex as sacred performance and divine mandate. Imbued with an aura of sacrality, in Mormonism the sexed body must be approached with “reverence,” a spiritualized sentiment that covers over its more libidinous and corporeal dimensions. In the midst of that morning’s lesson celebrating the transcendent act of “building eternal families,” I was reminded of how starkly different many of my ex-Mormon friends had come to think about sex, how they admonished the church’s teachings on sex as “manipulative” and “damaging.” I began to wonder how thinking about sex as “sacred” had shaped the very sense of religious subjectivity and embodied self these ex-Mormons were now so desperate to escape.

I am inspired here by Bourdieu's suggestion that "the most fundamental structures of the group" are rooted in "the primary experiences of the body" (1990:71). My interest in recounting the details of Mormonism’s particular form of sexual subjectivity is therefore intended to draw attention to how learning to think about, interact with, and use one's own and others bodies as “sacred” is the primary process through which social meanings are inscribed both on the surface of the body and "below the level of unconsciousness" within the church (1990:73). As Bourdieu suggests, these determining structures for the most part go unnoticed, though having untold influence on our daily thoughts, actions, and sensibilities.

The topic of sex in Mormonism constitutes the primary avenue through which

lessons about church membership, gospel principles, sin, purity, and “eternal happiness” are most fully and intimately articulated. While they were members of the church, it was primarily through learning to correctly “bridle the passions of the flesh” that ex-Mormons originally incorporated the values and ideals of Mormonism into their sense of self, including an embodied relationship with ecclesiastical authority and a deep identification with the larger church community. I would therefore like to complicate my friend’s assertion that Mormonism is best understood in terms of its explicit emphasis on building eternal families. That a Mormon sense of self takes shape by learning to direct embodied sexual capabilities towards building eternal families - what may be considered a positive identification with Heavenly Father as a “co-creator” - is only half the picture. In addition, we must look to how there exists a concomitant negative identification achieved through a denial and negation of the embodied self.

In Mormonism, the body and its sexual abilities are marked by a pervasive ambivalence. While on the one hand heterosexual, procreative, and marital sex is glorified and celebrated as sacred and divine, sexual bodies and acts are also invariably suspect and dangerous. Church members are taught that the “very elements” out of which their bodies were created are “by nature fallen and ever subject to the pull of sin, corruption, and death,” and that sexual sins are more serious than any other sins except murder or denying the Holy Ghost (see Alma 39:5). So even while told to seek “eternal progression” by harnessing their “divine powers” of sexual reproduction, church members are simultaneously warned that their sexual bodies are the quickest route to eternal downfall. As in the story of Adam’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, members are taught that Satan affects them most directly through their physical bodies.

The eternal rewards of correctly controlling these sacred powers equally matched by the everlasting punishment for abusing them, as one church leader warned, “your future may be burned; your world could go up in flames” (Holland 1998).⁷³

This duality of human existence and everyday embodied experience constitutes the very core of Mormon theology, culture, and religious thought. As simultaneously natural and cultural, carnal and sacral, the Mormon body sits precariously at the confluence of two competing modes of existence, one worldly and one divine. As one church leader succinctly explains, “for at the same time that we inhabit a physical body that is subject to the Fall, we also have a spirit that represents the eternal part of us” (Bednar 2001).⁷⁴ Mormonism thus draws an ontological distinction in its conceptions of the self between people's active volitions, seated in their faith and strength of character, and their passive perceptions, sensations, and pleasures, seated in the corporeal body. The embodied flesh, in its profane state of nature, is thought to be susceptible to the influence of Satan, and so is directly antithetical to the spiritual self that Mormons seek to groom, thus constituting a divided self that is constantly under attack. “Where is the adversary presently directing his most direct and diabolical attacks?” members are rhetorically asked. “Upon our beliefs about and uses of the physical body and upon the family,” they are told. Inhabiting a world in which spiritual and embodied selves are under constant attack from evil forces, church members are given strict lessons on keeping spiritually pure, and admonished to be constantly vigilant in renouncing any “tempting influences,” including avoiding people, places, and interactions that may pose a danger. As one church

73 <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/10/personal-purity?lang=eng>

74 <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2001/09/ye-are-the-temple-of-god?lang=eng>

pamphlet, Sexual Purity, cautions church youth to stay attuned to “the spirit” to “help you know when you are at risk and give you the strength to remove yourself from the situation” (2011:36). The predisposition to avoid anything eliciting an embodied erotic response - a word, an image, or a song - so as not to provoke the temptation to sin, was made quite clear to me once while teaching an introduction to anthropology course in a Utah university. During the showing of an ethnographic film on the !Kung, several of my students stood up and left the classroom, later claiming that the film was too “pornographic,” that it “just didn't feel right.”

Similarly, that members should learn to avoid other people's sex as inherently dangerous and sinful is brought into sharp relief in the lessons taught to young men and women in the church in the years prior to marriage. For example, during one object lesson commonly used in Sunday school classes the teacher brings out a tray of cupcakes, one for each person in the class, and licks one before handing the tray around. Inevitably, the last person to receive the tray is stuck with the licked cupcake, which they refuse to eat. Meant to illustrate the value of personal virtue and sexual morality, young members are told that should they give into sexual temptation they too will be like a licked cupcake, dirty and unwanted.

Yet, the greatest danger to a virtuous self isn't located out there in “the world.” Avoiding pornography is only partly about negating a fallen, external world - it is about members controlling that within themselves that poses the greatest danger - their own seething, unruly, appetite for the flesh. As one former church prophet instructed, “Be clean in mind, and then you will have greater control over your bodies” (Hinckley 2006). Living with such a divided self therefore means asking whether “my body [will] rule over

my spirit, or will my spirit rule over my body?” as church leader, Elder Bednar (2001) explained, instructing members that their primary purpose in life was to “learn to bridle all of the passions of the flesh.” Avoiding external sources of temptation acts as a technique of self-discipline whereby church members effectively suppress a part of themselves thought to be an ever-present and treacherous threat to the eternal, virtuous self they seek to build through church activities. From an ontological point of view, however, this makes for quite a precarious existence, as the “true self” in Mormonism, the self that makes decisions, and is thus capable of, and held responsible for, bridling the passions of the flesh, emerges only in distinction and opposition to one’s own material body and embodied passions. What constitutes the actual self in Mormonism is then actually quite narrow, as the most onerous divisions between good and bad, virtuous and vile are drawn between only that part of oneself adhering to gospel principles, and the thoughts, desires, passions, and appetites that therein constitute a hopelessly polluting influence on the spiritual self.

As “sacred,” the body must also be seen, in light of anthropological teachings on the topic, as “set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1915:47) necessitating intervention by an ecclesiastic order (Mauss 1981). As such, the body’s power to provoke temptation is thought to be too much for any person to effectively control on their own and is made a matter of collective concern, a threat that requires institutional and authoritative intervention. During obligatory interviews with their local bishops, members’ sexualities are routinely made subject to institutionalized moral oversight. As part of a series of questions concerning the interviewee’s “worthiness” to receive a “temple recommend,” members are specifically asked about their sexual propriety and fidelity, whether they

masturbate, have sex outside of marriage, or even the positions and erotic techniques they use within the marital relationship. Such questions reiterate the fact that membership in the church is constituted through both accepting a set of prescriptive beliefs, and, abiding by a set of proscriptive rules concerning how a member uses their body. Yet, it also underlines the sense that Mormons are taught to think of themselves as not only inherently divided, but also powerless to control themselves, necessitating divine or ecclesiastic intervention. Similarly, couples getting married in the temple learn that they are bound as a unit, not only to each other, but to God as well, their relationship forever constituted by and through his enduring presence in their spiritual and sensual, lives. “Physical intimacy is not only a symbolic union between a husband and a wife—the very uniting of souls—but it is also symbolic of a shared relationship between them and their Father in Heaven” (Holland 1998).⁷⁵ Having sex with one’s partner should thereby serve as a regular and abiding reminder of this tripartite union and commitment.

Church authorities also dictate the appropriate clothes and appearances of members. All members (especially women) learn to cover their shoulders, thighs, and chests with “modest” clothing so as not to provoke lust in others and cause them to sin. Members who have received their “endowments” (a ritual rite of passage conducted in the temple when marrying or before embarking on a proselytizing mission) are instructed to wear a set of knee and shoulder length temple garments that serve as a form of sacred underwear, a symbolic reminder of the covenants they made in the temple. Those who dress “immodestly” or do not wear their garments are subject to scathing criticism, gossip, and ridicule. Learning to maintain one’s “modesty” - wearing clothing that

75 <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/10/personal-purity?lang=eng>

conservatively covers the chest, arms, and legs - thereby becomes a potent culturally mediated self-technique for inoculating the latent potentials of the body to provoke sin, and points to the ways in which the body is seen as polluting and shameful when inappropriately constrained.

In Mormonism sex is legitimized only inasmuch as it succumbs to the sterilizing power of religious reason; it is not celebrated for its materiality or sensuality, but for the way in which, through sex, members of the church symbolically demonstrate and dramatize their commitment to the gospel. It comes to constitute an unconscious “habitus” of sedimented dispositions and predilections.

An understanding of ex-Mormons’ religious disaffection is therefore incomplete if all that is taken into consideration is their rejection of particular ideas and beliefs associated with the institutional church or its formal doctrine. No longer believing in formal doctrine does not counteract the deeply ingrained sense of self that has been constructed through a lifetime of church membership. Because of this, even after rejecting the church’s teachings, Mormonism’s presence in some ways lingers on and in ex-Mormons in the form of a persistent, and tacit, embodied ontology that divides one’s sense of self between a polluting body and a sacred spirit, an aversion to sex in its libidinous forms, and a leeriness of the bodily pleasures it may produce. This inhabitation, however, no longer takes the form of an explicit ideology, but rather as a form of tacit colonization of the coterminous mind/body subject. As Katie Stewart writes, the body is not “incorporated into the self as inert substance or bodily ‘self-image’” but rather manages to “retain an affecting agency all its own” (1996:132). Ex-Mormons know this “affective agency” all too well, as the body persistently re-emerges as a

problem in the process of deconversion. The embodied habits, dispositions, ways of feeling and moving, internal divisions and external boundaries, have all been crafted and disciplined through years of envelopment in church activities, families, and doctrinal teachings, resulting in a persistent “interpellation” of self as “Mormon” (Althusser 1971).

“I lost my body to the Church”

Gesturing with open palm over her midriff and breasts, Sara told an ex-Mormon support group how her body changed after giving birth to three children within the first four years of her marriage. “I lost my body to the church,” she declared, “I wasn’t always like this.” She used to be proud of her physique - at one time a young, firm, and fit woman, with a trim waistline and “perky breasts.” However, now she feels sunken, heavy, and unattractive, the cultural pressure in Mormonism to have multiple children as soon as she got married creating a form of bodily estrangement and alienation of self that she and others like her are still struggling to come to terms with outside of the church.

“I lost my body to the church” became a common refrain among many of the ex-Mormon women I spoke to. Inevitably, talk of “loss” was paired with descriptions of a life spent in the church in which they felt “trapped” in their bodies, “locked behind the bars of patriarchy,” constrained by frumpy clothing, a demeaning self image, and teachings that slotted them solely as childbearing mothers attached to priesthood holding men. Most importantly, though, loss was a language of the enduring and ambivalent absence of self effected by the church’s continued constraining and controlling presence in their lives, even outside of the church. Although they could begin wearing more

flattering clothing, they say, it is not as easy to ignore the stretch marks and drooping breasts that are indubitably etched into the flesh, constant reminders of a body transfigured in service to the church. For those like Sara, the body became a potent mnemonic device that stubbornly reminded them of what was lost (in the form of a youthful buoyancy) and what was gained (in the form of wrinkles and stretch marks) during their life in the church. Even mundane practices such as looking in the mirror can provoke anger, sadness, and memories of life in the church. “I can literally see what the church did to me!”

For ex-Mormon women, however, loss is a polysemic metaphor that also points to a feeling of not knowing how their body works, of realizing that for decades they have been unable to enjoy its pleasures, always looking at it with anxiety and skepticism. Ex-Mormon women described “not knowing” their bodies, feeling unable, or unwilling, to explore pleasure. For Judy, this registered as a lack of control and ownership, a colonization of self that scared her away from exploring that which was ostensibly “hers.” “The church did a good job of drilling into me the idea that even thinking sexual thoughts was a sin. Touching myself was a sin, talking about sex was a sin. I got lessons regularly about chastity and staying pure and protecting my bodily temple. Even though it was my body, I had no control over it. It’s sad, but I know so many women who never knew they could achieve an orgasm before they left the church. It took me over a year before I was comfortable enough to have one myself.”

Judy’s description of self-alienation, manifested in her relationship to a body that was strangely hers, yet not hers, reveals a more enduring, and elusive dimension of ex-Mormons’ experiences of continued religious embodiment. As discussed above, to be

Mormon is to internalize a highly proscriptive set of embodied habits and dispositions. Yet, while these embodied habits envelope individual church members within collectively held ideas, morals, and values, they operate essentially beneath any individual's active consciousness. The implications of this for ex-Mormons attempting to break ties with the church should be apparent. The values and beliefs which tacitly inform habits are entrenched in people's modes of conduct with themselves and with each other. Modes of action, and reaction, may thus continue long after the rationale supporting them has been forgotten.

Among ex-Mormons, a prominent, lingering form of this was talked about in terms of having "God in the bedroom." Despite their staunch rejection of church teachings those who leave the church often found that God may have left their day to day thoughts, but had somehow stayed between the sheets, appearing and reappearing during their most intimate moments. For example, John and Lana typically talked about sex easily and openly with me and each other. Yet, putting their talk into action often provoked unwelcomed reactions. Over drinks at their house one evening, Lana described what it meant to have "God in the bedroom." "Sometimes when we try something new in bed I literally get nauseous. I don't know what it is...I try to talk myself out of it, but it's always there. We'll talk about trying something new, but when it comes to it, I always ends up crying." Lana considered sex to be a matter of fact part of human existence, and even something to be enjoyed. The physical act of sex, especially John's attempts to try something new, however, made her question whether leaving the church was the right thing to do, the affective power of guilt for using her body inappropriately in these moments of sensuality drawing her back into what she described as "a Mormon mindset."

On a later day, in private conversation, John described his understanding of “having God in the bedroom.” He told me how Lana’s reluctance to experiment in the bedroom, her frequent bouts of guilt for being “unclean,” and relapses into a Mormon mindset had been an enduring source of tension in their relationship since leaving the church. In the months and years following their disaffection, they had spent hours talking about sex with each other. He tried to reason with her, to talk through her feelings of shame, fear, and guilt. But in the end, he confessed, “I’m just arguing with thirty years of indoctrination.” The labor of these recurring conversations - each one a reinvigoration and reinsertion of the church back into their relationship and into his life - took its toll. John said he loved his wife, but didn’t know how long he could keep this up. Her frequent rebukes were making him feel guilty. He began to question whether he was in fact really transgressing some moral boundaries, whether he was indeed leading them “down a path of destruction,” as he had frequently been taught about in the church. “It’s really sick!” he exclaimed, “But that’s what it is. It’s like God’s always in the corner, watching you do it.” Flustered and frustrated by the ever rebounding revival of a religious subjectivity he thought he had forever laid to rest when he left the church, his patience was wearing thin. “Something’s gotta give...it’s either God or me, but one of us has got to go. I spent over thirty years letting the church tell me how to fuck and I’m not going to do it anymore. I’m not.”

Freeing sexual subjectivities

Breaking the hold of an embodied disposition to feel guilt, of thinking of sexuality only

in Mormon-centric terms, is not as easy as simply rejecting the church's teachings. Instead, those bodies and sexualities must be carefully reconceived outside the umbrella of Mormon morality. In this section I discuss how ex-Mormon bodies re-emerge as the political and symbolic terrain upon which a reinterpretation of moral and sexual selfhood unfolds.

During my fieldwork in Utah I attended dozens of ex-Mormon support group meetings, parties, book clubs, and discussion groups during which members of the "ex-Mormon community" would gather to socialize, meet new people, and discuss their experiences leaving Mormonism. At one particular meeting, several dozen ex-Mormons gathered at Richard and Ann's house to discuss "Sex Outside the Church," as the email invitation titled it, a two-hour long session set aside to talk solely about sex. When I arrived, all of the furniture had been pushed away from the center of the living-room, an assortment of metal folding chairs and plastic patio chairs standing in their place. By the start of the event a half hour later, the seats were filled and the floor space was covered with people splayed out chatting noisily. Richard, a confident, upbeat man in his early forties who unlike most others gathered had been out of the church for almost a decade, led the discussion.

In his opening remarks, Richard decried the church's treatment of sex, and expounded upon an understanding of sexuality seated not in a moral discourse of good and bad, but a scientific rationale of human evolution. His words were savvy; they spoke to the gathered ex-Mormons' collective anxieties about a topic he suggested was systematically obscured in the church. "We're trained to be sex stupid" he began. "My hope is that after tonight we all come to a place where sex doesn't scare us anymore." In

his talk Richard naturalized sex, situating it within an understanding of human physiology and evolutionary development that was explicitly a-moral. “People need to understand that sex operates in one of the oldest parts of the brain. You can go back to amoebas, way back in evolution, when things were first reproducing. Our sexuality is an old, old instinct. Instincts that had to be kept strong to keep the species from dying out. You see, sexuality goes beyond thought, its subordinate to thought. The only reason we do anything else in our lives, like eating, is to make sure we can reproduce.” Over the course of his lecture, Richard compared humans to other higher order animals, like dolphins and apes, who have a “genetic disposition” for both pair bonding and for finding multiple partners. More than just a natural history lesson, Richard and Ann described of male and female sexual anatomy in great detail, saying that despite the way they looked like, were actually quite similar in form and function. In a humorous sort of “show and tell” they reviewed where the various erogenous zones could be found on the body, and the physiology of an orgasm, including what kinds of erotic techniques and sex toys could be used to produce one. Finally, they spoke about the problems associated with the moral imperative for practicing monogamy, a particularly salient issue for many people leaving the church for whom marriage was no longer a divine mandate. It was normal and healthy, they said, to have seemingly random thoughts, feelings, and fantasies come up during sex. Rather than continue to repress them, the audience was encouraged to explore what they meant as a way of developing their post-Mormon sexualities. Humans are not “wired” to have sex with the same person, the same way, every few days for the rest of their life, they said - being open to and exploring these parts of sexuality was not only expected, it was healthy.

Richard's talk spurred fervent conversation. I sat on the floor next to several couples in the midst of processing the new information, telling stories, and sharing insights with each other. "It just dawned on me," Rachel proclaimed. "Sex is such a basic instinct. It's a survival mechanism. Our urges and thoughts are unavoidable!" The church targets these instincts and ties one's self-worth to impossibly high standards of behavior, she claimed, all in order to create a cycle of guilt and need for repentance through membership in the church. "It's really impossible to be 'good' by the church standards. That's why they do it!"

Such talk constitutes what psychologists and psychological anthropologists refer to as "cognitive reframing" or "restructuring," a process whereby events, concepts, or ideas thought to be "maladaptive" or harmful are transformed or otherwise rendered "positive" (Beck 1997). Richard's talk did not directly confront Mormonism or its particular views on sexuality. As evidenced in Rachel's comments, what Richard did was provide the semantic tools by which the ex-Mormon audience was able to begin reframing their own sexualities and embodied experiences for themselves. Rachel's comments reflect what I heard many ex-Mormons refer to as an "awakening" to their sexualities. They began to see themselves as long subjected to externally mandated rules governing sexuality which they were now empowered to fight against. Bringing sex out into the open, talking about it frankly, informally, and in a pseudo-scientific manner, inverted the moral logic regarding sex that had been at work in the church. It was a way of subverting their fear of "uncontrollable passions" and temptations to sin, and converting that fear into an understanding of themselves as having natural "instincts" that superseded Mormonism's teachings on sexuality.

There is a therapeutic dimension to the sexual reframing ex-Mormons were undergoing. For example, they contended that Mormon sexual morality held members to an “impossibly high standard,” which subjected church members to a pervasive form of sexual repression. Several men confessed to being obsessed with pornography and masturbation while in the church; the desire to masturbate having driven them into deep bouts of self-loathing and guilt, as the temptation to sin seemed not to emerge from some external source (which they could ostensibly just avoid), but rather seemed to erupt from within themselves. In their discussions at the group meeting, however, they asserted that the true source of pathology was in the church’s compulsory restrictions on sexual expression. As natural, sexual instincts worked outside of any conventional understanding of morality and should not be subjected to repressive religious control. Attempting to suppress desires creates the transgressive pleasures the church sought to extinguish, and therefore, the pathological mindset and behaviors that plagued them. “It was like magic” one man asserted, “once I realized that what I was feeling was natural, I didn’t need it anymore. The addiction went away!”

Reframing sex in these ways was not just a way of legitimizing formerly tabooed sexual feelings or behaviors, or “rationalizing” what they otherwise knew to be “harmful.” It was an act of disenchanting the authority of an institution, and the people that represented it, and effectively combatting its ongoing hold over them. For example, ex-Mormons grew up looking to church leaders as the *de facto* authority figures on issues of both cosmological and mundane importance; they were paragons of moral virtue, divinely inspired leaders of “the one true church” who spoke with the authority of the heavens. Even after leaving the church, I often heard ex-Mormons talk ambivalently

about the church leaders they knew and loved their whole lives. Did these men really set the bar for righteous living, they worried, and were they as ex-Mormons in comparison living a life of sinful sexual debauchery? In reframing sex as natural ex-Mormons were able to reverse the logic of sin and pathology to which they felt subjected. This in part took the form of a backdoor denunciation of church leaders' professed piety. "Do you think they never really masturbate?" one man asked the group. Another answered, "Ya, I do. I think they're being honest. But only asexuals and psychopaths are able to do that. That's what the church does, it brings up psychopaths through the ranks. They're the ones who reach the top." Another woman interpreted early church leaders' practice of polygamy as an extension of evolutionary theory. Taking multiple wives in "celestial marriage," she suggested, although thought of within the church as a divine mandate (though now suspended), is in fact evidence of church leaders selfishly leveraging their status, promising eternal life to a multitude of women in a lascivious attempt to quell their own sexual desires. The idea that Mormonism hides its own sexual flagrancy under a veneer of "righteousness" was thus a powerful way for ex-Mormons to not only critique the church, but also call attention to what they saw as its hypocritical and bankrupt moral order. One woman in our group was vividly reminded of this as she tearfully recounted an encounter she had with her church bishop. Called into his office for an "ecclesiastical interview," she was asked if she ever masturbated. She remembers flushing red with embarrassment; "Here I was sitting alone in this old man's office, and he's asking me if I touch myself. I didn't know what to do, so I tell him yeah. Then he asks me how often I do it, where exactly do I touch myself, and what I think about when I'm doing it." It was imperative, he said, for her to fully "atone" for her sins. "In any other situation" she

concluded “an old man asking a kid about sex and masturbation would be a crime! There I was cringing inside and he was enjoying it!”

Richard’s explanations introduced his audience to a way of thinking and conversing about the sexualized body that allowed them to reconceptualize what stepping outside of Mormonism’s corporeal and moral ontology meant for them as ex-Mormons. Sexual bodies, objectified, scrutinized, and deconstructed in this way, were thus opened up for thoughtful reflection and critical scrutiny. For them, sexuality was no longer governed by the logic of divine sanctity, with its prohibitions, divisions, and inherent dangers. By gaining more “adequate ideas” (Spinoza 1985) of the body’s natural functions, instincts, and dispositions, they instead began to construct a secular ontology of life outside the church that was not divided against itself, that did not require living in fear of individual passions and desires, and which effectively expelled the church’s authority to morally mediate their sense of self.

In addition to a conceptual reframing of sexuality, the essence of these newly sexualized self-assessments lies in what Heidegger (1977) calls “enframing” (*“gestell”*) an ontological processes of “revealing,” “opening up,” or “bringing forth” of new worlds. For Heidegger, the emphasis is not on the particular tool or apparatus used in the process of enframing, but rather to how enframing constitutes the conditions of possibility in which a deeper, more “real” “truth” may be revealed. Gaining sexual knowledge about the body, including a new understanding of its pleasure inducing parts and the techniques to stoke them, thereby constituted a new plane of awareness for ex-Mormons. The body could now be enlisted in the pursuit of pleasure, as an expression of desire in and through the flesh, rather than a lingering source of fear and guilt. “We’re really so lucky” another

woman at the group meeting proclaimed, commenting on her female sexuality, “not only is sex amazing when you know what you’re doing, but we also get to have multiple orgasms! Who knew!?”

Repossessing the body

This “opening up” to new ontological horizons and forms of embodied truth through sex reverberated in ex-Mormon discourse and practice throughout the time I spent in Utah. For ex-Mormons, sexual exploration, discussion, and experimentation revealed a new way of ordering and mapping the human body outside of the former religio-symbolic framework, and the sacred truths, in which it was previously framed. Posting on an online ex-Mormon message board, an unnamed woman provocatively sums up her personal experience of sexual transformation while leaving the church:

I realized that I am a woman with a body that has sexual desires that I had not been acknowledging. My desires had been masked and shut down through many years of shame. I had no sexual identity of my own; duty sex was on the weekly list of wifely chores and God knew I wanted a gold star next to each finished chore. I had no idea what it looked like to be a sexual being without shame or a submissive, timid approach. Sex was empty and time could always be spent doing more important things like balancing my check book or scheduling next week’s events. But now it could be different. I began to approach sex with the intent of finding out how much physical pleasure I could get out of it. I admit, at first it felt selfish, but I eventually was able to give myself permission to lose myself in the pure, clean energy of sexual pleasures. It was uncharted territory that I discovered upon the terrain of my body that I never felt before – I didn’t even dare to look. I realized my own desires, once they peeked out from behind the rock they’d been shoved under, had just as much validity as a man’s. My body began to sync with my mind and my heart. I realized that pleasure was mine to own and explore; it was not something to hide from myself or something to give the ownership of away to my husband or Church. The damage of the

years in the Church was not easily overcome in one night – although once I allowed myself to be curious enough to get lost in pure, personal ecstasy, a whole new world opened up for me. I am beautiful, powerful and I love my feminine beauty – whatever it looks like today. Women’s (and men’s) sexuality has been owned by the Church and governed by God since the early years in the Church. To find out, through personal bravery, that I actually owned my body was the pivotal point in changing my mindset. I began to build resilience to the shame all around me, especially from those in the Church. I later found that this resilience was the key to arming myself against the cultural stigmas. It was a path I was going alone, that was very clear.⁷⁶

In this passage the author describes her disaffection from Mormonism in terms of a shift in sexual ontology. She begins in a state of alienation, a self constituted by its very lack of sexual identity and “masked” desires, unable to conceive of herself as a “sexual being.” Sex was “empty,” a waste of time that could be better spent working on a list of chores in fulfillment of her divinely sanctioned role as wife and mother. In this prior state, personal fulfillment came through labor that was future oriented and religiously defined - balancing the family checkbook was part of her wifely duties, her contribution to the endless effort of building a celestial family. After giving herself permission to “lose” herself in sexual pleasure, however, her body was reconstituted as a “whole new world,” newly opened and “uncharted territory” waiting to be “discovered.” For her this resulted in a joining of mind and body, an overturning of the moral dualism of mind versus body with which she had been so accustomed, and a return to a more full sense of self. Thus sex as embodied practice constituted for her, and many like her, a transformation of a whole mode-of-life outside the church. Her disaffection and distance from the church was realized in the act of “opening up” to her body and “discovering” its

⁷⁶ Excerpted from posting on exmormon.org.

sexual pleasures, her mind and body working with one another as they jointly, and simultaneously, moved away from Mormonism.

For some ex-Mormons it is not enough to just talk about sex differently. As discussed above, sexual guilt is hard to overcome, and simply talking about it sometimes isn't enough. Instead, the values and ideas that frame sex as pleasurable and natural must be put into practice. As Kopping notes, "The transformation of ideas cannot occur without the surrender to practice which is inscribed in our bodies and only expressible or retraceable through the sensual encounter with the environment and thus through performative praxis" (2002:23).

I often heard ex-Mormons refer to "swinger parties" and living "monogamishly" (a term loosely related to an "open marriage"). There were people in the ex-Mormon circles, I was told, who regularly "dated" each other or routinely "swapped spouses." While the sexual activities I describe here exemplify, from a Mormon perspective, the morally aberrant behavior to be expected of those who drift from the church, I want to provide a counter-interpretation that understands these activities not as indicative of an inherent moral divide between members and former members, but as an integral part of the process of deconversion by which ex-Mormons recreate their lives anew outside of the church.

Thinking about sex as an act of transgression is not just about rebelling against a normative moral order. In the anthropological literature instances of transgressive sex are often discussed as not only challenging to moral boundaries, but reaffirming of them. As Max Gluckman (1963) suggests in reference to the upending of conventional moral hierarchies and categories during "carnival," transgression reinforces the existence of a

normative order by ritually reversing it in highly predictable ways. Ex-Mormon “swingers” did in fact “play” by a set of rules governing the frequency of encounters, the activities allowed (or not), and the need for transparency with all spouses involved, including the imperative that at the end of the night everyone returned to their spouse. Yet, for ex-Mormons, transgressive sex is not about temporarily lifting rules and taboos. It is about challenging those rules directly and spontaneously. It is about two sets of couples meeting at a party, talking about the church and the reasons they left, then progressively flirting, touching, and inviting the other upstairs. In casual meet-ups, threesomes, and swinging, sex is brought down from the divine pedestal upon which it sits in the church, as a jointly dangerous and hallowed experience, and made into a tool for bringing about carnal pleasure. As one man who frequented attended these parties explained to me, “In the church you’re taught that sex is this amazing, heavenly experience, like sitting down at a four star restaurant and having a fifty dollar steak, or whatever. And that’s fine. But that also gets boring, and isn’t really how it works. I think sex should be like eating. Sometimes you want to take your time and go to a fancy restaurant to eat that nice steak. But sometimes you just want to go through the drive through for a nasty, greasy hamburger.”

Descriptions like these point to the messiness of sex outside the church as entailing the potential for experiences of muddled physical and symbolic boundaries between people, of sex as messy, eruptive, informal, and fun that directly challenges Mormon conceptions of sex as purposeful, sacred, dangerous and routine. In this way spouse swapping and the “monogamish” lifestyle allow for a “symbolic inversion” (Babcock 1978), a re-articulation, a realignment of sex outside of the normal parameters

of fidelity and procreation – where God exists. It is about exploring the differences in people's bodies, the way they taste, smell, and move, discovering how each one feels a little different from the others, and how a person's own body feels differently with them. While in the church going about choosing a spouse is done with deliberation and much prayerful consideration in order to determine who a person will be joined with for “time and eternity,” in sex play, ex-Mormon couples are able to circumvent these definitions by experimenting with sex as mutable, its pleasures as autonomous of the morally bounded venue in which they first experienced it as church members. Spouses break off from one another and find other partners for a night - no one person is “meant for you,” each offers their own assortment of tastes and pleasures. When I asked one couple about their “monogamish” lifestyle they equated it to the aesthetics of eating. “For us it’s like eating your favorite flavor of ice cream. You can really like chocolate, but eventually if you eat it every day, you’re going to get tired of it, and want to try some vanilla, or strawberry, or whatever. You’re still going to love chocolate, and can always go back to it, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try everything else available.”

All this is not to say that sex was not a form of physical, psychological, and emotional intimacy for ex-Mormons. Research on hypersexuality often pathologizes “over-active” libidos as an individual’s inappropriately directed attempt to realize some lost intimacy. The focus is on the individual who has lost something and now resorts to aberrant forms of interaction to find it again. But perhaps by framing hypersexuality in medicalized or psychologized terms, it is too easily equated it with a religiously inspired moralism. Embedded within the logic of addiction, pathology, and excess exists an enduring Victorianesque predisposition towards framing hypersexuality in terms of guilt,

shame, and the imperative to control corporeal desires through the individual's application of moral reason - a logic eerily similar to the religious moralism of Mormonism. However, understanding ex-Mormons' sexuality in these terms misses sexuality's immanent sociality, its ability to bridge difference and division, and to resubmerge the individual in the oceanic feeling of being-in-the-world with other people. Religious disenchantment is for ex-Mormons initially an experience of alienation, isolation, and individuation – they've been cut off from their former ontological and social horizons and find themselves alone, “floating” in an existential abyss, fearful of a life and death isolated from the ones they love. Sex, however, has the potential to remedy, or at least, address this particular existential malady. As Bataille (1986) suggests, sex constitutes a temporary dissolution of boundaries and divisions between self and others. In the coital act, culminating in orgasm, one's individuated existence ceases for a moment and is submerged in a tidal force of inter-relationality, an experience which in the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis equates to a return to “the Real,” before the identity, and divisions between self and other have been constructed. In sex, the divisions and discontinuities found in Mormonism are blurred; self and other collapse, and participants reach a new state of communality, of continuity, with each other.

Fantasizing Freedom

I sat with Marissa, her husband and several other couples one evening after an ex-Mormon “secular parenting” meeting about how to teach children morals and values outside of religion. At the meeting, participants discussed strategies for parenting outside

of a religious environment, concerned with how to effectively “inoculate” their kids against the kind of “fantastical thinking” and irrational thought that leads people to become emotionally and intellectually dependent on the church, including the kinds of sexual repression they felt they had been subjected to. The discussion was at first supplemented by and then soon transformed into stories about their own childhoods, their grievances growing up Mormon, and their frustrations with making a life anew outside the church. At a coffee shop where we all convened after the meeting, Marissa asked if anybody wanted to hear about a sexual fantasy she often had. “Yes, yes, yes!” another woman excitedly answered.

In the fantasy I’m bound, gagged, and blindfolded. I’m in my living-room, and all of the lights are on, but I can’t see anything. I’m dressed in sexy lingerie, but it’s been partially ripped off of me. Some of my male friends come in the door while I lay there, but I can’t see them. Each of them takes turns spanking me with these leather crops...they fondle me, and eventually penetrate me. Because I’m blindfolded, I can’t see who or what is going to come next. I’m stuck there, I can’t move or get away, and so I just let them do whatever they want.

At first, I was distressed at the frankness of her spontaneous account - I didn’t know how to react. But the other women in our circle nodded in agreement as she finished her description, eager to talk about their own fantasies. Each one repeated the same basic components of submission, helplessness, violence, and unidentified men.

Through numerous informal conversations with Marissa before and after that day I was able to piece together pieces of her life history that began to shed light on the sources of this fantasy. Marissa grew up a highly sexual person in what she calls an extremely devoted Mormon family. Even at a very young age she remembers being curious about her body and trying to examine her vagina in the shower. However, her

mother always reprimanded her, telling her that was not a place she was allowed to touch. Puberty brought on a heightened sense of self-consciousness as she learned her body was dangerous and potentially sinful, told that her budding breasts risked inciting the licentious gaze of her childhood friends, provoking sinful thoughts of sexual indecency that could lead her and others astray. This became ever more clear at the age of thirteen when an older boy in the neighborhood who was soon leaving on a mission sexually abused her – an abuse that went unacknowledged and unpunished by her parents or church leaders. The imperative to maintain the appearance of priesthood holders’ “righteousness” disguising the reality of “what men really want.”

Marisa says she always felt guilt as the desire to explore her body and sexuality increased as she grew older, leaving her in a perpetual state of self-recrimination. The shame attached to sexual impropriety in the church isolated her from her friends, family, and even herself. "Sex was not something we talked about in our family. Any mention of it was immediately condemned as dirty and sinful. Even asking questions was off limits, learning about sex was like reading an instruction manual for immorality." Several decades later, as an adult woman in the church, Marissa said she was eventually able to repress her sexuality and married. After giving birth to three children in quick succession, she put on weight. Sex with her husband became routine and unsatisfying. "I didn't care anymore. I did a real good job of convincing myself that I just wasn't worth it."

It was only after beginning to question the church at thirty seven years of age that Marissa again began to explore her sexuality again. Yet the guilt remained, leading to reoccurring bouts of depression. When I first met Marissa she said she felt stuck in a state of indecision, not ever going to church, but not being able to feel fully free of it either.

She struggled to shake the nagging feeling that somehow sex really was primarily for making babies and pleasing her husband – never for pleasure. Her sexuality remained a cause for guilt and self-loathing, the thing that kept her bound and entangled with Mormonism.

Often unacknowledged, much less spoken about, sexual fantasies are often thought to exist in the unconscious recesses of our mind, a product of repressed or sublimated desires, only brought into conscious awareness when spurred or triggered by a word, image, interaction or event (Scott 1994). At times bizarre, fantasy allows for a temporary escape from what are felt as the bonds of sexual-restraint in our daily mundane existence. Yet, through fantasy we are also able to reflect on and in some sense unconsciously act out our deepest desires and fears about our bodies and social relationships (Strassberg & Lockerd 1998). As such, fantasy focuses our imaginations onto the feelings and sensations of the erotic encounter – the physical tastes and textures, the relationships between bodies, and our emotional responses to them – and allows us to come to terms with the tensions, frustrations, and unexpressed desires of which they consist. Although typically thought to be highly individual, fantasies can also be thought of as products of shared circumstances, experiences, tensions and conflicts. But what does sexual fantasy do for Marissa? One interpretation might be as follows.

In the fantasy Marissa imagines herself, in an exaggerated and twisted form, as the repressed and alienated Mormon woman she is struggling to overcome in her daily life - a position of utter loss of self-control, having given herself, her autonomy, her individuality, over to the group of men, the priesthood holders, the patriarchal culture that binds her. In their presence she's made powerless and submissive, gagged and

blindfolded, mute and blind. Like her relationship to the men of her youth who lustfully watched her, and the one who abused her, she imagines herself in an adversarial relationship with men, yet still stripped of the ability to anticipate, reproach, or repel her sexual assailants. The guilt and fear she felt as a woman in the church is here as well in hyperbolic form. She's humiliated in the face of countless, anonymous, staring eyes - the men of the church watch her, in an ambiguous confluence of righteous judgment and lustful desire. Yet, her bare flesh is exposed to all that would want it, no longer modestly covered behind the garments or conservative clothing. The guilt of being so exposed manifests in the form of lashes from the leather tassels, her flesh wracked by pain that punishes her for transgressing tabooed moral boundaries, yet also perhaps reflecting a masochistic desire to be forcibly drawn out of the endless cycle of self-reflection and recrimination she's been stuck in since leaving the church.

Yet, for Marissa, fantasy was not just an expression of, but also functioned as a window into these tensions, a way of negotiating and gaining control over her afflictions. Here in the fantasy, rather than giving over to the sexual domination she's been subject to her whole life, she gains control over it, she repossesses the body she feels she lost to the church. Such fantasies provide respite from the unending need to uphold an image of Mormon moral uprightness, both to herself and others, the stuff of which "losing one's body" is made of. Her sex is not tied to a single man, nor is she held morally responsible for its expression only within the confines of a procreatively successful marriage. In the fantasy she is able to imagine her sex as desirable for the pleasure it provides, not the babies it produces. She's made erotically accessible to anybody and everybody, for only moments at a time – not a single man "for time and eternity." There is similarly

something instructive about the fantasy. Her presence in the living room, bound on the ground, brings into stark relief the “reality” of sex which for so long has been covered over by talk of its “sacredness” – its play of dominance and submission, pain and unbridled pleasures. Finally, despite imagining herself bound by her hands and feet, the men don’t control her - submissiveness is not what it seems. In the fantasy her vulnerability is instead made into a tool of seduction. During the time that I knew Marissa she always came across to me as timid and insecure. In leaving the church, she said she felt utterly confused and unsure about life on the outside, sometimes complaining about feeling “overpowered” in her relationship with her husband. I often cringed when her husband would joke about Mormon women’s sheep-like disposition, about their “naivety” and “squeamish” attitude towards sex. But in the fantasy, like a good femme fatale, she entraps men by making herself into the extreme version of that which she believes they have desired all along – a submissive, controlled, woman. She appropriates power by provoking and exposing men’s latent “unrighteousness,” and so effects retribution on them by exposing their own bestial desires.

In the months after this secular parenting meeting Marissa gradually lost weight, and eventually decided to seek a divorce and begin dating other men in the ex-Mormon community. Reflecting on her marriage, she often spoke of her love for her husband as driven primarily by a sense of duty and obligation, rather than passion and excitement. She suggested that her deteriorating relationship had been symptomatic of the ongoing transformation she was undergoing after breaking from the church. “When we got married I didn’t know anything else. I thought it was what I was supposed to do. Now, I see that life doesn’t have to follow one set path.” Above all, I think Marissa sought to

escape “God’s presence” in the bedroom by exploring sexuality outside of her husband’s overpowering symbolic presence as a constant intrusive reminder of God, the church, and the Mormon past she sought to transcend.

For Marissa, veering from the “one set path” laid down for her by the church was accomplished through sexual fantasy and experimentation. The fantasy here was a therapeutic device and imaginary template for reconstructing herself as a woman outside the church. In it she was able to work through her guilt, fears, desires and hopes, condensing them into manageable chunks in the erotic fantasy; and in her imagination, come to terms with their meanings and her means for escape. In talking about fantasy Marissa thereby accomplishes what Lacan refers to as “*la traversee du fantasme*” (the traversing of fantasy), “the subject's assumption of a new position with respect to the Other as language and the Other as desire...a utopian moment beyond neurosis” (Fink 1996:72). For Marissa, fantasy therefore constitutes a therapeutic reclamation of self, a repositioning of self in relation to the forms of desire and control that until now shaped her sexual subjectivity. In Marissa’s fantasy the tensions and ambivalences of her sexual subjectivity are both made visible and provide an imaginative framework through which she was able to begin the process of repossessing her sexuality and life outside the church.

Feeling the Spirit

In the LDS church belief and belonging are predicated on being sensitive to and getting caught up in experiences of “feeling the spirit.” Members describe times in which the

spirit overcame them – while reading scriptures, singing hymns, praying, or when having a particularly meaningful conversation about the gospel. It is a feeling of warmth, calm, peace, tranquility, being “filled with light,” or at times, a feeling of urgency and cautionary counsel in the face of danger. Church members must build their testimonies of the church’s authenticity, developing trust in its teachings and leadership, by attuning themselves to these feelings and listening to the whispers of “that still small voice” speaking to them throughout the day.

Unexpected manifestations of the spirit are made into a routinized practice in what are called “fast and testimony meetings,” when on the first Sunday of every month, congregants devote the weekly sacrament meeting to sharing their testimonies with each other over the pulpit. Men, women, and children stand behind the podium and give tearful renditions of faith confirming experiences, and above all, their absolute knowledge that “this church is true.” “I want my family to know I have a testimony” a man confided to the congregation I occasionally attended one Sunday afternoon. Choking up, he struggled to get the words out as tears streamed down his face. “I shouldn’t be crying like this, but when the spirit comes over you there’s nothing you can do.”

Central to Mormon understandings of “feeling the spirit” is its ability to overwhelm the person. Thus, “feeling the spirit” is effective in bolstering one’s testimony in the church only inasmuch as it is experienced as involuntary. One is made passive to the upwelling of the spirit as it consumes, overpowers, and in doing so, leaves one’s memory and mind undeniably marked by its affective force.

Rather than condemning feelings as merely subjective, in the church feelings are given a uniquely objective character. They alone have the capacity to reveal the sacred

truth of reality as it is experienced in the banality of day to day life. And importantly, it is by learning to read these embodied sensations that a syncretic unity is achieved between the community as a whole and the individuals of which it is composed (Riis & Woodhead 2010). The emotional resonance of feeling the spirit forms the intersubjective backbone to church membership, and solidifies the church as an emotive authority in individual's lives.

Day to day experiences thus become saturated with sacred significance via their ability to provoke an unexpected emotive reaction. As a result, church membership and spiritual knowledge is acquired, and required, not simply through textual or discursive engagement with scriptures and theological principles. But rather, through emotional and affective experiences that become the site and source of spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge via "feeling the spirit," within Mormonism, I argue, is the equivalent of having a carnal knowledge of God. He consumes, overtakes, and overwhelms people, filling them with his love. In these moments of sensuality there is indeed a loss of self and a visceral euphoria as the person comes to know God personally and intimately.

Ex-Mormons, however, describe the church's emphasis on "feeling the spirit" as a kind of emotional colonization of its members' hearts and minds. The church coopts everything they feel, they say, and they're left unable to discern which emotions are their own, and which are the church's. As one man put it, "If you feel happy, joyful, peaceful, the church takes that and claims it comes from God. It then sells it back to you, saying that it was the one that gave it to you in the first place, and that if you want to continue feeling that way you have to keep going to church." Your whole life, he says, becomes a game of chasing those good feelings, thinking that you can only get them through the

church. “It chains you to itself,” he explained, “not literally, of course, but if you grow up thinking anytime you feel the warm and fuzzies it comes from God, then what else are you supposed to think?” For ex-Mormons who grew up in a religious culture in which one is constantly interrogating thoughts and feelings for traces of these heavenly whispers, any stirrings of the soul after leaving the church become immediately suspect. Emotions, rather than constituting the whisperings of a heavenly father, are now looked at with an ambivalent distrust.

An encounter with the spirit

In ex-Mormon support group meetings participants seemed to create a stark division between themselves and their former faith. Mormonism was depicted as cultish, a religion that brainwashed them into a repressive mindset. And they, as ex-Mormons, had now “woken up” from or been able to “see through” it, and now stood on the other side of the rational/irrational divide. The separation between themselves and their former faith seemed complete.

I began to question ex-Mormons’ on-going affective attachments to Mormonism, however, one day as I sat talking with Paul, an ex-Mormon man who I came to rely on for insights into the ex-Mormon experience, on his back porch in a suburban Utah Valley neighborhood. I knew Paul to be an intellectually restless, at times stoic, and hyper-rationalist thinker. He read broadly across various scientific disciplines, his bookshelves filled with texts on philosophy, psychology, astronomy, and sociology, all of which he accumulated since leaving Mormonism. He claimed they were a necessary obsession,

vital in his efforts to make up for all the “brain cells I lost while in the church.” In most of our encounters Paul avoided speaking too intimately about his life in the church, instead taking a distant third-person voice, or talking in vague generalities. I often attempted to engage him about his childhood growing up Mormon in Utah, or raising his own family in the faith over the past fifteen years. During these conversations he was, however, typically aloof, analytical, and even surgical in his intellectual deconstruction of Mormonism.

Perhaps this stemmed from Paul’s antagonistic relationship to his family, with whom he rarely spoke. They had not “disowned” him for leaving the church, but, like most of the ex-Mormon’s I spoke with, had stridently disapproved of his decision. On most occasions, Paul said, they avoided talking about religion altogether when he was around, a tacit silence that Paul keenly felt as passive-aggressive condemnation.

A week before, however, Paul’s brother sent him an email confronting his apostasy. Paul had printed it out in anticipation of my visit that afternoon, handed me a copy, then read aloud:

I want more than anything to shake you until you realize what it is you are doing. I am not sure you are grasping the gravity of your decision and how extremely important this choice is. The consequences will for sure bring you sadness and great suffering at some point. Either when you come to the realization of your mistake, or when you stand before your Maker and have to answer for why you left and led your family and posterity with you. Satan is waging his most fierce war and I am afraid he has deceived you.

Can you really deny the scriptures are true? How can you possibly believe that all the times you have felt the spirit while reading the Book of Mormon means nothing?

The only way you will be able to ever understand and recognize truth again is to "put off the natural man, and yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit" (Mosiah 3:19).

I promise you that if you do this sincerely and with sincere prayer, you can find your way back. I also warn you that if you don't, serious heartache, pain and regret await you. I know you feel the spirit now, as I relay to you these sacred things, testifying to you of their divine truth. Listen to that still small voice, if indeed you can still hear it, and let it guide you back.

Paul initially dismissed the letter, criticizing his brother's attempts to minister to him.

After several minutes, once the initial vitriol had worn off, he confessed that the funny thing was, "I used to be that guy at church who would get all weepy giving my testimony of the church's truth, of Satan's war against the saints, and the need for us to hold fast, by faith, to the iron rod that would lead us to the celestial kingdom." He said it was hard when family "did that to you" because even though he no longer believed, he still knew "what it used to feel like." I asked him what it was like to have those feelings come back, to remember who he used to be. "It's a constant battle" he says, growing contemplative and somber. "It's really hard to deal with. I sometimes think to myself, am I just being duped?" Duped by what, I asked, hesitantly. "Satan. Is this just Satan duping me, pulling me into the dark?" He looks down into his glass of beer, and chuckles nervously. "Then I have another shot, and tell myself, that's stupid!" We went inside the house for a drink. Paul seemed to need a break from our discussion. I did too – I had grown self-conscious, concerned that I would soon be interpolated as the agent of Satan, duping him further down the path into darkness.

When we retook our seats outside I tried to alleviate the tension from before. I asked him what it was like to feel the spirit, to hear its whispers, as his brother had encouraged him to do. I expected him to reply in scientific, if not explicitly psychological and anthropological terms, as he often did. This time, however, he responded slowly, with

a self-conscious chuckle and a wistful pause, and then explained. “It’s really good when you’re in it, when you can shut everything else out and get that warm, comforting feeling inside.” His voice drifted off, he looked away; growing comfortably nostalgic. For these few moments, he seemed relaxed, the memories and emotions spilling out unimpeded - he took pleasure in the temporary abeyance of his typically analytical disposition. I followed along as the spirit seemed to possess our conversation.

All of a sudden, however, he caught himself – his narrative had drifted too far down this path of long lost sentiment. He looked up at me sternly, his eyes again staring harshly into mine - a burning intensity had replaced his brief meditative melancholia. “But there’s no way I could go back,” he blurted, “I would need a lobotomy first” he said, drawing his hand, as if a sharpened blade, across his scalp.

I chuckled at the metaphor. He continued. “Sometimes people get stuck into a way of thinking, no matter what you tell them, they can’t get out of it. I have a cousin that works for the department of corrections in the prison. He told me how sometimes, when an inmate is going berserk they have to Taser them. But afterwards, he says, they wake up a totally different person. They’re calm, clear headed, and in control. Paul gestures in the air, as if holding a Taser. “Sometimes I think that’s what people need, a good jolt to shock them back into their right minds.”

Disenchanted emotions

What does it mean for ex-Mormons to find these emotions, these experiences of “feeling the spirit” as a threat in their post-Mormon lives? As discussed so far, the intimate,

corporeal experience of feeling the spirit burning in one's chest generates a particular aura of truth and authenticity of the church for its members. After leaving the church, however, for ex-Mormons these emotions are re-constituted, no longer as affective assurances of truth, but as the embodied focal point of anxiety in the midst of disaffection. Despite outright rejecting the church's teachings about God and the spirit, at any time the spirit may still whisper to them, planting seeds of doubt in their intellectual rejection of Mormonism.

In his essay on "The Uncanny," Freud (1919) writes that things considered uncanny (*unheimlich*), are those which arise unexpectedly, which lead us back to something that was once very familiar but have sense been denied, repressed, or concealed. They are only *unheimlich* now because they were once *heimlich*, that is, capable of "arousing a sense of peaceful pleasure and security." "Everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (1919:517). Importantly, for Freud, the uncanny was not simply that which evoked feelings of uncertainty or confusion. The fear and terror one feels in the face of the uncanny was rather indicative of the return, the exposure, of a formerly concealed anxiety.

What happened to Paul in our conversation? What did Paul's allusion to lobotomies and shock therapy reveal about the potency of feelings to disrupt his secular disenchantment?

While in the church, many ex-Mormons say they passionately fought to keep the weight of facts and reasons proving the church not true under control by seeking out the spirit almost obsessively, until one day, their "shelf broke" and all the questions and

doubts came tumbling down, and their faith was gone. No longer seeking truth in the spirit, they turned to science as a dis-embodied source of objective knowledge.

Remembering the embodied state of feeling the spirit had perhaps reinstated an all too familiar cognitive dissonance in Paul. Perhaps his dispassionate estrangement from Mormonism was not as complete as he thought.

Since Paul's disaffection several years prior to our conversation, he had labored to expel any lingering attachment to the church. In our discussions he frequently lashed out at church leaders, saying they "stole" thirty years of his life, and had become leaders of an "immoral institution," "hell bent" on creating a gerontocratic theocracy. He repeatedly challenged them in our conversations, quoting their speeches from the bi-annual church conferences held in Salt Lake City, and dismissing Mormons' beliefs as backward and naïve. Science, he said, had now replaced mysticism as the guiding principle in his life.

One fears the uncanny, it is argued, because confronting it threatens to reveal one's illicit desires that have been carefully and systematically denied out of fear of castration by a powerful super-ego. For Paul, it is that feeling of intimate unity with the spirit that had become the unconscionable desire in a now thoroughly rationalized and "Enlightened" world he sought to inhabit, a world in which he was free to make up his own mind, rather than heed to the promptings of his heart. Feeling the spirit again threatened to return Paul to a state of confusion, dissonance, and indecision he had been in before his "shelf broke." It threatened to return Paul to a position of submission to Mormonism, to re-subject him to the sense of being inhabited, possessed, and penetrated by a spiritual force that took away his autonomy and freedom.

This allusion to a lobotomy, it seemed to me at the time, was not a hypothetical

condition that if met would allow him to return to the church. Rather, it was a fantastical attempt, a symbolic self-procedure, employed in that moment to cull the affective hold the church had, even after all these years, over his memories and emotions. All the feelings his science, his philosophy, his intellectualization had been at pains to keep at bay had unexpectedly faltered in those brief moments, necessitating the fantasy of an actual lobotomy to again wrest control over their uninvited return. Amidst the ambiguity and ambivalence in that moment, Paul was forced to make a choice. He could follow the path back into confusion, or he could appeal to a techno-scientific intervention, and fantasize about the relief a lobotomy or shock therapy might grant him. In that moment of dissonance he made a decision; he reconceived the emotions which unexpectedly welled up within him into a force that threatened to invade him and thus had to be excised and removed from his body via surgical intervention.

A week later I came across one of Paul's posts on an online ex-Mormon message board. He said he had been in a conversation with a woman who was gifted with intuition, who had the ability to "feel energy." She worked as a freelance energy healer and had been seeking clients in the ex-Mormon community. Paul responded to her request with scathing indignation.⁷⁷

The emotions Paul experienced during our interview seemed to greatly unnerve him, even scare him. In the wake of Paul's disenchantment from Mormonism, he had

⁷⁷ Psychoanalytic theory suggests that a reaction formation emerges as a response to anxiety producing or unacceptable emotions. As a defensive reaction, the subject responds to the threatening situation by exaggerating the directly opposing tendency in an effort to conceal its persistent, yet unconscious existence. In a clinical setting, a reaction formation would be suspected where exaggeration, compulsiveness or inflexibility are observed. As a type of reactive formation, in a phobia, Freud argued, "The person wants what he fears. He is not afraid of the object; he is afraid of the wish for the object. The reactive fear prevents the dreaded wish from being fulfilled."

turned to a highly intellectualized form of atheism informed by scientific detachment and objectivity. They worked, for the most part, aside from a brief moment in which their therapeutic effects broke down and more drastic interventions – in the form of lobotomies and shock therapy - became necessary. But now Paul had had time to recover from this brief moment of weakness.

Paul now projected all of the angst of our previous encounter onto this woman who could “feel energy.” “You think there is “energy” somewhere *out there*? What are you, a Jedi? You think you can actually control this energy?” he asked. Where was it, how do you find it, he wanted to know. “Isn’t that just your mind, your emotions you’re feeling? Isn’t that just a mood?”

His diatribe then slipped into instruction on enlightened reasoning. People in the church attempt to do the essentially the same thing with emotions, he said, and it’s dangerous:

Emotions can make us accept things we've no business accepting. Just because they claim ‘feeling’ of the truth doesn't make it valid. Facts are facts. Feelings are bullshit. Saying you ‘feel’ something and that makes it true, means nothing. Your emotions may be very real to you. They may even be very important, but they come from inside you. My atheism certainly includes all those human concepts and emotions as real things. I just realize that they aren't coming from outside us. We don't have a soul that is separate from our physical bodies. We have as many neurons in our heads as there are stars in the Milky Way. All the feelings and emotions we have are supported by the real, physical construct of the brain.

I couldn’t help but feel that he was lecturing, not just to his online audience, but to himself in our conversation just a few days prior. He was interpolating that part of himself that was tempted by the spirit as an imaginary audience, re-instantiating reason and rationality as the basis of truth.

Here Paul sought to overturn the spiritual logic of “feeling the spirit” by levying a scientifically informed sense of the body. He inverted the sensation from one of being overwhelmed by an *external* divine source, to one that is better understood as an *internal* eruption of subjective feelings. By relocating emotions “inside the person,” and by framing them as a neurophysiological reaction, the relationship between the body, mind, and emotions was reconceived as an immanently material one. That is, the body, its sentiments and perceptions could thereby be reconceived as scientifically verifiable, predictable, and controllable.

Emotion’s power to envelope believers within a sacred reality stems from its individual, personal, and corporeal immediacy. In the wake of radical disenchantment, therefore, individual emotions, no matter how vivid, must be reconceived no longer as an undeniable basis of truth, but as a continuously suspect and dangerous phenomenon that can be subjected to the sterilizing power of rational thought.

By conceptualizing emotions as stemming from one’s own psyche, and locating them within the neurological processes of the human brain, ex-Mormons mitigate the power emotions, and by extension the church, have over them. Through the biologization of spirituality, the embodied experience of feeling an emotion (e.g. guilt, levity, joy, or sorrow), and the anxiety it provokes for ex-Mormons outside the church, can then be understood not as the product of a capricious God, but as immanently internal, private experiences that can be effectively controlled by employing enlightened reasoning.

A scientifically informed atheism gives ex-Mormons an explanatory framework to apply to their own and each other’s emotions. And it is through culling the importance of emotional experience that ex-Mormons sever the links with Mormon life-world they

formerly inhabited. It is through re-conceptualizing emotions and their feelings in the body, via a scientifically informed atheism, that ex-Mormons negotiate their subjection to Mormonism's institutional, social, and psychological control, a control that stems not from explicit coercion, but from tacit immersion into a sacred reality made intimately real through feelings. It is how they demystify and distance themselves from a formerly sacred sense of self and its entanglement in a religious community they are at pains to extricate themselves from.

As I've argued in this chapter, many ex-Mormons find that their mind and bodies continue to feel inhabited by Mormonism, even long after they have rejected its teachings. Whether in the form of sexual guilt, or a predisposition to feeling the spirit, ex-Mormons struggle to disentangle themselves from the church. This in fact is often a protracted process of working through long internalized habits of thought and feeling. Deconversion takes place, then, as much through a reconceptualization of emotions and sensations as it does through rational argument. And is, in essence, a reconfiguration of one's relationship to oneself and one's body that is at times aided through acts of sexual experimentation and the use of atheist sensibilities.

Ch 4: Stigmatizing Apostasy

In Mormonism the scriptural story of “Korihor” is often referenced as a model for understanding those who oppose God’s one true church. The story of Korihor tells of an unruly atheist in ancient times who preaches against belief in God and so brings wickedness into the church and “leads away the hearts of many.” In retaliation, church leaders forcibly brought Korihor before the high priest where he was struck dumb and blind, lest he “be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction.” Forced to beg from house to house for food, Korihor was eventually “run upon and trodden down” in the streets “until he was dead,” while the people witnessing his downfall were warned to “speedily repent, lest the same judgements...come unto them.” Such is the end of him “who perverteth the ways of the Lord,” scriptures teach (Alma 30).

The practice of identifying other such metaphorical “Korihors” is routinized in Sunday School classes where the scriptural story is used to encourage church members to identify “possible sources of such false teachings today,” and to stridently avoid such sources of doubt and confusion. This is further reinforced during “temple recommend interviews” when church Bishops ask members if they “affiliate with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” as a requirement for gaining access to the temple. In such a religious environment, a hostile response to apostates' can be explained apologetically in terms of adherence to religious teachings of maintaining personal righteousness and faithfulness.

Antipathy towards the non- and formerly religious is perhaps as old as religion itself. Accusations of atheism, apostasy, and heresy have, and continue today, to be

leveled at those who are thought to pose a threat to dominant religious ideologies (Wilson 2004). Such accusations are intended to mark social, cultural, and religious boundaries when these divisions are thought to be in threat of eroding. In these communities, operationalizing prejudice towards the nonreligious is touted as a moral imperative necessary in order to ensure the continued vitality of the faith and the faithfulness of its adherents.

For example, in much of the American population's collective imagination, the United States is a country founded upon religious teachings and home to an overwhelmingly religious majority, where the idea of “religious freedom” has been ensconced in a constitutional amendment legislating for each and every faith’s right to religious expression, unfettered by governmental or civil persecution (Chaves 2012). This desire for a flourishing pluralistic landscape of religious diversity is indeed visible in tax incentives for religious organizations, laws protecting religious subjects’ rights to freedom of religious practice, and the ubiquity of religious motifs in public, in the form of prayers, imprints of “In God We Trust,” and religious holidays (Beneke 2006).

Because the United States has historically been thought of as a religious nation, its model of citizenry and full personhood defined by individuals’ incorporation into a religious collective, those outside religion face a unique set of stereotypes (Cragun et al, 2012). The non-religious person is often stigmatized as anti-authoritarian, amoral, angry, unpredictable, and not to be trusted. When asked who they would least likely vote for in a democratic election, contemporary Americans say they are more likely to disregard differences in race, religion, gender, or sexuality, than they are to overlook a candidate’s lack of faith in God (Hammer et al. 2012). Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2006) report

Americans as a whole harbor more antipathy towards atheists than for Muslims, Jews, racial or ethnic minority groups, recent immigrants, or homosexuals, to such an extent that they constitute the contemporary "Other" against which American moral and cultural membership is constructed. As a result, as sociologist Ryan Cragun (2012) contends, discrimination against the non-religious abounds, from tacit shunning, to loss of employment, and even acts of physical violence.

While previous studies of the nonreligious have addressed instances of secular identity formation (Ledrew 2013; Smith 2010), collective lobbying efforts and identity politics (Kettell 2013) in the United States, and globally (Asad 2003), the micropolitics of transitioning out of religion have not been studied in a highly localized and culturally specific context. For ex-Mormons living in Utah, leaving the church is not about organizing against school prayer or lobbying against the use of "In God we Trust" on American currency. Rather it is a decision made with much more immediate and tangible concerns, one that must be weighed against the harsh criticisms, stigmas, and stereotypes they may receive as "apostates" from friends and family, neighbors, colleagues, employers, and fellow students. As most soon find, their decision to leave the church in Utah unwillingly pits them against a religious community that dominates political, cultural, and social discourse in their homes and larger community, a condition that often leads to experiences of social alienation, isolation, and vulnerability.

Within Mormonism, having a knowledge of the church's "truth" and then rejecting it throws the very foundation of reality upon which truth rest into question, an issue made even more problematic because those who reject "truth" were at one time faithful church members, believing and worshipping alongside everybody else. Because

of this, the phenomenon of apostasy invokes anxiety in the church community, prompting the need to formulate explanations about how and why someone could go from faithful church member to nonbelieving apostate, all without challenging the religious truths upon which church membership rests. From the viewpoint of faithful church members, apostates' sudden loss of belief must be re-framed with a faith promoting explanation that upholds the very reality from which they have departed, while shielding church members from facing the possibility that the church just may in fact not be true.

In this chapter I address the various stigmas and stereotypes circulating within Mormonism around the issue of apostasy. I first became aware of this issue when discussing my research with faithful church members who would, in the course of conversation, offer up their own explanations of the reasons people “really” leave the church, and what happens to them once on the outside. Here I trace the various causes and consequences of stigmas and stereotypes for both church members and ex-Mormons. I first review the various reasons offered by church members and contextualize these within contemporary Mormonism's bid for popular acceptance in mainstream American society. Here I interpret the stereotypes circulating around apostasy as part of a culturally patterned discursive defense mechanism for allaying anxieties associated with entertaining doubt or questioning church teachings. I then describe the effects these stigmas have on ex-Mormons as they make their way out of the church.

Stereotyping Apostasy

When I asked church members why they thought people left the church they would often first attribute people's disaffection to an imagined lack of faith. Although, to them

apostates' *lack* of faith was not the result of undergoing a process whereby they *lost* their faith. Rather, apostates were imagined to have "never really had a testimony" in the first place. Anyone who had truly "felt the spirit" and "gained a testimony" would not willfully deny it, I was told. Their disaffection was simply a part of the process of the "chaff" being separated from the "wheat."

According to many ex-Mormons I spoke with, church members are acutely aware of the fragility of their testimonies, and therefore must deny the fact that apostates once also had a testimony as a means of spiritual self-preservation. As one ex-Mormon man told me, "If they admit that someone can have a testimony and then lose it, it means whatever it is they're basing their testimony on, however secure they think theirs is, it can be potentially destroyed as well." Furthermore, if the dissolution of a steadfast testimony is imagined as not only possible, but actively afflicting those around them, it must then be assumed that there is something that can potentially overpower the force of one's own spiritual witness. Imagining apostates as never having had a testimony reassures members that their own testimonies are instead uniquely impervious. In the same way, denying apostates a testimony pre-emptively and retroactively invalidates apostates' former membership in the church, after which members can effectively discredit any seemingly reasonable criticisms the apostate may voice. The circular logic of discrediting apostates is complete - only those who have had a testimony can understand what being a member of the church is like, therefore, because apostates never truly believed, their criticisms of Mormonism can be readily dismissed as uninformed.

An especially acute example of this is seen in the response I received when I once explained my research to a group of Mormon students at the university I taught at in

Utah. In the course of the conversation, during which I attempted to explain to them that I worked with a group of “ex-Mormons” who *chose* to leave the church, they immediately reframed apostasy as stemming not from a conscious decision, but rather from some earlier transgression for which they were “excommunicated.” In describing ex-Mormons as having been institutionally excommunicated, my students retroactively conferred a moral transgression on the apostate, transferred any semblance of agency to the church leadership, and abrogated the religion itself of any culpability for their loss of faith, all in one fell swoop. Ascribing the aura of “excommunication” onto the apostate further allowed for the issue of former members’ disillusionment to be safely explained as something other than simply their intellectual rejection of church teachings, effectively dismissing further discussion of apostates’ specific grievances or reasons for leaving. Importantly, such ascriptions render apostates spiritually innocuous to believing members; imagining them as having been excommunicated preempts any further introspection into possible reasons someone might want to leave the church, thereby allaying the possibility of introducing doubt into the believer’s mind.

The fact is though, many, if not most, ex-Mormons had a strong testimony before leaving the church, and very few are officially excommunicated. Friends and family members of apostates remember their loved one’s testimonies and find it hard to accept that they were either lying about their testimony while a member, or were now willfully denying it.

In church lesson materials church members learn that no one leaves the church because they have valid questions or concerns about its teachings, morals, or leadership. Since the church’s truth is unquestionable, and its teachings beyond critique, disaffection

is *ipso facto* thought to arise from someplace else. Reading church publications, such as this one found in the *Ensign* magazine, members learn to identify apostasy as the surface manifestation of a deeper personal deficiency of integrity, morality, or obedience:

Apostasy frequently results when a person commits serious sin but does not repent. To silence his conscience or justify his sinful actions, the individual moves away from the truth, looking for imperfections in others or questioning Church doctrine with which he no longer agrees. Conflicts between Church members can also lead to apostasy. Some individuals begin to think the Church is not true when they feel that a leader did not treat them well. They become offended and, without considering what they are losing, they stray from the Church...I testify that we can avoid the mists of darkness that lead to personal apostasy by repenting of our sins, overcoming offense, eliminating faultfinding, and following our Church leaders (Zivic 2009:27).

According to this logic, apostates did not repent of a sin, or otherwise fell short in a number of prescribed religious practices, including prayer and scripture study. In my discussions with church members I indeed heard them frequently claim that people leave because “they were offended” by what someone said or did to them, including an unkind word or criticism from a fellow parishioner, a disagreement with a church leader, or an offense taken to a gospel principle they personally disagreed with, any one of which could have “offended” the person who spitefully chose to leave.

Church members likewise often accuse apostates of having committed a myriad of more serious sins which they felt embarrassment or guilt over, including illicit sexual affairs, infidelity, pornography addiction or addiction to drugs and alcohol, all of which I heard expressed in the form of rumors, gossip, or outright slander. Instead of repenting for these sins, the logic goes, the apostate decided to leave the church so they would not have to face their own depravities.

This logic not only created a moral hierarchy within which church members positioned themselves as superiors, it also served as a slanderous means by which church members could disenfranchise and exclude apostates away from the community. Such stereotypes also function similar to the logic of paranoia, in which a “hidden” or “veiled” reason (usually from a source that is considered all-powerful, and thus feared) for the state of events is always assumed to be existing just out of view, yet perpetually imagined, described, and fantasized about. One ex-Mormon man could indeed feel the projections directed at him, describing the effect of this circulation of moral stereotypes and gossip as if “standing in the middle of this awful narrative that’s being constructed around you that you’re powerless to fight against.” Important to recognize here is the extent to which church members understand people’s rejection of church teachings as the manifestation of hidden and unspoken transgressions that have long been harbored, a topic I explore in more detail below.

Attaching such stigmas to apostates allows for the creation of a category of absolute otherness into which disbelievers fall, and simultaneously articulates and reinforces a normative moral order built upon strict adherence to church teachings. Stories of apostates typically depict them as stricken with unbearable grief and misery, left to lead an isolated and forlorn existence. Such stories indeed reinforce Mormonism’s moral and social boundaries through a negative depiction of life outside of the church as filled with “darkness, ignorance, doubt, pain, sorrow, grief, mourning, unhappiness; [with] no person to condole within the hour of trouble, no arm to lean upon in the day of calamity, no eye to pity when they are forlorn and cast down” (Young 1997: 78–84). They likewise constitute a collective form of “downward comparison” in which the

Mormon community collectively inflates their feelings of happiness and contentment, making whatever grievances or frustrations they may have about life *inside* the church seem pale in comparison to the utter destitution of life *outside* of it.

Accusations of apostasy are indeed an effective method of boundary keeping, as they tacitly reinforce orthodoxy and obedience among the church ranks, serving as cautionary examples meant to discourage others who may deign to doubt. James, a forty year old man who left the church while serving on his ward bishopric, described the fear he felt from what he described as a partially unconscious awareness of his own potential alterity. "Growing up, you hear how apostates are talked about...you see how they are treated...As if they're these monstrous creatures whose lives are full of loneliness and sadness...You really internalize this fear of becoming like them, because I think deep down you realize that everyone around you could turn on you too if you start to step out of line."

In such a fear laden psychosocial environment, learning to avoid apostates becomes paramount, not out of an immediate fear of life and limb, but rather out of fear that their spiritual affliction may be contagious, that they have the capacity to turn a happy believer into a social pariah. James's fears were indeed realized when he left the church. He soon found that his former ward members "avoided me like the plague." A model member up until his apostasy, James provoked a mix of anxiety and confusion in those with whom he once had intimate relationships. At the grocery store, in his neighborhood, and at his son's youth baseball games, he was either outright ignored, or only engaged in curt conversation. "It's almost like they think they'll catch what I have if they're around me too much," he confided. The fear of apostates can thereby be

understood, in some ways, as a communal defense mechanism that stems from each individual members' tacit awareness that the group of which they are now happily a part of may one day turn on them too - that apostates may spread the affliction which has stricken them, putting the community as a whole at risk. "Remember," an apostle of the church once counseled a group of BYU students, "when you see the bitter apostate, you do not see only an absence of light, you see also the presence of darkness. Do not spread disease germs" (Packer 1981).

Having lost the constraining power of religion to "uphold" religious virtues and reason, the disease of apostasy is indeed portrayed as an affliction of moral and spiritual pathology and insanity. From the perspective of the faithful church members, there is in fact a certain madness to apostasy. "Let a man or woman who has received much of the power of God, visions and revelations, turn away from the holy commandments of the Lord, and it seems that their senses are taken from them, their understanding and judgment in righteousness are taken away, they go into darkness, and become like a blind person who gropes by the wall...They have become darkened in their minds and everything has become a mystery to them."⁷⁸ Amidst life's tumultuous seas, the church is allegorized as a ship guiding its passengers to calmer waters. In contrast, members are taught that the apostate is he who foolishly abandons the ship of safety to his own demise. "Why do people apostatize?" the prophet Brigham Young once wrote. "You know we are on the Old Ship Zion. We are in the midst of the ocean. A storm comes on, and, as sailors say, she labors very hard. I am not going to stay here, says one; I don't

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believe this is the Ship Zion. But we are in the midst of the ocean. I don't care, I am not going to stay here. Off goes the coat, and he jumps overboard. Will he not be drowned? Yes. So with those who leave this Church. It is the Old Ship Zion, let us stay in it" (Young 1997:85). From church members' perspectives the apostate has fundamentally lost their bearings, their decisions and actions thought to be incomprehensible, outside the bounds of reason, and thus made into the very embodiment of a somehow less human "other." This on the one hand effectively puts life in the church on a pedestal, granting to those who adhere to its teachings the promise of moral and rational clarity. On the other hand, however, in projecting madness onto apostates, Mormonism, a restorationist religion often denounced for its own 'irrational' and heretical teachings and practices, effectively reverses and channels the stigmas that have historically been attached to it.

In order to maintain all of these spiritually ameliorative explanations, stereotypes and projections, apostates must therefore be held apart from the church community, like Korihor, their voices silenced so as not to disturb the narrative being constructed around them. As a result ex-Mormons often described themselves as "living in the shadows" of the church, experiencing everyday moments of exclusion and avoidance. They became someone who is talked about, but not talked to, at least not when it comes to the topic of their decision to leave the church.

Although filled with inner turmoil and angst as they felt their faith in the church slip away, friends and family seemed indifferent to ex-Mormons' experiences, treating it as a topic of shame that was best avoided. Trying to explain the real reasons they disaffected – problems they had with church history, doctrine, or theology - would be met with blank stares or outright dismissals. 'Whatever you do, just don't talk to your

siblings' one woman's father told her when she came out to him about her disaffection. Others were simply no longer invited to family functions, and when they were, told to keep quiet about religious topics. "We can still have a relationship, it just won't be about religion," apostates are frequently told.

Whether out of fear that their apostate loved one would bring up challenging information, or, reflecting church members' disappointment or social embarrassment at their loved one's disaffection, I often heard church members express desire for apostates to "just be quiet about it" or to "keep it private," frowning at those who publicized their apostasy in conversation or discussing it on internet message boards. While faith in the church was to be publically promoted and a cause for collective celebration, as manifested in the thousands of missionaries circling the globe or the millions of dollars spent on church advertising and PR campaigns, loss of faith was to be secluded away and hidden, "dealt with by individuals and their families" as one church member told me, "not put in the spotlight. Because, you know, it really isn't something to be proud of."

Apostates can therefore be understood as a culturally specific form of "bogeyman" emerging within Mormonism. As such, they serve a particular set of functions in the life of the religious community, including as a litmus test for orthodoxy, while tales of their moral failings maintains social and moral order among the faithful by exemplifying the consequences of crossing the boundary into disbelief. As an object of mythical elaboration, their presence is ubiquitous. "There have always been, in every age of the church, those who have been opposed to the principles of virtue...and have been the enemies of truth" Joseph Smith taught in the church's early years.

Gordon and Michael

Stigmas are indeed used to legitimize and reinforce hostilities and distance between groups of people. But the fact that apostates become stigmatized for their loss of faith reflects more than church members' disappointment that a friend or family member is no longer counted among their religious brethren. Stigmas must also be understood for the way in which they express, in disguised fashion, deeper tensions circulating within Mormonism itself. That is, they function as projective fantasies through which unacceptable desires, tendencies, or conflicts emerging in the course of life in the church can be expelled and rendered safe.

Gordon's lifelong friend Michael left the church several months prior to my research. Gordon and Michael had shared a life together in the church starting from when they were young boys passing sacrament together at church, and though they were the same age, Gordon said he had always looked up to Michael as an older brother. However, Michael had recently begun questioning his testimony and eventually left the church entirely, along with his wife and two children. The news of Michael's apostasy confounded and disturbed Gordon, and he initially refused to believe that Michael's decision was final. Pressed to accept the truth of Michael's apostasy, Gordon said he eventually "cut ties" with Michael, explaining that "he wasn't who I thought he was anymore."

In our conversations Gordon talked about Michael with great hostility, repeating the accusations of pride, "taking offense," or moral corruption that were often levied

against apostates as presumed causes for disaffection. He accused Michael of having strayed from the path to happiness by following the “false teachings of the world,” of having had his testimony undermined by reading anti-Mormon literature which subsequently led him to question the prophet, the scriptures, and the entire religious edifice he had grown up within. Similarly, Gordon accused Michael of having committed moral sins, how he now routinely broke the “Word of Wisdom,” a religious proscription of alcohol, tobacco, and coffee, and had “probably had problems with the law of chastity.” Gordon told me he “wouldn’t be surprised if I found out he had been unfaithful” to his wife.

Yet despite all of this talk *about* him, Gordon had not talked directly to Michael in months, refusing to call or visit, and explicitly avoiding Michael’s attempts to contact him. As far as I know, Gordon had never asked Michael why it was, in fact, that he decided to leave the Church. In the first few months after Michael’s disaffection Gordon said he had tried to hold onto the relationship by sending Michael emails and text messages warning him of the consequences of apostasy and the “path to destruction” down which he was headed. In so doing, Gordon held Michael responsible for their loss of friendship, explaining that Michael “chose that life” and thereby drew to a close the life they once shared together.

Gordon accused Michael of harboring irrational hostilities for the church and for him, describing Michael as angry and vindictive, and thereby unwilling to maintain a relationship. Yet it was Gordon’s anger towards Michael which stood out to me, an anger that seemed at times to betray a more fundamental feeling of fear directed at Michael. When discussing Michael’s apostasy, Gordon’s voice became erratic, as if at pains to

eclipse and silence Michael's own reasons for leaving and what he had found in "life outside the church." Indeed, Gordon's rhetoric seemed to defensively keep Michael's spectral presence at bay. But why should this be necessary? Despite professing a need for incorporating the Christ-like qualities of love, kindness, humility, and brotherly kindness in his everyday life, why was Gordon unable and/or unwilling to mend his relationship with Michael the apostate?

Gordon was a "dyed in the wool" Mormon. Having been "born in the covenant" his entire world was defined by his participation in the Mormon Church. While I had met older generations of church members who seemed at ease in their faith, responding to my questions about why some people leave the fold with a shrug and the complacent suggestion that "it's not for everyone," Gordon was defensive and argumentative about the need for strict adherence to church teachings, saying that "lazy" or "rebellious" members should "either fall in line or get out." There was an aggressive emphasis on internal purity and obedience in Gordon's stance, one that was echoed in the larger church.

However, as I grew acquainted with Gordon, I became aware of the various ways in which his identity as a Mormon was routinely challenged and made insecure by various cross-cutting identifications. One of the successes of Mormonism's agenda of cultural and political incorporation into mainstream American life has been its transformation from a marginalized religious sect to the very embodiment of "American wholesomeness," while American patriotism has in many ways become coterminous with faithful church membership. Relatedly, LDS Church leaders' rhetoric has increasingly emphasized Mormonism's harmony with wider Christianity as the *de facto* civil religion

of American society, recently releasing a statement on its website asserting its “respect for diversity of faiths” stating that “Members of the [LDS] church do not view fellow believers around the world as adversaries or competitors, but as partners in the many causes for good in the world.” This, coupled with Mormonism's ongoing missionary activities in disparate parts of the globe suggests that in the contemporary Mormon Church the historic divide between the Saints and the Gentiles is increasingly being overlooked in favor of a more global, pan-ethnic, and ambiguously “Christian” orientation. In many ways these trends are part of a larger process of secularization in Utah and among the church membership and the dissolution of historical moral and cultural boundaries. The cultural environment of Utah has shifted in recent decades, as Utah now boasts over half a dozen craft breweries, a burgeoning downtown night scene in Salt Lake City, and has undergone tremendous economic growth and cultural diversification as Utah’s tax code has invited a host of corporations to relocate there. These developments have in many ways been celebrated by the LDS Church, as they provide jobs and financial investment opportunities for the many church owned companies operating in the state. Yet, they have also sped Mormonism's acculturation into mainstream American culture and introduced church members to the pleasures and temptations of “the world.” The traditional boundaries constructed between insider and outsider wearing thin as a result.

Additionally, Gordon at times complained that church members were losing sight of what made them “distinctive.” Like many church members, Gordon’s career preempted various professional identifications that tacitly challenged, or are at least paralleled his religious faith and church membership. Gordon had attended university out

of state receiving a degree in philosophy, an academic discipline he said sometimes challenged his beliefs. Gordon often impressed upon me the need for Mormons to place church membership above these competing responsibilities, to remember that they are first and foremost Latter-day Saints and to not get caught up in conflicts that detract from their responsibilities as church members, and often felt disillusioned by disputes between church members over issues “not related to the gospel,” citing the need for intra-group harmony and unity.

The dissolution of these historical boundaries between “the church” and “the world” has indeed impacted how individuals experience church membership. Gordon was aware of the growing presence of temptations in the world, often citing the “filth” he saw on television and in the store fronts he passed while walking the streets of downtown Salt Lake City, the urban environment serving up to him that which he on some level desired, yet had to maintain his distance from as sources of “sin.” At the same time, however, Mormonism has begun to adapt to and capitalize on this increasingly thin divide, as seen in the numbers of Mormon friendly establishments that have cropped up selling alcohol free “mocktails,” clothing stores specializing in “sexy-modest” wear, and an increasing emphasis on middle-class consumption as a model and testament of receiving divine blessings.

Like many other church members, Gordon viewed being a Mormon not only as a matter of “belief,” but rather one of group membership. A person’s personal conviction of religious truth is in some ways less paramount to authentic membership than is the obligation to stay obedient and loyal to the church community and the authoritative institution of priesthood leaders standing “at the head of the church.” Gordon took his

devotion to “following the counsel” of his priesthood leaders seriously, dutifully accepting whatever “callings” were assigned to him, even when they seemed inconsequential as when he was assigned to work as ward librarian. Despite his outward obedience, however, Gordon seemed to grow frustrated with his inability to enter the upper echelons of church leadership, whether in securing a calling in his ward’s bishopric or at the larger stake level. His identification with church leaders’ authority, power, and sanctity, thus in large part went unrealized, his progress in the church bureaucracy inexplicably stymied and increasingly incongruous with the status he felt afforded to him in his professional career. Yet, though he felt overlooked, he always followed up such complaints by reasserting his confidence in his priesthood leaders’ wisdom and ultimate authority in the matter, resigning himself to a state of annoyed complacency, unable or unwilling to criticize his priesthood leaders directly or out loud.

Gordon’s family life was equally frustrating. He got married when he was twenty two years old to a woman he met at university shortly after returning from his mission in Brazil. His wife was his first and only sexual partner, and had quickly birthed four children in the first seven years of their marriage, before, as he said, she became uninterested in sex. They indeed seemed to have a rather lackluster relationship, one held together primarily by convenience and duty rather than more romantic notions of passionate love. Despite frequently repeating stereotypes about apostates as depraved, Gordon at times seemed fascinated by their sexual practices. I in fact indirectly provided him an outlet for this curiosity as he often questioned me about my marriage to an ex-Mormon, a line of inquiry I often found uncomfortable entertaining in light of his prior accusations of ex-Mormons as hyper-sexualized and “unable to control themselves.” His

curiosity thus at times seemed characterized by a fantasy driven imagining of the kinds of pleasures that awaited those who left the church. “I can’t imagine what would happen to me if I didn’t have the church” Gordon pondered once while talking about Michael’s life outside Mormonism, “I’d probably fall into all kinds of sex and drugs...probably like Michael is doing.”

As I later learned, Gordon had experienced his own crisis of faith several years before. He had begun questioning church teachings after perusing an “anti-Mormon” website. Then, once when he broached the subject with his wife, she “freaked out,” warning him in no uncertain terms of her intolerance for such questions. Fearing the repercussions of entertaining his doubts any further, Gordon summarily re-devoted himself to a life of spiritual piety and faithfulness.

In psychoanalytic language, projection is the act of transferring one’s own thoughts or feelings onto others as a means of becoming aware of their presence without feeling the accompanying distress of knowing that these thoughts and feelings are in fact our own. Externalizing them onto others further allows for them to be assessed and criticized while distancing ourselves from a conscious awareness of our own dysfunctions (Newman et al. 1997). Having been socialized into a particular culture, with its associated values, norms, and rules, the superego warns of punishment if the dysfunction is found to be internal (Erikson 1973). In response, the ego redirects those unwelcome thoughts and feelings to an external, more acceptable place, often found in other people. In transforming neurotic or moral anxiety into “reality anxiety” it is thus rendered less harmful and more easily managed (Freud 1937). In the interest of

maintaining internal coherency, projection allows the ego to externalize potential sources of dissolution into the outside world.

The narrative stigmas surrounding apostates are indeed, as I am arguing here, a form of projective fantasy which functions in Mormonism as a means of mitigating anxieties provoked by the church's continuing incorporation into mainstream American society and the conflicts that ensue. The construction of such narratives is key to understanding the logic of apostasy from the viewpoint of faithful members, as it points to a pattern of moral projection taking place between church members and apostates in which members' own illicit desires and fears are transferred onto those who leave.

First, while stigmatizing apostates allows for a reinscription of moral boundaries and acts as an expression of individual and group adherence to a normative moral order, there is something more at work than only the renunciation of disobedience and moral sins. As seen in Gordon's case, I found that stigmatizing apostates was an expression of Mormonism's anxiety over the dissolution of the historical boundaries between the Mormon church and Christianity and America that had once provided a sense of distinct collective identity. The apostate has become the negated "Other" - a position of alterity long held by the "gentiles," those in the "abominable religions," and the American government and society as a whole - against which Mormon cultural and religious identity can be constructed and defined. Now, however, it is the apostate who serves as the primary "other" through and against which Mormonism effectively takes shape, most presciently evidenced in Gordon's statement, "fall in line or get out."

Secondly, the myopic, even obsessive, focus on identifying and circulating rumors about the "real reasons" someone "became apostate" makes present and conscious the

pervasive and underlying fears, anxieties, and salacious desires that are in normal circumstances kept hidden and left unspoken about in the church. In being made to embody and openly signify the spiritual, cultural, and social tensions which must remain repressed and silenced in the church, the apostate serves as a cathartic conduit through which these tensions can be appropriately expressed and cathected. Gordon's dismissal of apostates as morally corrupt, disobedient, and prideful thereby expresses an underlying need to deny that which he shares with them, yet cannot admit - his frustration with church leaders, his feelings of wounded pride, his sexual curiosity and lust, and his own repressed doubts and questions about the church. In this environment of ambiguous belonging and sensitivity to doubt, the act of stigmatizing apostates serves as a defense against the appeal of openly expressing these tensions, while the act of alienating apostates, though seemingly "un-Christlike," paradoxically comes to constitute a means of performing one's religious authenticity and faithfulness. The stigmas that are routinely attached to apostates therefore not only construct a moral boundary between members and former members, believers and nonbelievers, they perhaps more importantly protect faithful Mormons from consciously realizing, and provide a means for actively working against, their own illicit desires and frustrations.

But why must apostates' be silenced and shunned? Unlike non-members and other "outsiders" who may also very well be categorized as "enemies of truth," apostates constitute a unique kind of threat to faithful church members. On the one hand, they have the capacity to lurk amidst the faithful brethren, looking and sounding just like any other member, requiring ever more strident defense mechanisms aimed at repressing their presence. No doubt influenced by the rash of mass apostasy afflicting the church in

Kirtland, Ohio, an early headquarters for the burgeoning religion prior to its exodus to Utah, Joseph Smith once cautioned the faithful to be on guard against defectors in their midst. “Those who have associated with us and made the greatest professions of friendship, have frequently been our greatest enemies and our most determined foes...Judas-like, [they] seek the destruction of those who were their greatest benefactors” he counseled. In days of rampant spiritual dereliction, in which the faithless seem many, and the faithful seem few, apostasy constitutes the most ambiguous and uncanny of afflictions to strike a religious community - for every true believer also dually embodies the potential for intimate betrayal. As Joseph Smith warned, the greatest friends can also make the greatest enemies.

On the other hand, unlike other historical “others,” the apostate is rendered ever more dangerous because they cannot be fully “othered.” There is an ambivalence attached to them, for despite their embodiment of moral absolution, they were in fact once loved family members, friends, and faithful church members, just as Michael was for Gordon. The danger they pose is an uncanny one. For church members, like Gordon, there is a disturbing recognition of sameness in the apostate. The apostate, by virtue of their former intimacy, inclusion, and recognizability as one-time faithful church members forces the church member to face an uncanny spectral image of themselves. In fact, it was Gordon’s identification with Michael as an “older brother” which made his apostasy ever more traumatic. Because of this, the apostate comes to represent the possibility of dissolution from within, rather than a more easily remedied and defended against attack from without. The apostate holds a metaphorical mirror up to the faithful church member, granting them a purview into a life and mind torn asunder by doubt and confusion.

Indeed, the apostate comes to represent the very possibility of madness lurking within the faithful church member – they apostate becomes the symbolic embodiment for the consequences of metaphorically eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as depicted in Genesis, and thus having gained a forbidden knowledge that drives away faith. This is what contemporary church members *know* happened to these erstwhile members, yet cannot bring themselves to admit.

In apostates, church members confront an uncanny visage of their own potential for doubt and disaffection, and perhaps even desire for sin and disbelief, yet for which the consequences are too disturbing to consciously entertain. The apostate forces the awareness of an internal foreignness, both within individuals, and the collective body of the church as a whole, so that the very thing which church members renounce in apostates is that which still circulates within the unconscious undercurrents of Mormonism. In encountering the apostate either in reality or imaginatively the distinction between member and non-member, sacred safe church and profane dangerous world, belief and doubt, collapses. And so the apostate must be kept silent, marginal, hidden, and repressed in order for the projection to be successful. From the perspective of faithful church members the apostate must be made into an ultimate, silenced, distanced other, for anything less would be to risk recognizing the “other” in themselves, bringing about an eruption of internal foreignness that would disassemble the boundaries between self and other, saint and apostate, upon which their religious subjectivity rests.

Contemporary Mormonism in fact needs apostates. It is through the denigration of apostates in stereotype and stigma that the effects of Mormonism’s internal tensions, rising amidst its acculturation into mainstream American life, are exiated. Indeed, as

Mormonism becomes more fully intertwined in the American public sphere, its sense of self further fragmented by competing allegiances and identifications, Mormonism will grow ever more dependent on the need to conjure up projective fantasies about apostates' sins. It is only through this, and by subsequently treating them as outsiders, that Mormonism will be able to maintain the illusion that a perfect, harmonious religious society is actually possible. It is in these types of psycho-social maneuvers, Žižek suggests, that ideology performs its "supreme conjuring trick" as it translates the altogether impossibility of social continuity and harmony into an imagined "theft" by an historical "Other," thereby effectively "concealing the traumatic fact that social harmony never existed and that it is an inherent impossibility" (1989:125-7; 1993:203-4). What social entities like Mormonism fail to realize is that "society is always-already divided" its "Symbolic order" already fractured and incomplete. However, by collectively imagining the apostate as a diseased entity, pathologically introducing into the social body the roots of "disintegration and antagonism," the fantasy-image of society as a harmonious whole is made possible. The "dream of holistic fulfillment - through the elimination, expulsion or suppression of the Other" is thereby forever maintained (Daly 2004).

"Living in the Shadow of the Church"

As Bourdieu (2001) writes, "being is being perceived...[We] exist first through and for the gaze of others." The effect of the stereotypes circulating within Mormonism about apostates and ex-Mormons extends beyond alienation from the immediate church

community. The church dominated social climate of Utah instead creates conditions in which those who leave the church find themselves quickly relegated to the status of second class citizens. Choosing to deny their religion potentially comes at a steep cost that reverberates in their homes, schools, jobs, and neighborhoods, with varying degrees of severity.

Ex-Mormons experience these stigmas in terms of a heightened sense of visibility, as objects of moral scrutiny and judgment. Ex-Mormons find that family and friends begin looking for tell-tale signs of sin creeping into their lives, scrutinizing their clothing, eating habits, and Sunday activities. "My Mom comes over to my house and you can just see the anxiety well up in her. She gets so nervous. She comes over and starts looking around the house, eyeing our coffee maker or the beer bottle in the garbage...One day I asked her what was wrong and she told me she can 'feel that the spirit has left' our home. She said it makes her feel ill... 'Great,' my husband said, maybe she won't come over as much anymore." Others reported frowns of disapproval or mild scolding when wearing shoulder revealing tank tops or thigh length shorts.

This moral othering of apostates is most acutely felt in the way it often leads to fractured families and broken homes. Within Mormonism families are ostensibly the most important aspect of membership in the church. It is a matter of foregone conclusion that Monday evenings will be set aside, in Mormon families across the United States, for "family home evening," where family prayer, singing, and fun activities solidify these sacred bonds of kinship. "Families are forever," members of the church often say. And indeed, that is what membership in the church is about, creating everlasting, eternal, family relationships that will last not just for a lifetime, but for all eternity. In Mormon

homes throughout Utah, plaques, signs, decorative plates, posters, and wall decals inscribe the words “Families are Forever” as an ever-present expression and reminder of this hope. These are not just lofty aspirations though; by engaging in certain forms of “temple work” Mormons can effectively “seal” themselves together – husband to wife, parents to children, etc. - “for time and eternity.” This emphasis on family, however, is what makes leaving the church so difficult for former members. In the midst of their departures they learn that “eternal families” can indeed have a finite existence - loved ones will often not tolerate “associating with an apostate” lest they risk putting their own eternal progression and the celestial happiness of the larger family at risk. So when someone becomes “an apostate” Mormonism’s emphasis on eternal families actually often promotes the very disintegration of familial bonds it is allegedly intended to foster.

Standing in a hotel lobby, waiting for an annual ex-Mormon conference to begin, I met Richard, a tall, partially balding man, who was in the midst of chaos at home. He stood alone, pensively waiting for the opening session to begin. Richard seemed lost. Although born in Utah, he now lived in neighboring Idaho. He had only found out about the conference the day before, and decided, on that Thursday afternoon, to drive the six hours into Salt Lake to attend. His distress that evening however probably had little to do with the drive, or the free cocktails he was liberally consuming. The day he found out about the conference was also the day he first told his wife about his decision to leave the church. “They’re all going crazy trying to figure out why I left” Richard told me about his family, “but I just had to get out of there.” When he told his wife he no longer had a testimony he said she looked at him “like I was a stranger.” “She told me she felt like she didn’t know me anymore. That I wasn’t the man she married.” She began asking him if

he had been cheating on her, if he was going to start drinking, imagined transgressions and wild accusations streaming from her panicked mind. Richard had harbored his doubts and resentments for almost a year, but feared mentioning anything to his wife or family. “What am I going to do? We’ve been married for thirty seven years. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything” Richard said. His wife had already threatened divorce, not twenty-four hours after he told her. With eyes that vacillated between stoic glares and erratic glances around the room, his stories moved from rambling stream of consciousness-like reflections on his recent departure from the church, to his wife’s threats of divorce, to repeated monosyllabic stabs of “I-am-just-so-angry.” “I don’t know what I’ll do now,” he confessed. “I’ll have to see what she decides, but it doesn’t look good.”

Divorce in many cases seems unavoidable for ex-Mormons, as one partner’s loss of faith evokes panic in their spouse as the promise of an eternal life together in the celestial kingdom slips away. One partner’s loss of faith is believed to jeopardize the eternal family unit, as husbands may no longer “use their priesthood” in the home, and wives are believed to no longer prioritize caring for the family.

Stories of broken homes abound on online ex-Mormon message boards and in support group meetings, reflecting a pervasive consequence that faces those who disaffect. Jenna told me how during her divorce proceedings her ex-husband used her apostasy as “evidence that I was mentally unstable and unsuitable to care for my children.” Her husband also frequently told their three small children that their mother “had chosen other priorities in life...that I wasn't living gospel anymore," Jenna said, sensing the wedge of stigma being driven between her and her children. “He was trying to turn my own kids against me. And I can’t tell them anything different because they’ve

already been taught to think people like me are evil. And then I can't get upset at their dad because that will just reinforce the idea that I'm angry and vindictive... I'm trapped."

A similar case, Brian had two small children, and a third on the way, when his wife packed her bags and went to live with her parents in Seattle. "She told me if I didn't hold the priesthood, she basically didn't want me," he said. In his wife's eyes, he said, he had become "useless." In leaving the church, Brian would no longer be able to preside over his family as a priesthood holder, and thus would no longer be able to baptize any of their future children, give them blessings when they fell ill, or do the temple work that would seal them all together. Distraught, Brian went to his mother to ask for guidance and advice on how he could get his wife back. But the stigma of apostasy supersedes even these relationships, reinforcing a religious moral order through the bonds of kinship. "She said she agreed! I couldn't believe it. I said 'Mom! I'm your son!' But she said she would've done the same thing if my dad had done that to her."

This culturally patterned presumption that apostates *must* be experiencing psychological turmoil, can have more pernicious effects. Accusations of unreasonableness, psychosis, or suicidal tendencies are more than just a culturally induced, and inherently innocent, response to an apostate's sudden loss of faith. They can also be an effective means of silencing apostate's objectionable views and socially marginalizing them away from the community. Tom and I sat at a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant after an ex-Mormon support group meeting held in Salt Lake City talking about his life outside the church. A quiet man in his early fifties, Tom stopped speaking with his family recently after he began compulsively researching the changes made to Mormon scripture, lesson materials, and doctrinal principles over the past

several decades, and sharing his discoveries with his family. “I tried to tell them about what I was finding” he told me through mouthfuls of chicken and coleslaw. “Did they know the church has been making changes to the Book of Mormon? Did they know they altered conference speeches? Did they know Brigham Young taught racism? Did they know any of this stuff? No. They thought I was crazy. And you know what? They had me committed.” “They had you committed?” I asked, not fully comprehending the severity of the matter. “Yea. Involuntarily committed. I guess they knew somebody at the hospital. This was just a few months ago.” Tom described how his father decided that his rantings about doctored church texts constituted an acute onset of delusional paranoia. “They didn’t know what I was talking about,” he said, “so they thought it was all made up. They just wanted me to be quiet.” It worked for a few days, Tom said, until he was released. “They eventually saw that I was telling the truth,” he said. Stunned, I asked if his father ever apologized. No, Tom said, they still thought he was crazy.⁷⁹

Otherness and alterity reverberates in neighborhoods as well, where apostates are transformed into social others through everyday acts of exclusion from normal social discourse. While other forms of otherness are typically marked by unsolicited stares, former church members experienced otherness most acutely in the way their very existence elicited acts of avoidance, leading to a tacit state of “censored presence.” For example, I often heard stories of how former members’ waves of hello to neighbors

79 That Tom may have in fact “gone crazy” I cannot say, not knowing all of the details of this episode. But if there is something to my earlier interpretation of apostate stigmas functioning as projective fantasies, then perhaps Tom’s episode of going crazy is the logical extension of this work of projection. Perhaps many apostates are in fact rendered “crazy” by how they are treated and talked about in the church. In projective identification one person treats another in such a way as to induce the very subjectivity the projector already imagines them to have, all in order to manufacture a relationship that is predictable, explainable, and ultimately amelioratory to the underlying tensions from whence it sprang.

passing in their cars were met with downturned eyes, or chance meetings at the grocery store provoked church members' hasty retreats as they sought to avoid prolonged interactions with apostates. Or how once vibrant social relationships dimmed as neighborhood kids no longer stopped by apostate families' homes to play, parents were no longer invited to monthly book club meetings and rounds of golf, and whole families were taken off the neighborhood circuit of rotating barbecues and communal babysitting responsibilities. This social marginalization can take a more pernicious form as well in the way neighborhood grievances and disagreements become institutionally moderated rather than informally resolved. After their disaffection Leslie and her husband had neighbors who reported one of their late night barbecues to the police under suspicion of illicit drug use. Similarly, after stepping away from the church, Adam had a neighbor who filed repeated grievances against him to the local homeowner's association, complaining that his garage door was left open too long, that he parked his boat in the driveway, and that his lawn grew too long between cuttings, each of these infractions ostensibly violating HOA by-laws. Adam explained his neighbors' behavior as petty acts of vindictiveness in response to Adam's decision to leave the church. "He was bitter, that's all. I've been living here for over fifteen years. Our kids grew up together. He's never had a thing to say about how I live my life till now. He never would have done stuff like that if I'd have kept going to church."

Outright rejecting their religion also makes apostates into objects of collective pity. Some ex-Mormons find that shortly after leaving the church they become the subject of intensive "rescue missions" staged by members of the congregation in an attempt to persuade them back into the fold. The implicit message of such actions is that the

wayward member is in need of assistance from the stable moral presence of the church. Patty described a particularly common response received by ex-Mormons from ward members. “You become this service project for them. They see it as their duty to help you and bring you back. I know what’s going through their heads, I used to do it too when someone in our ward stopped showing up or was having some kind of trouble. Everyone always thinks the worst about the situation, about what happened to you. But they act like all they want to do is love you. It’s a funny kind of love, though. The first few months I stopped going to church members of my ward would “muffin bomb” me every week. I’d come home from doing whatever and there’d be a basket of muffins or something on my doorstep. Is that love though? If they think that I’ve turned to the darkside, and my life really is in shambles, are muffins really going to do anything? ‘Take back your muffins!’ is what I think. I don’t need your pity.” Patty grew angry while recounting this treatment. On the surface, her fellow ward members actions can seem innocuous, and her defensive response unwarranted. But for people like Patty, it is the stark contrast between the derisiveness shown to her in everyday moments of gossip about her ex-Mormon life, and the feebleness of their attempts to show compassion through baked goods that irks her.

This behavior can be stifling and patronizing. In a similar case, Brent’s family began to treat him as a charity case in need of immediate and drastic intervention. While attending a family reunion with relatives he quietly avoided discussing church topics, not wanting to “spread the word” about his decision to leave the church. Though “when members hang out together, there isn’t much else they *do* talk about,” so Brent remained reposed for much of the afternoon. Shortly after the reunion, however, a sister who lived out of state found out about his disaffection. She frantically emailed him, pleading for

him to “not take his life” - the holy spirit had revealed to her that Brent was indeed, as evidenced at the reunion, suicidal. “It’s so condescending” Brent told me. “She thought because I’d left the church I wanted to kill myself, when really the only reason I may have looked like I wanted to kill myself was because I was stuck spending my Saturday afternoon listening to all of them instead of drinking a beer at home!”

The effects of the apostate stigma can reverberate beyond people’s immediate family and church community. It can also jeopardize people’s employment and financial security by undermining their employment status and professional reputations. People employed directly by the LDS Church face the greatest risk. Losing one’s testimony, or even being accused of apostasy, can result in immediate dismissal and a loss of benefits and retirement funds. Because religious organizations are able to stand apart from federal laws in the hiring and firing of employees, operating under the guise of “ministerial exception” which grants “preference in employment to individuals of a particular religion” and gives religious institutions the right to “require that all applicants and employees conform to the religious tenets of [the] organization” discriminating against someone’s *loss of faith* is legally justified.

However, there are also more tacit forms of employee discrimination based on the stigma of apostasy that have an especially pernicious effect in states like Utah where a single faith dominates culturally and demographically. Roger owned a small engineering consulting firm that worked on residential and commercial projects throughout Cache county (an hour north of Salt Lake City). Like many others whose professions relied on professional reputation and garnering new business through referrals and word-of-mouth, apostasy resulted in a loss of business. “I was basically run out of town,” he said, “all of

my contracts pulled when word started to spread that I'd left." Leann faced a similar, though more immediate, form of discrimination. Working as a fourth grade teacher in a suburb of Salt Lake City when she decided to leave the church, Leann's students' parents began calling her school's principal demanding their children be reassigned to other classes. In the midst of the financial recession in the mid-2000s Leann's principal eventually let her go the following year, citing statewide budget cuts. "I know what really happened though," Leann said. Her principal confided to her that parents had been growing concerned that she was being a "negative influence" on their children, and that she had become, in her principals words, a "liability" for the school.

As I discuss in the next chapter, ex-Mormons are at pains to respond to these forms of social exclusion (perpetuated by the circulation of stigmas and stereotypes) through collective action and consciousness raising. Ex-Mormonism, to whatever extent it can be said to constitute a "social movement," is emerging in direct response to living in such a religious environment where the choice not to believe begets such forms of sectarian intolerance.

Ch 5: Politics of Apostasy

Over the past decade an amorphous “ex-Mormon” movement has been taking shape in Utah and on the internet. In online chat rooms, annual ex-Mormon conferences, and “mass resignation” rallies, ex-Mormons are waging a new form of identity politics against the religious institution, community, and ideology of which they were once faithful members. As marginalized and stigmatized “apostates,” ex-Mormons are joining together to weather the negative stereotypes projected onto them, and even “speak back” to their former faith, while staking their claim to a space of social personhood defined by its explicit oppositionality to, and even “transcendence” of religion.

Such developments are not unique to Mormonism, and in fact reflect wider trends of secular identity politics and positioning at the national level. Although nonreligious individuals have long existed, the widespread formation of explicitly secular or nonreligious groups has been driven by several factors. First, nonreligious people are demonstrating a growing concern over religion’s tendency to foster “exclusionary and divisive in-group mentalities” (Kettel 2013), creating divisions and antagonisms not only between people of differing faiths, but also against those with no “faith” at all, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Second, with the rise of the internet, previously isolated individuals have now been able to begin creating and demarcating a space to meet and converse with each other while still inhabiting a religiously dominated society (Cimino and Smith, 2011). In response to these developments, nonreligious people in the U.S. are increasingly adopting a discourse of “group rights” and articulating demands for equal treatment (Taira 2012), issues in which the ex-Mormons in Utah are embroiled.

The ex-Mormon example further evidences wider trends and strategies used by secular groups around the country. Drawing inspiration from the gay rights movement, secular groups in the U.S. are attempting to “introduce” themselves to the larger American populace in the hopes that increasing their mutual familiarity with each other will allay the negative stereotypes typically projected onto them. Staging “Out” campaigns, “Reason Rallies,” and engaging in other promotional and public outreach work, including writing articles, staging public talks and debates (broadly disseminated on YouTube), and producing documentary videos and podcasts, these groups are attempting to establish an explicitly “secular” identity under which people can congregate and mobilize. Through these efforts nonreligious people are not only able to begin raising the visibility of their minority status, they can also begin to effectively counter stigmatizing public perceptions by articulating their own moral discourse of pluralism and acceptance.

Following my discussion of the various stigmas and stereotypes attached to apostates in the previous chapter, this chapter discusses how ex-Mormons attempt to engage in a politics of alterity as they carefully negotiate their fractious relationships with their former religious community. Here I discuss how this has unfolded through a micropolitics of nonreligious labelling, a mass resignation march staged in a suburb of Salt Lake City, and a series of “I am an ex-Mormon” videos.

Deciding what to call yourself

In the contemporary LDS church the proclamation, “I’m a Mormon” has become

something of a rallying cry for members who are attempting to reassert their collective identity on a U.S. religious landscape once skeptical and even antagonistic to these “peculiar people.” As with most religious communities, the ability to publicly identify oneself, to fix a label to your particular set of ideological or group affiliations, and to feel as if that label expresses something essential about your sense of self and place in the world is a powerful component of religious practice and belonging. Former members of the LDS church, however, lose this moniker, and the work that it does in positioning, grounding, and categorizing them as a social person.

Part of constructing a new identity in the wake of religious disaffection involves deciding what to call oneself now that "Mormon," "Christian" etc. is no longer available. Ex-Mormon, apostate, atheist, secular-humanist, are several options. Yet as I came to see, for former members of the LDS church each term is seen to carry its own set of cultural baggage or is limited in one way or another in its ability to define the person who they see themselves becoming. As one woman said to me, "I'm not really a Mormon anymore, but I don't know if I'm an atheist. That seems too strong of a word. But I can't go along the rest of my life saying I'm an ex-Mormon either. Can't I just be "me"?" As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) suggests, social struggles - such as the one between Mormonism and its former members - often take the form of conflict over classification and representation (the negative consequences of which I discussed in the previous chapter). For newly nonreligious people, who live in a world suffused by religious identifications, deciding what to call oneself is therefore not just a matter of being able to affix a label to oneself, but rather is an exercise in constructing and defining a new sense of nonreligious

personhood.

Though the terms “ex-Mormon” and “apostate” are frequently used by both current and former church members, these terms are inherently polysemic and at times highly contentious. There are semantic issues to any identity politics movement, as the labels that are ascribed, adopted, renounced or embraced involve nuanced tactics of positioning and classification. In the wider U.S., using the term “atheist,” for example, a moniker popularly defined by its oppositionality to religion, has been seen as a mistake by some who argue that it perpetuates the stereotype of atheists as a “cranky sub-culture” (Harris 2007). Similarly, identifying with the term “atheist” or “agnostic” is often avoided, as these terms are freighted in the American collective conscience with a lack of morality and affront to public order (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006:230). As Ryan Cragun (2012:108) notes, nonreligious people’s decision to affix a label to themselves is potentially self-defeating, as “self-identification as something beyond ‘none’ may heighten attention to one’s out-group status among those who hear about one’s irreligious identity.” Others, however, argue that such labels are politically useful as “rallying cries” for the disparate secular communities scattered amidst a larger, dominant, religious society (Myers 2007).

The people I talked to were keenly aware of the moral stereotypes associated with the various nonreligious labels available to them. When I asked people whether they thought a God exists they typically responded with either an outright no, or some version of an explanation that goes something like, ‘I have no way of knowing whether a God exists or not. Therefore I can’t say definitively one way or the other.’ Yet they often

demurred when I asked if they would call themselves an atheist. When I asked one woman about this she said that, “‘atheist’ has such a harsh tone to it. I guess I’d rather say I’m an agnostic.” To her, the difference between atheist and agnostic had less to do with a difference in definition, than a difference in public perception. “When people hear atheist they think you’ve got an axe to grind or something,” she added. For her, using the term atheist implied a decisive, and even combative break with a normative religious society from which she was tentatively negotiating her distance from. Choosing to label herself an agnostic ameliorated her fears of provoking outright antagonism while effectively distancing herself from being hailed as religious. “When I call myself agnostic, it leaves the question open for people. Especially religious people...they get less defensive. It’s like they think there’s still hope for you!”

Within the ex-Mormon circles there was less of a concern over how a self-ascribed label might affect relationships and generally a plethora of terms people were able adopt to describe their current nonreligious identity. When I first began attending the various meetings throughout the state, I would consistently be asked, "so, what are you?" The imperative to identify oneself in these circles is not so much a practice of ideological gatekeeping as it is a reflection of group members' curiosity of the diversity of perspectives circulating within the community. During one of my first visits to a local meet-up at a coffee shop in Provo a group of a dozen or so of us sat on a set of couches sipping our drinks when Christina asked me the question.

Christina: You're studying Mormonism, huh? I bet that's fun. What are you?

Marshall: What do you mean?

Rich: You know, what's your relationship to the church? Were or are you religious?

Marshall: Oh. No, I've never been Mormon. I grew up Christian. But I guess you could say now I'm a comfortably apathetic agnostic. Whatever that means.

Kyle: Ya, I know what you mean. There's a term for that I think, it's an apatheist. At first I didn't know what I was. Someone once told me I'm a pantheist, so that's what I say. I don't believe in a God. It's more about an awareness of the idea of something powerful existing in everything.

Michelle: I was like that once. But now it makes more sense for me to say atheist. I have no reason to think God, or any God, exists.

Rich: I think I'm more of an agnostic. If there's something out there, great. If a God like thing does exist it surely doesn't care about us down here, at least not the way Mormons think it does. But if there's a heaven of some sort we all get to go to, I'm down with that.

Within these explicitly “ex-Mormon” circles, deciding on what nonreligious label to use was less a politics of secular/religious positioning, than it was a reflection of people’s ongoing practice of “trying out” these different identities and nonreligious subjectivities. However, deciding what to call themselves as former church members, that is, how to define and label their explicit relationship to Mormonism outside of these circles was a different matter. In relationships with friends, family, and neighbors, they chose their self-labels with care, their choices reflecting a strategic reading and response to particular contexts and situation rather than a representation of their “actual” stance. Each of the labels - post Mormon, ex-Mormon, former Mormon, cultural Mormon, etc. - were understood to come with their own tacit stereotypes which people were attempting to negotiate.

For those with "one foot still in the church" - meaning they still regularly associate with active members in their daily life - using the term ex-Mormon or former Mormon can be disadvantageous. "I don't know what I'd call myself now," Craig told me as we discussed all the options, "I guess all of the above given the situation. I would probably avoid using ex-Mormon hanging out with church folks. Why give someone else the ability to marginalize you even more?" Craig left the church several years prior to our conversation, yet he was still heavily involved in church life. Craig's wife, children, and extended family were all still members, so Craig often attended baptisms, ward socials, and family events where he was the only nonbeliever. Although he often attended "ex-Mormon" activities, in church contexts he describes himself as "inactive," a term commonly used within Mormonism to denote those who do not participate in but have not severed ties with the church. Craig's decision was indeed strategic and reflected his attempts to negotiate both people's understanding of his loss of faith and his ongoing attempts to maintain important connections with the church community. "If I tell them I'm an ex- or post Mormon or whatever, they'll immediately be suspicious; they'll think I did something wrong or label me an anti-Mormon. So I say inactive. It makes more sense to them. And it makes it easier on my wife. That way she doesn't have to go through all the 'oh, I'm sorry' conversations when people find out I left." By using the label "inactive" Craig was able to maintain the illusion that his return to the fold was still a real possibility - he could, ostensibly, be "reactivated" at any time.

Another term, "cultural Mormon," is often used as a means of softening the boundaries and divisions discursively drawn between apostates and the church. Tom, for example, works in an accounting firm in Utah county, and worries about how his

coworkers' and employer's perception of his religious status may affect his job. According to Tom, describing himself as a “cultural Mormon” signals to others that though he does not believe in the church's theological teachings, he still appreciates and respects his ancestry and upbringing as a Mormon. He recently put this strategy to use when he decided to begin openly drinking coffee at work, thereby advertising his loss of faith. A colleague approached him and directly asked Tom what he was drinking (a rare instance of direct confrontation). “You could tell he was curious and really just concerned. I told him I no longer had a testimony that the church was true, but that I still loved my Mormon friends and family. I don't know if I said I was a cultural Mormon, but that's basically how I described myself.” Tom’s co-worker seemed satisfied with the answer, even asking Tom about how coffee tasted, a conversation that Tom says allowed him to have a “normal” conversation and “let him know I’m really the same guy I was before, I just happen to drink coffee now.”

Others are more explicit about their disaffection from the church when conversing with faithful members. While teaching anthropology at a local university in Utah, April, one of my students, no doubt aware of her minority status in a room full of faithful members, self-identified by saying “I used to be Mormon... I've since been enlightened and have transcended the church,” while extending her hands into the air and smiling. When I asked her later if she was ever concerned that such pronouncements would antagonize her classmates, she shrugged. “I don’t really care. I’m tired of them thinking they own the world, like they know better than everybody else. I’m not going to hide who I am, they’re just going to have to learn how to deal with.” Such pronouncements, although in this case eliciting eye rolls from classmates, speak against the assumed

relationship between current and former members, deftly reversing the hierarchy typically at work in which former members are assumed to have "fallen away."

In conversing with non-members, or as they are colloquially referred to, "never-mos" (a category in which I was slotted), some former members said they avoided the labels ex-Mormon, post mormon, former Mormon altogether. Jason told me, for example, "I don't like to label myself as anything with the word "Mormon" in it. I don't want to be connected to it anymore than I already have to. Telling someone you used to be Mormon either leads to lots of questions about the church or they think somehow you're still connected to it." Some former members even find that their public identity as a Mormon has stuck with them despite their private disaffection. James, for example, said that in job interviews he would often be questioned about his education at Brigham Young University, plainly visible on his professional resume. "People just assume I'm Mormon. They see that on their and they immediately categorize me." James was frustrated at his inability to relinquish his Mormon status.

Others appreciate the term "post Mormon," versus ex-Mormon, for how it still implies a connection to Mormonism, valued not for its intersubjective, but rather, personal significance. As Stacy told me, "Post-Mormon sounds better to me than ex-Mormon. Mormonism was such a huge part of my life for so long. And it still is, really. I was raised Mormon, all my memories are of being in the church. Saying post-Mormon I think does honor to that life...but it's still something I eventually have moved past." For Stacy, describing herself as post-Mormon allows her to dually articulate both a lasting connection and estrangement from Mormonism that reflected a sense of self with a past she sought to incorporate into her present and future existence..

Unlike post Mormon or ex-Mormon, “apostate” is a term often thought to be divisive and derogatory. As I discussed in the previous chapter, when used within the church community the term denotes someone who has failed in their spiritual commitments and “turned their back” on, or even taken a hostile, antagonistic stance against their religious brethren. Its use tacitly legitimizes and normalizes exclusionary practices and constructs a moral hierarchy in which church members sit at the top while apostates are relegated to the bottom. “Mormons use it when they want to connect all former believers with some grievous sin just to puff themselves up,” one woman told me. Another man, a “closeted apostate” as he called himself because he had not yet “opened up” about his disbelief, described sitting one time in Sunday school with his wife as the class discussed the story of Korihor from the Book of Mormon, a tale about an atheist who tricks people into leaving the church. After hearing people in class vilify apostates they knew as dejected, scornful, and dishonest, as fallen members who believers should be weary of, he finds the term nothing more than a slur.

Despite its negative connotations, and its potential to perpetuate damaging stereotypes, the apostate label can also be self-ascribed as a means of preempting its derogatory power when used by church members as a term of derision. I once attended a family BBQ with Judy and Mitch, a young couple I met at a local ex-Mormon meetup event, held at Mitch's parent's backyard. I had been warned on the car ride over to their house that all of Mitch's family would be there and that they were all “TBMs” (true believing Mormons) who were dogmatic in their belief in the church. This was a social situation that caused both Mitch and Judy some trepidation, which we attempted to alleviate by taking shots of dark rum at their house prior to leaving for the BBQ. At the

party Mitch introduced me around to his parents, siblings, and nieces and nephews. While introducing me to Mitch's older brother and sister-in-law, Mitch said, "Meet Marshall. He's our resident anthropologist...he's studying the apostates and all of our crazy lives!" Mitch laughed at his joke as did, to my surprise, his brother and sister-in-law. "I'm sure you're getting a lot of good information for your study" his brother quipped back affably. In effect, Mitch's self-labelling as an apostate in this Mormon dominated social setting temporarily defused the tension between him and his family members. "It's problematic to do that, I suppose," Mitch later explained to me on the car ride back. "You're basically telling them that it's alright to call people that. But really, they're already thinking it and saying it anyway. So I think in some ways it helps because it makes being an apostate not so strange, and maybe even normal. And that's really what we are."

Some ex-Mormons' hesitancy to use the term, or general aversion to it as a persistent moniker of religious stigma, strikes people like Eli as a passive way of supporting the exact stigma they should be working to overcome. Having left the church two years prior, Eli reflects a growing sentiment I heard expressed by other ex-Mormons attempting to reclaim the label that until then had been unwittingly ascribed to them. "I think we have to recognize that it's Mormons that attach so much baggage to the word. And that baggage is all tied to their belief that they have the one true faith. If we truly reject that faith and all that comes with it then the word doesn't mean anything anymore. Or rather, it means whatever we want it to. I personally don't think we should be ashamed of being called apostates. Call me an apostate! That's damn right; I reject all your myths and superstitions! So be it. So you see, I think it's something to be proud of."

Normalizing, and even embracing the term apostate, has thus become among some newly nonreligious people an effective strategy for combatting and overturning the negative stigmas attached to it. Invoking the literal definition of apostate as someone who rejects religion yet who otherwise stays “normal” has enabled the term to be appropriated as a “badge of honor” to be worn proudly by many ex-Mormons aiming to make their rejection of religious dogma an identity to rally under. That such a transformation was underfoot during my fieldwork was made clear to me when a popular ex-Mormon online community began selling t-shirts, thong underwear, beer mugs, and shot glasses stamped in bold letters with the word “Apostate.” Similarly, a song written by Brian, a close friend of mine with a flair for creative rebellion strategically appropriated the term and used it to achieve a certain degree of consciousness raising. Growing up in the church he grew to love the song, “I’m a Mormon,” which was a staple in Primary classes and the inspiration for the LDS church’s recent ad campaign of the same name. In the song, sung with a plucky sense of resolution, singers rejoice in their peculiarity, their opposition to mainstream values, and their ownership of the name “Mormon,” a label their gentile neighbors historically imposed upon “the Saints” in a maligning way.

I’m a Mormon, yes I am!
 And if you want to study a Mormon I’m a living specimen.
 Maybe you think I’m just like anybody else you see,
 But trust in my word,
 You’ll quickly observe,
 I’m different as can be!

At parties and social gatherings with other ex-Mormons Brian’s song became a hit, with frequent calls for multiple rehearsals so that everyone in the audience could pick up the words and sing along. In it apostates expressed their own sense of peculiarity, of

alienation, and excluded collective identity by transforming a song once so loved for its religious inspiration into an anthem of apostatic insurrection.

I'm apostate, yes I am
After studying the history
I discovered it's a sham

Everyone thinks I'm just inclined to disobey
But maybe I don't believe
The spirit will leave you
Just because you're gay

I'm apostate yes it's true
And you may think that I'm deluded but I'm sad to say it's you
You see now I know the Book of Abraham is just a false translation
I know we stole Masonic rites and tried to say they're ancient
Maybe you'd like me to tell you about the women that Joseph screwed
Then you can be apostate, too

I'm apostate, through and through
And since I broke all of my covenants
I'm sleeping in the nude

It's not that I'm lazy or offended in some way
I just don't buy the excuse apologists use
For Indian DNA

I'm apostate, yes, it's true
And if that means we can't be friends
I guess that's what you've got to do
You see now I am aware of troubling things like Joseph's polyandry
I get upset when Packer talks, I keep Fawn Brodie handy
Maybe you'd like a list of the things that prove the Church isn't true
Then you can be apostate, too.

That the phrase “I’m apostate” can come to express a sense of collective pride points to a shift in ex-Mormons’ conceptions of self and identity outside of the church, towards one of group solidarity and collective consciousness no longer simply as marginalized subalterns, but rather, as authors of their own existence. In the song the apostate position is strategically appropriated and essentialized as a condition brought about, not by the apostate’s own moral deficiency as stereotypes often depict, but rather by an abundant knowledge of the church’s defects (Joseph Smith's sexual exploits, historical inaccuracies, the lack of Indian DNA, etc.). This idea is further engendered in the song by depicting the apostate position as one void of the personal idiosyncrasies or individual circumstances that church members often point to as “causes” of apostasy. Rather, the song reads as a collective position statement under which apostates can uniformly congregate, united by a common positionality vis a vis their marginality from and antagonism with the church. Here an apostate identity is generated and harnessed as a basis of struggle, effectively creating a foundation of temporary solidarity upon which social action can arise.

“Out of the Shadows and into the Light”

The only real way to change the system is to reject it in its entirety. This of course has huge social cost, which many have had to bare. But those cultural costs will lessen with each individual who chooses to publicly refuse to support the organization. And this break, to get through the structures of silence has to be loud and pronounced. It has to come in the form of willful non-participation in events and formal statements of position that are clearly understood as such. But this brashness is not due to the heretics being louds, it is necessary because the system makes it necessary, it is the only way to get out of the trench and make the message heard.

- “Ex-Mormon Vanguard”

On a hot June afternoon in 2012, several hundred ex-Mormons hiked to a prominent hill overlooking Salt Lake City in what was billed as a “Mass Resignation March.” There, marchers signed a “declaration of independence from Mormonism,” mailed in resignation letters to church headquarters, and carried signs that read “transcend Mormonism,” “it’s ok to be an atheist,” and “ask me if I’m Mormon.” Not all were resigning that day. Many had left the church years ago and were prominent players in Utah’s ex-Mormon scene, others had yet to tell their spouses that they no longer believed the church was true, harboring their secret in silence. What they all had in common, though, was that in the eyes of the church, whose headquarters and temple stood prominently in the valley below, they were apostates.

For the ex-Mormons gathered there, the march was a strategic, symbolic act of speaking out about and against a new form of religious intolerance they felt victims of. As an event attended, recorded, and publicized by newspaper reporters and anthropologists, it was a venue through which the frustrations of apostasy could be voiced and a narrative of religious persecution could be generated and dispersed.

The march was billed as a journey “Out of the Shadows and into the Light,” and according to marchers, an attempt to openly embrace people’s decisions to leave the church and invert the shame typically attached to apostasy. Through the march, ex-Mormons sought to overturn the stigma and transform themselves, as apostates, from being silent objects of criticism, to vocal subjects agentive in their own public representations. One woman described her motivation for marching as a desire to undermine the taboos attached to leaving the church, and transform it into something she

said people could be “open and proud about.” For her, being an apostate was an identity that she hoped people could gather around, feeling strength and support as they saw others like them come out into the open with their disbelief. If they were going to be identified as apostates, it was going to be an identity they controlled.

Ex-Mormons’ desire to “make a statement,” and a public show of apostasy must be understood within the particular context of Mormonism’s rise to prominence on the public stage, a presence ex-Mormons sought to capitalize on. Although only attended by a few hundred marchers, news of the march spread widely across both national and international news outlets, reflecting the media fervor for all things Mormon that existed at the height of the “Mormon Moment.” Articles covering the march were picked up by papers in major cities across the country, in Chicago, Detroit, Washington D.C., Phoenix, Yahoo News, and even a front page spot on the Huffington Post website.⁸⁰

Their identity as Mormons, until now undermined by characterizations of apostates as spiritually and morally deficient, was solidified by the media’s presence. It allowed their dissent to transcend the normative logic of “anti-Mormonism from angry apostates” within which vocal criticism of the church is typically catalogued, and thus easily dismissed. It instead indexed their cries as coming from a group of people enveloped within a new form of religious identity - that is, as disaffected apostates - who in their disbelief also fall victim to a peculiar form of religious intolerance in need of atonement. Newspaper reporters’ presence at the event, particularly from the Reuters news service, bestowed a sense of legitimacy on the ex-Mormons’ efforts to engage in

80 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/01/us-usa-utah-mormons-idUSBRE86000N20120701>;
<http://www.advocate.com/politics/religion/2012/06/29/mormons-plan-mass-resignation-church>;

this unique form of subaltern political expression by interpolating them first and foremost as “Mormons” with legitimate criticisms and complaints. Headlines hailed them not as de facto outsiders, but as disenfranchised and disenchanted *members* of the church; “Mormon group quits LDS church en masse,” “Mormons quit church in mass resignation rite” the headlines proclaimed.

For individual ex-Mormons, the march provided an opportunity to publicly gather around an identity that most had previously been afraid of embracing. I met Roger standing nearby the staging grounds for the march slathering sunscreen onto arms and legs and asked how he was feeling. When I spoke with him a few days prior he was not entirely set on marching. Roger was somebody that despite having stopped attending church for several years, had still not told his family he no longer believed in the church. He seemed taciturn and reticent, saying that he has been nervous to come to the event, what he described as a mix of “fear and trepidation.” Gesturing toward a nearby reporter, he said he worried that his parents may see his face in a picture or video. Perhaps by marching, he suggested, he could break free of the cycle of silence and frustration.

The politics of embracing an apostate identity, for some of the marchers, therefore served as a public reclamation of a sense of self lost in the private sphere of family relationships. For example, Bob became an atheist several years ago, yet in the eyes of friends and family, like Roger, is as devout a member as ever, as his wife has forbidden him to speak of his disaffection from the church. I originally got to know Bob at bi-weekly ex-Mormon support group meetings held on Sunday afternoons. He would occasionally show up late, having just gotten out of the church service he attended with his wife. He seemed resigned and embittered at the life he led - I never understood how

he stayed with a woman who he complained “kept him in the closet.” However, in the march, Bob seemed resolute, unconcerned about the possibility of having someone see his picture in the newspaper. “I kind of hope I will get outed,” he said, “then that way it’ll all be over.” Another woman I marched next to lived in constant fear of having her husband “outed” as an apostate to his employers, a turn of events which she felt sure would lead to his swift dismissal. For her, the march was, as she described, her only means of making a statement. “I’m tired of being avoided and ignored. This is my way of saying this is me, and I’m not going away” she told me.

I met another man named Peter as he stood chatting with a reporter from the Salt Lake Tribune who was a stark contrast to the trepidation I saw expressed in others. With a smile on his face and a gleam in his eye, he carried a stick with a white button-down collared shirt tied to the end, the same garment, he said, that he wore on his mission several decades ago. This time, however, it was scrawled in black permanent marker with the words “In honor of our integrity, our reason and freedom, and our peace of mind, our wives our children, and our friends - both straight and gay.” “Life is so much happier now that I’ve left,” he told the reporter, “instead of thinking in terms of regretting the past and dreading the future, I’m doing much more of living in the present.” Like others, he voiced frustration at Mormonism’s continued intrusion into his life, despite the fact that he stopped attending several years ago - missionaries, visiting teachers, and other ward members continue to visit his house, inviting him to church. Resigning that day was both a public declaration of his oppositionality to the church and a final salute to his life as a Mormon. For Peter, the resignation march was the culmination of his personal journey out of the church - he told the group of several reporters now huddled around him. “It’s

now complete. I turned in my resignation letter today. I left the church philosophically six years ago, physically two years ago, and now I've left legally."

Embracing an ex-Mormon apostate identity was then, for ex-Mormons, a potential source of power and pride around which they could congregate and feel a sense of unity and camaraderie. As previous studies of marginalized communities - whether based on sexual, racial, or religious difference - have suggested, it is often only through a mimetic reappropriation of the stigmatized identity that a change, however slow and incremental, can be made. For ex-Mormons, simply walking away from the church, and "moving on," as members of the church frequently admonished them to do, was in many ways not possible. Those who did found themselves quickly isolated. It was only by maintaining an identification with the church as ex-Mormon apostates that they found a voice with which to speak, and a locus around which to gather in contrast to their previous positions of silence and defenselessness.

The march, however, was not just about seeking recognition within the Mormon community. Rather, in rejecting their membership in one community, in the march ex-Mormons effectively identified with and indexed their unification with a larger, and explicitly pluralistic, U.S. community.

In a speech to the marchers before their ascent to Ensign Peak, Paul, one of the organizers, explicitly drew on the rhetoric and iconography of democratic pluralism to make his case. In a grassy field from which the marchers would soon depart, Paul stood between a pair of American flags blowing in the wind, a few feet from a table upon which a "Declaration of Independence from Mormonism" had been signed by hundreds of the marchers, and gave his remarks:

In fundamentalist religions there are only three states of existence. Those who believe, those who don't yet believe, and those who have stopped believing. For fundamentalists, however, in the end there will be only one, and everyone will bow before the people who are right and the heretics and apostates will burn.

No matter how much we try to get along, there is that force that is hanging out there. Our goal today has nothing to do with the church perse. And that's why we're here and not down there. We're here because we reject that paradigm fundamentally, and we reject the idea that we have to fall in one of those three states.

There are literally thousands of people who are supporting us. But there is another group that would love to be here, but they can't. The fact is that the state of apostasy, the state of leaving the church, the state of leaving religion, leaves people in fear of losing custody of their children, losing jobs, losing their careers, losing their families, being ostracized in their communities, their children being locked out, and all sorts of negative ramifications that are happening today, right now. Divorces and destroyed lives, simply on your belief in metaphysics, which is not very understandable to people outside the paradigm.

About one hundred sixty years ago, after the first party of the Saints came into this valley, with their slaves and their polygamist wives, they came up here to this peak a few days later and they blessed the valley. One of the reasons they were on this peak, was because just over those mountains the trappers had set up a community and lived their permanently. And just over those mountains the Paiutes lived their permanently. This valley, from the get go, was a three state valley. It wasn't always the Mormons, and the Mormons didn't always control it.

Now we have a time and a place when those who are pluralistic in their views and their society outnumber those who want the one true path. And I think our goal here is to take it back. But not in a demanding sort of way, but only to say that we're here. And for our brothers and sisters who can't be here because of those ramifications, who are here with us in spirit, who know that they will face that, we're here for them.

Next year there'll be more of us, and the next year there'll be even more of us. But the goal is not to conquer the other. The goal is to live together and not believe the worst of each other. Our inspiration is Dan Savage in his "it gets better" project, which encourages people to publicly come out of the closet who are homosexuals. Because the studies show that your attitudes about folks has to do with how well you know them, how many homosexuals you know, how many you interact with everyday.

We don't want to be offensive, we just won't kowtow to those things.

We're not telling people to go out and be proselytizing non-Mormons, but were talking about living authentically and letting others know we're here, and that once you cross through on the other side there's peace and happiness. That's where we're at, and that's where we want to lead our brothers and sisters.

In Paul's narrative, the goal of ex-Mormons is to restore the valley to a state of pluralistic inclusiveness. He identifies the apostates' plight with the historical precedents of American, pluralistic democracy from which he could both articulate the need for redress, and a direction towards which ex-Mormons could turn as wayward members of the church. Referencing an earlier pluralism in the Utah area, even stark divisions between diverse factions of trappers, Paiutes, and Mormons, his was an appeal to a originary state of plurality to which Utah, and the U.S., was now ideally returning. In doing this, Paul enacted ex-Mormons' identification with the United States as a sacred community that transcended the sectarian and marginalizing politics they had been subject to within Mormonism.

After the march the internet message boards lit up with discussion - particularly on the Salt Lake Tribune website where the article on the march was said to have received the highest number of discussion posts in the newspaper's history. The debate focused on whether or not this "public show of a private matter" was newsworthy, with members of the church proudly arguing that such a drop in several hundred members was statistically insignificant, given the church's fourteen million worldwide members. One poster's remark reflects an anxiety felt by many Mormons, who despite their criticism of the march as unworthy of news coverage, took the time to read and engage in heated conversation over the matter on the boards, saying "These people leaving the church is SOOOOO not newsworthy. It's not even interesting. These people are sad and pitiful

because instead of living their lives, they DEFINE their lives by leaving an organization that they're not compelled to be a part of anyway.” For an image conscious church in the midst of the “Mormon Moment,” apostates vocally proclaiming their disaffection was an affront to the image they were attempting to construct in the media of being a church whose members were happy and satisfied, a religious labor every member was complicit in.

The march, its news coverage, and particularly the response it received on the boards thereby revealed a latent insecurity and anxiety within Mormonism over its public image and what it meant to have those who chose to leave the faith be vocal about their decision. If the church was selling itself as full of happy contented members, this is where ex-Mormons could have the most impact. Responding to one poster's assertion that ex-Mormons were just attention seekers, another poster drew attention to the “field” of attention in which both ex-Mormons and Mormons were playing on, replying, “So when the LDS Church builds its temples high up on the hill, builds them larger than all surrounding buildings, and lights them up in bright white lights, that's not drawing attention? Just be honest, you don't have a problem with drawing attention to yourself. You have a problem with people leaving ‘your team.’”

For ex-Mormons, it was exactly this sort of shameful secrecy they were seeking to combat and expose to a wider public. Many articulated the need for and legitimacy of a public demonstration as an inverted form of religious freedom, one that was equated to the rights Mormonism benefitted from on a daily basis. “A lot of folks make their faith a very public thing, and express their private convictions. Choosing to make your lack of faith public doesn't seem to be very different,” one man remarked. The freedom *of*

religion must, according to commenters, be extended to those outside the church in the form of freedom *from* religion. “If the LDS Church would leave the rest of us the hell alone, we’d be more than happy to return the favor. However, the LDS Church has inserted themselves into our lives by campaigning against our Civil Rights as American Citizens” someone caustically remarked. In reply to another commenter who argued that the Salt Lake Tribune should have followed the church owned Deseret news’ lead in not covering the event, one ex-Mormon wrote, “Your demand then, is that an event critical of the LDS church, staged in the city that is the headquarters of the LDS church, receive no press coverage in that city whatsoever. That would be censorship of the most blatant and restrictive kind and would be completely incompatible with the functioning of democracy in our state.” Having a “voice” as an apostate was framed not just in the register of freedom from religion, but as necessary in upholding the virtues of a politically democratic and religiously pluralistic state.

By making public what was supposed to be private, and by framing apostasy within wider discourses of tolerance and respect for difference, ex-Mormons sought to make Mormonism morally and publically accountable for its treatment of apostates in the wider sphere of public opinion where Mormonism was still negotiating its own inclusion. By presenting themselves as victims of intolerance at the hands of a hegemonic religious majority, it catapulted the act from one of isolated internal significance solely within Mormonism, to one with a much larger importance on the American political stage of minority rights and pluralistic inclusion.

“I am an Ex-Mormon”

The LDS church's entrance into the American public's imagination in the twenty first century was marked most notably, perhaps, not by the attention drawn to it through Republican Mitt Romney's presidential campaign, but by the hundreds of average faces that appeared on billboards, television, and internet ads across the country as part of the “I'm a Mormon” PR campaign. During the so called “Mormon Moment,” the PR campaign was a deliberate attempt by a newly empowered church public relations department to construct an image of the average Mormon different from the stereotypical one of straight laced, upper-middle class, and dominantly white members, epitomized by the well-dressed missionary figures that often appeared on people's doorsteps. Instead, the ads sought to normalize the public image of the church by profiling its members' racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, their inherently rational faith based on family values and integrity, and their membership in a church community that valued personal expression. On YouTube and the church website Mormon.org viewers could watch dozens of professionally produced profiles of members describing their personal interests, hobbies, professions, faith and family life, with the words “I am a Mormon” tagged at the end.

While the “I am a Mormon” campaign sought to normalize Mormons in the pantheon of American religious pluralism, in 2010 another series of videos began appearing on the internet under the label “I am an ex-Mormon.” Filmed and produced by a group of ex-Mormons, these videos instead sought to capitalize on Mormonism's mainstream success by publicizing the stories of those disaffected from the church.

Parodying the format of the church's videos, the "I am an ex-Mormon" video series depicted average members telling their "exit stories," narratives of religious disaffection and loss of faith.

The videos, accompanied on the I am an ex-Mormon website with a longer written version of people's exit stories, follow a format loosely similar to religious conversion narratives, or even Mormonism's own practice of "bearing testimony." In these narratives the apostate recounts their previous life in the church community, the emergence of social, theological, or psychological tension between themselves and the religion, a period of profound doubt and questioning, and finally their "breaking free" of the church and "conversion" to a new, largely secular, worldview. As others have written (Payne 2009; Avance 2013) such "deconversion narratives," "exit stories," or "apostimonies" as they were colloquially referred to in Utah, are common among religious apostates. However, in these studies the exit story is interpreted either as an analytical window into how the psychological and emotional process of deconversion correlates with the typical conversion experience, or, how the exit story constitutes a dramatic narrative performed by apostates as a means of gaining entry into a "subculture" of apostates, just as "conversion narratives" are used by the newly converted to signal their identification with the church body.

Yet what is not taken into account is how such exit stories are instead a constitutive element of an ongoing politics of identity making for those transitioning into the social category of nonbeliever. While exit stories do to some extent mediate the boundaries between religious and formerly religious communities, in the I am an ex-Mormon videos the primary audience was not groups of ex-Mormons to whom the

speaker was seeking entry. Rather, through such narratives, ex-Mormons sought to “speak back” to the church from which they left, but to which they were nevertheless still intertwined, to draw attention to their plight as a stigmatized minority, and to challenge the stigmatizing stereotypes they were often subjected to. The telling of exit stories or deconversion narratives should thereby be understood as a strategic counter-hegemonic discourse, rather than simply a reflection of the psychological or social transformations ex-Mormons were experiencing. They are an attempt by ex-Mormons to strategically inhabit their new social positions on the margins of Mormonism, and to discursively challenge the stereotypes they feel leveled at them in everyday life. This requires the use of several distinct rhetorical strategies.

For one, establishing credibility as a once “true believing Mormon” is important if the subsequent criticisms or complaints against the church are to be taken seriously. At the outset of several clips, the speaker is seen standing in front of the Salt Lake and Provo Temples, narrating their story of disaffection and disbelief while flanked by the towering spires of the Temples in the background. In one video, a man paces silently in front of the Provo Temple gates in an uncanny visual juxtaposition of the now nonbelieving apostate and the most sacred of Mormon iconography. Describing his once full-hearted dedication to the church as a temple worker and Sunday school teacher, he describes Mormonism being “at the very core of my identity” and “influenc[ing] everything I did.” Common in exit narratives, this intimate identification with the former religion is a rhetorical strategy employed in order to deflect accusations that those who leave are spiritually lazy or institutionally uninvolved. Another ex-Mormon similarly explains, highlighting his status as a “dyed in the wool” Mormon, “I am a 6th generation member of the LDS church. My

family was always active in the church...I served a mission for the church completely convinced that the church was "true." I knew that I was helping to build the kingdom of God on earth and bring people into it."

Once the former religious identification is established, however, several of the videos sought to draw attention to the symbolic violence committed against those who question or lose faith. That those who question religious dogmatism can be socially ostracized and maligned, strikes many ex-Mormons as a contemporary form of social injustice committed against nonreligious minorities. Jim, an ex-Mormon man I knew who had travelled throughout the United States, once marveled to me at the unique "backwardness" of Utah as an enclave of religious bigotry in the country. Looking around the room at a local ex-Mormon atheist meeting, he explained to me that, "We all come here because we feel oppressed by religion. It's weird because we live in a country where that doesn't happen, but here it is, happening to us." I wanted to question whether he considered places in the mid-west or deep south, where Pentecostal, Baptist, and Evangelical strands of Christianity prevailed as similarly oppressive, but nevertheless understood his point. Perhaps nowhere else in the U.S. other than Utah do strict categorical divides between current and former members come with such punitive consequences for those who stop believing. ex-Mormons therefore seek to draw attention to these repercussions as a means of demonstrating the ways in which they have been collectively and categorically oppressed by a dominant religious majority. Accentuating this condition of "living in the shadows," as apostates from the church often described it, one anonymous man's video was filmed at night, a bright street lamp shining behind his

head, effectively shrouding his face in darkness, out of fear that his family would find out about his disbelief.

Hi, we're standing here in beautiful rural Utah, in the United States of America, land of the free, home of the brave, peak of the Information Age. Where thoughts are shared with impunity and celebration. And I'm afraid to say what I truly feel. There's this tyranny of thought that were trapped within, that tells us what we're supposed to believe, what we can believe, what we can say and to whom we can say it.

I've been told that it's ok if I have doubts, it's ok if I don't believe everything that Joseph Smith. But I was also told that I must not tell that to anybody else. Some of these people that I talk to, we have to talk in hushed voices, because were afraid of anybody overhearing us....

I know a gal who decided because of the church's position in proposition 8 she stopped going to church, she just could not handle it anymore. And her kids are not allowed to play at some of her neighbors houses, simply because she had a problem with bigotry against gays. Her children are ostracized in this community.

When you go to church and you hear how bad those people who leave all are, and how those people are sinners, it makes you silent. And those people who intellectually can't handle it are stuck. They can't express what they feel, and, they're afraid to lose their family, they're afraid to lose their job, they're afraid to be ostracized from the community. They're afraid what will happen to their children if they just come out and say no I can't believe it any more. So they stay. They stay silent. They're afraid to say anything.

And there are many who are like this. The Mormon church teaches that it's right. That it has the answer to anything. And that if you question it...you are seen as an enemy, you are cast aside. It shuts you up. It keeps you quiet. It keeps you going and playing the game that you don't want to. And there's a lot of people who are trapped in that same scenario. My heart goes out to them. We're stuck. We don't know where to go. We don't know where to turn to.

This is a problem that's becoming greater and greater in areas that are predominantly LDS. You cannot come out as a nonbeliever without risking losing everything. I think that the church is doing more damage to itself than they know. I can't tell you my name. I don't want to lose my family. But I'm an ex-Mormon.

The fear of voicing doubt or dissension is driven by stereotypes of ex-Mormons which presume that those who leave have committed some grievous sin or have fallen into

spiritual apathy, and thus must be avoided. Ex-Mormons therefore also used these videos as an opportunity to explain their loss of belief, to counter the gossip circulating about why people leave and to provide counter-explanations for their loss of faith. As Nick describes, the notion of having a testimony based on personal feelings seemed increasingly unsubstantiated and lacking “objective” proof:

As I began to study church history and church doctrine and scriptures, seriously, for the first time in my life, I began to have more and more questions about it...for the first time I let myself think, what am I really basing this on. And I realized I was really basing it on subjective experience. You're always taught to read the Book of Mormon and pray about it, and if you get a good feeling that means it's true. And I began to really consider for the first time, does that really mean it's true? Doesn't a Muslim praying in Mecca have the same feeling, and use it to confirm their faith. I decided that even if that feeling is from the Holy Ghost, that subjective feeling isn't good enough. Because no matter how powerful it is, no matter how much it feels external it's still subjective and it still could be self delusion and wishful thinking.

For others like Alex, the obligation to “know the church is true,” the very foundation of every faithful member's testimony, precipitated his personal experience of disenchantment. Standing in front of the Salt Lake Temple, Alex tells his story:

I suppose my story starts around seven years old when I was at Sunday school. My mom was the substitute that day. She gave a lesson on giving your testimony. She wrote the first line of what we were supposed to say on the board. “I know the church is true.” As her son she called on me to say it, and I refused. I knew I didn't know the church was true. I didn't have such knowledge that I was aware. And I wouldn't lie, that's not how I was raised. And everyone else seemed to know, they always said they knew the church was true in their testimonies every fast Sunday. People would ask me how my testimony was going, and I would say fine. But I didn't actually know if I had one.

Not “knowing” the church is true, or otherwise having a weak testimony is a frequent occurrence in the church. Alex describes reaching out to his bishop for help. Yet, the disappointment he felt at realizing there was little the church could provide for those who questioned prefigured his total collapse of faith.

I told him I was having problems believing. And he told me what everyone else had told me. That I should do Moroni’s challenge. I knew this didn’t make any sense, I knew there was only one answer you could get. It was biased from the start. You either knew the church was true. You got that feeling. Or nothing happened, and then you were supposed to do it until you die, I suppose.

“Moroni’s challenge” refers to an exhortation found in scripture to those pondering the truth of the Book of Mormon, in which the seeker of truth is told to “ponder in your heart,” asking God “if these things are not true” with “a sincere heart, with real intent,” upon which time “He will manifest the truth of it...by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Alex’s lack of testimony then, he exclaims, is not based on a lack of spiritual fortitude or motivation, but rather, stems from an inherent fallacy in Mormon logic. The challenge only accepts as a correct answer those responses which affirm its assumptions. His loss of faith therefore reveals more about Mormonism’s own impotency in handling those who question and doubt, he asserts, than it does his own deficiencies as a believer.

Constructing an ex-Mormon identity also at times means identifying moral hypocrisy within the church. In such a way do ex-Mormons attempt to reverse the stigma of nonbelief and thus position themselves as having transcended Mormonism and achieved a moral high ground outside of the church.

Eva stands in a forest, silhouetted against the white snow layered in the background. Eva always wanted to live the perfect Mormon life that her parents taught her to pursue. “I’ve always admired my parents. Their love for me and their love for their beliefs always impressed me and I wanted to be like them. So I tried my best to do everything we were taught to do in church. I listened to the prophets, I even served a mission. When I came home from that mission I snagged myself the perfect Mormon boy and he was just what my family wanted from me.” However, two years into her marriage, Eva describes her husband’s research of church history and decision to leave the church, a turn of events that left her “devastated.” Turning to her parents, bishop, and stake president for advice, she was counselled to divorce her husband. It was a decision, she says in the video, that seems antithetical to the stated mission of the church. “I thought that I was doing the right thing, that I was following my belief and my faith” Eva explains. “Looking back, this church that had told me that family was first, had [instead] ripped mine to pieces.” Shortly after her divorce Eva also left the church, and despite the turmoil the church’s teachings had put her through, reconnected with her husband.

Similarly, Mormonism bills itself as a bastion of family values, touting a theology that proudly boasts the ability to grant families an eternal existence together after death. Those who leave the church, as discussed above, are therefore believed to not only be jeopardizing their eternal families, but are also thought to live in temporal disarray as well, as they no longer have the guiding, steady hand of the priesthood to lead them. In the “I am an ex-Mormon” videos, several ex-Mormons attempt to counter this hegemonic discourse of the family within Mormonism, while undermining the stereotype that ex-

Mormons are invariably living in “bad families.” For example, Kerri describes how Mormonism’s teachings on “eternal families” affected her relationship to her children.

My innate feelings are that I love my children so much, that I am bonded to them so much, that I'm not going to lose them. Yet this doctrine, these ordinances, make it so that I'm separated from them if we don't all obey...This doctrine is about the cruelest thing that can be foisted on a human brain. Your love for your family is being used against you, to keep you in line, to keep you obeying. You know, as a little kid I feared that, I feared losing my parents, having to go to the lowest kingdom and be without them forever. That is cruel and unusual punishment, that is fear programming, I do not think that a loving celestial parent would use fear programming to maintain membership in its church.

When you're always in fear of losing them you kind of put up a little shield over your heart. ‘Well what if I lose them’, I don't want it to rip my heart out completely. So you put a shield there. And you don't bond with your kids the way you're supposed to. Then you're always yelling at them because you want them to be good so they will stay with you forever.

Well guess what, now that I'm not part of this church I can just love my children as deeply and fully as I wanted to. And when they make mistakes I hug them, I cuddle them, and I don't scold them. We talk through it, we bring wisdom in, and share enlightenment. And I don't just say, you're not going to get to the temple if you do this, or you're no to going to get to be with me forever if you don't do this. That's all irrelevant. And I was so happy to be able to realize that and take the shield down and to love my children deeply and properly the way I always wanted to.

Ex-Mormons also sought to counter stereotypes of the dysfunctional ex-Mormon family by “normalizing” the appearance of ex-Mormon families, and displaying the same “traditional values” found in church teachings. “Hi, we’re the Leavitts,” Sean’s smiling face greets the viewer. “We’re the typical Utah family. We have fun together. We do a lot of activities together” Sean’s wife Stacy, explains, as the camera pans over their family of four playing bocce ball and climbing trees in the backyard. The image turns to the family sitting side by side on a couch.

Sean: We were a bit nervous when we decided to talk to our kids about leaving the church. We weren't sure how they were going to react. We were kind of afraid they'd be really upset. But they took it really well. They were worried whether we were still going to do stuff as a family still or you know, how things were going to go. We just assured them that we were still a family and still going to do stuff as a family.

Sean and Stacy's son: When my parents told us that we were leaving the church we had the option to stay or leave or go to a different religion. They left the choice up to me, so I thought that was really cool.

Sean: It's cost us a couple of friendships, but we've gained a lot more friendships with people who really want to be our friends because of who we are and not because of what organization we belong to. And I count myself really really lucky. We're all together, and we're a lot more together than we've ever been.

Micah similarly emphasizes his enduring appreciation for “traditional family values” as both a Mormon and now an ex-Mormon. In his video he fluidly transitions from a story of growing up Mormon to describing the continued vibrancy of his marriage.

Growing up in a large family, when we would go on vacation, my parents would put us all in bright colored t-shirts, bright neons or greens, or we'd have neon pink hats, for example. It made it really easy for them to keep track of us, because there were ten of us. We'd get a lot of looks when we were out east or in New York or wherever we were going. Now I have my own family, we have three kids, my wife and I are coming up on our ten year anniversary actually. And we really are best friends. We often turn down invites for guys nights out or girls nights out because we'd rather be together.

Religion is often heralded as not just a purveyor of religious truths, but a source of personal fulfillment and happiness, while religious apostates are often stereotyped as combative, bitter, or vengeful. The I am an ex-Mormon videos, however, complicate these binaristic assumptions by describing a life outside religion as one in which the

nonreligious are able to realize their full potential without being circumscribed by religious dogma. “Leaving the church has been the best thing I’ve ever done with my life. I’ve never been happier, I’ve never been more fulfilled. I’ve never felt more satisfied, more hopeful, optimistic, and positive about life in general,” one woman describes. Another suggests that losing their faith has allowed another side of themselves long hidden to shine through. “The best thing that has happened is I feel like I’m living in tune with myself, that I’m being honest with myself.” The benefits of personal transformation and discovery following apostasy was the subject of many people’s exit stories. Mike, for example, who in his video for the first time is open about his disaffection to his family, focuses on how in his disbelief he has become more open to and better at empathizing with other people.

One thing that I've gained is I feel a lot more comfortable when I am talking with people. I feel like when I'm having a conversation with somebody I don't need to worry about spinning the conversation to some gospel direction in an attempt to try and convert the other person. I feel like I can have a meaningful conversation with the other person without a hidden agenda. I find that I'm more respectful of other people's beliefs and as a nonbeliever I'm less judgmental of other people. Everyone that knows me knows that I constantly seek after the truth and that I try to be a better person everyday. And I want you to know that that's still how I live my life.

Similarly, Micah describes his apostasy as a transformation to a much more hope-filled mode of existence, in which the dour cynicism of Mormon teachings concerning “the world” have been shed, allowing for him to embrace an ethics of inclusivity.

Often you hear in the LDS church about how you should bring all the good that you have, if you're not a member for example, and see if they can add to it. Leaving Mormonism I kind of took that same approach. I took the good that I got from

Mormonism and still have that in my life today and have found so many other things that have expanded my view and enjoyment of life. In leaving Mormonism it was like my eyes were opened. I see a lot more hope in the world than I did before. That there doesn't need to be an apocalypse. There doesn't need to be a world war three that ushers us into some millennium for example. I think with science and technology as it is, the more advanced we get as a society, the more we expand our family circles and we can start thinking about us as a global society...My religion now is my integrity, and follow the evidence where it leads me, and to live life to the fullest.

In addition to appearing on the I am an ex-Mormon website, the videos were also available for viewing on a dedicated YouTube channel. There, in the “comments” section under each video, the identity politics of ex-Mormonism waged on, with self-identified Mormons and ex-Mormons vigorously criticizing and praising the videos, respectively. Those identifying as ex-Mormon praised the courage it took for the people in the videos to tell about their experiences, or wrote their own confessions of doubt and disillusionment, thereby further perpetuating the creation of a “class” of ex-Mormons. However, self-identified church members lambasted ex-Mormons as full of lies and perpetuating the work of “anti-Mormons” who were intent on “destroying the church.” There the politics of adopting an ex-Mormon identity was revealed as a social process fraught with religious sectarianism and bigotry towards those speaking out against the church. Some commenters, for example, attempt to discount the very legitimacy of an ex-Mormon identity - that is, an identity that is based on a personal decision to denounce and oppose one's former religion - by accusing those who adopt it as secretly having been excommunicated for having led a life of sin.

"Ex-mormon"?.....HA Oh please!.....If you left the church which (sic) means you are less activity (sic) in the church not ex mormon....if ex mormon that means you are excommunicated from the church for wrong doing against God's

wills and no longer a member of that church... You are judging the LDS church and other churches...you know that?.....Only God knows which church is true.

Another states:

Plain and simple. This guy had a breakdown in his life and snapped. He now lies to himself and others. He obviously had sin in his life that he couldn't cope with and give up. So he snapped. He is foolish and has a lot to learn, if he ever chooses to learn again. He needs to wise up!

Others simply dismiss ex-Mormons as unqualified to have a voice on religious matters - including their own experiences of losing faith in the church - by virtue of the fact that they no longer identify with the religion anymore. As one commenter replied, "You clearly are not saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. So shut up." Such responses are familiar to ex-Mormons. As they find out becoming an ex-Mormon is equivalent, in the eyes of many church members, to aligning oneself with Satan, the very archetypal personification of nonbelief.

The truth is that the LDS church REALLY is Christ's true church. That is the real truth. Anti-Mormons don't like truth, just as Satan didn't like it when Moses wouldn't worship him. What did Satan do? He ranted upon the earth. What is another way of saying that? Satan threw a temper tantrum when Moses wouldn't worship him...Anti-Mormons don't like truth, because anti-Mormons have the same contentious spirit that the devil himself does. That's the real truth. The LDS church IS TRUE!

When I talked to my ex-Mormon friends in Utah who had filmed their own I am an ex-Mormon videos, their primary concern was not to "embarrass the church" as church members often claimed. Rather, I came to see these videos, these exit stories, as extensions of their heartfelt pleas for respect and understanding from a church

community who was often antagonistically at odds and dismissive of their very personhood as nonbelievers. They were struggling to figure out what it meant to no longer be Mormon, while also attempting to inhabit this ambiguous and marginalized zone of ex-Mormonism. They sought to do this, primarily, by reaching out to loved ones and trying to explain what it meant for them to no longer be members of the church. One of my close friends in Utah, Nathan, in fact said he hesitated before deciding to film his video. He was concerned that his family might misunderstand him, that they might see it as an act of hostility. Yet he wanted to be heard, he wanted his family and every other ex-Mormons family to “see who we really are, not who they think we are.” Sitting in the lobby of a hotel in downtown Salt Lake City during the intermission of an annual ex-Mormon Foundation conference, with his characteristic straightforward, gentle demeanor, Nathan told his story.

One of the things that’s been important to me throughout my life is my family. I really love them. I was always brought up with beliefs that were just fine by me. In fact I loved them. And then I started to learn some information that was different than that...This was fine except that my parents or siblings, their beliefs didn’t change when mine did. My decision to leave the church has not always been easy for my family to deal with and yet its a reflection of my sincere belief that a person should have integrity. Their actions should match their words. My name is Nathan, and I’m an ex-Mormon.

“Is ‘ex’ all we are?”

As can be seen, ex-Mormonism in many ways defined itself in its collective opposition to Mormonism. Theirs was an identity of ultimate alterity. A positionality sustained and fostered by a constant antagonism to the former faith. However, defining a sense of

collective and personal identity strictly in terms of what you are not is inherently precarious. It requires reifying representations of the other that are not always stable, and which among ex-Mormons, came to be a source of internal division as not everyone agreed what this thing called Mormonism is, how they were wronged by it, and what one should do about it. At a more existential level, *ex*-Mormonism is, as a collective grouping or nonreligious identity, only made possible inasmuch as it maintains its oppositionality to Mormonism. Ex-Mormonism can never stand on its own. In order to be an *ex*-Mormon, Mormonism must be continuously reengaged with, talked about, and rejected - disidentification from Mormonism was thus predicated on a persistent identification with it. For ex-Mormons, then, collectively rejecting the church was thus both empowering and debilitating as it necessitated a recursive reinvigoration of that which they were trying to escape.

One ex-Mormon I knew, Jake, understood quite well ex-Mormons' ambivalent relationship to the church as a central component of its continued vitality as a distinct social grouping. He explained this by saying that there is a cycle of growth and dissolution the ex-Mormon community goes through that reflects the unsustainable nature of maintaining an "ex" positionality. "We're part of the second generation of ex-Mormons, and there's clearly a third generation cropping up now." Every few years this happens, he says, describing it as a process of crystallization and fragmentation. He worries that the circle of friends he is currently a part of now might not be around for much longer. His group of friends "crystallized" together two years ago when he and his wife began attending ex-Mormon support group meetings when they were "fresh out of the church." But now he worries that his group of friends are beginning to fragment, as

individuals' personalities and idiosyncratic interests pull apart the solidity they once felt in the early years of their disaffection and the shared anger they held towards the church. "We all are so different from each other," he says. "When you first leave the church it is easy to make friends because you can just get together and talk about how bad the church is. But after the anger subsides, people tend to break back up and stratify again."

It seemed that this was a pervasive structural vulnerability within ex-Mormonism. Anger, and its emotional correlate, fear, once abated, no longer serve as the intersubjective nucleus around which groups could "crystallize." Joan told me of a book club she and a group of her friends used to be a part of, called the "Infidel Women." She says they typically read "hard hitting, edgy books," feminist works, and books on science and philosophy that questioned the foundations of religion and "gave [them] a way to intellectually rage against the church." After six or seven months, however, it dwindled away, she says. "We were really passionate at first. But after a while there was nobody to fight against, so we kind of lost interest." She said that once they all realized "there's no big bad monster in the closet" they slowly lost interest and the group dwindled away.

In a similar case, at an ex-Mormon atheist book club meeting I once attended, while discussing Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian," one of the participants briefly interjected into the heated conversation about how Russell's criticisms of Christianity coincided so well with how they all felt about Mormonism. "It's ok that we get together like this to complain about the church," he said, "but we need to think about what brings us together other than our rejection of the church or religion. What does it mean for us to be atheists beyond our contempt for religion?" His words, however, were quickly drowned out by the ensuing fervent conversation. He fell silent, his exhortation

having fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, at times it seemed there was no ready answer for such questions. For ex-Mormons in the midst of distancing themselves from their former faith, creating and gathering around an identity defined solely by its oppositionality to religion was all they really had.

And sometimes, that was enough.

Ch 6: Melancholic Middle-way Mormons & Angry Ex-Mormons

The study of nonreligious, secular, and atheist groups in the United States has been rather scant, despite growing numbers of religious “nones” on the U.S. religious landscape (Lee and Bullivant 2010:26). When I began my research on religious apostasy and disenchantment in 2012 there were only several, mostly edited, volumes dedicated to “apostasy” or “religious disaffiliation/exiting” (Babinski 2003; Bromley 1988; Bromley 1998; Wilson 1994; Winell 2006; Wright 1987). Part of the problem, as I have found in my research, is identifying who or what specifically is the object of study. To isolate a social collective as belonging to a clearly defined “group” with a consistent “identity” is problematic, not only because these “groups” are largely amorphous, informal, and decentralized, but also because they are internally heterogeneous with largely porous social boundaries across which “members” frequently traverse. However, this is also in large part because labels such as nonbeliever, nonreligious, secular, atheist, agnostic, humanist, skeptic, apostate, etc. are nondescript, and overlapping, with nonexclusive ideological boundaries.

Although the people I spoke with would contend that the church, on a “factual” basis, was not “true” in the way they once thought it was, there was little consistency in what that meant for how they related to Mormonism now as, for lack of a better word, “nonbelievers.” The people I spoke with ran the gamut from sympathetic admirers of Mormonism’s strength and fortitude as a religious movement, to outright iconoclasts bent on “disproving” Mormonism, variously viewing religion as a matter of individual consciousness that should be respected; a corrupt moral institution that should be

dismantled; a social organization that although fictitious should be tolerated for its ability to bring “good” into the world; and, a natural byproduct of human development that modern humans have evolved past the need for.

While in the previous chapter I discussed people’s strategic re-appropriation of the apostate label and the creation of a distinct “ex-Mormon” identity, in this chapter I seek to complicate these categories. What I present here is a way of thinking deeper about, and in more nuanced terms, than the categories of “apostate” or “nonreligious” and the positionalities they are assumed to inhabit vis a vis their relationship to religion. If we are to understand the effects of secularization in its local, historically contingent, and culturally specific iterations, we must attend to the various outcomes the experience of a loss of belief can take, aiming for less categorization and more contextualization, and sensitive to the multiple, often contradictory identifications that prevail amidst “nonbelievers.”

To these ends, this chapter explores and compares two case studies of “nonbelievers” in Utah - one a so-called “middle-way Mormon,” the other an “angry ex-Mormon” - as a way of discussing the various ways in which religion is variously dis/identified with in the wake of disbelief. My aim, however, is not to impose another set of conceptual or cultural categories, but rather to present two cases that reflect the diversity within the category of Mormon “nonbelievers.” It therefore seeks to address a set of questions stemming from the rise of apostasy in Utah, including: How is the loss of belief circumscribed or intersected by ethnic and cultural identities? And how does dis/identification with and of religion inform people’s beliefs and behaviors as “nonbelievers” and their relationship with their former faith? What my comparison of

middle-way and ex-Mormons illustrates is how nonbelief can lead to widely divergent attempts to maintain or sever ongoing attachments to a former faith, to blur boundaries between believers and nonbelievers or to passionately insist on their reification.

I begin by discussing the phenomenon of “middle-way Mormonism” through a case study of a man who was, to whatever extent the word is useful here, a “leader” of this “group.” Among middle-way Mormons, I argue, the boundaries between belief and disbelief are productively blurred as its proponents seek to focus on their primary goal of maintaining a cultural identification with Mormonism. This identification with Mormonism, despite the absence of belief, reveals itself as an emergent form of nonbelieving melancholia in the contemporary church. That which is lost in religious disbelief is nevertheless held onto through new forms of religious belonging. I then juxtapose middle-way Mormons’ cultural identification by turning to a discussion of how ex-Mormons disidentify with Mormonism by identifying with the affects of “anger” and “craziness” as a means of staking out and performatively inscribing boundaries between themselves and their former church. Finally, I describe how ex-Mormons’ further perform and reinscribe these boundaries with Mormonism through sharing “exit stories” and engaging in a practice I describe as “policing disbelief.”

Melancholic Middle-way Mormonism

When I first met Josh at a dinner-party, he struck me as a walking contradiction. Through a mouthful of toothpick skewered pork appetizers he told me, “I’m a vegetarian that sometimes eats meat.” And in regards to his Mormonism Josh describes himself, with

equally self-satisfied contradiction, as a “religious humanist with atheist tendencies.”

He knows, with all probability, that God does not exist, and he's fluent in the historical and doctrinal issues with the church. Yet he studies religion with passion and conviction, even finding the "power of worship" at times personally gratifying. “I like to say I’m a religious pragmatist,” he says, a phrase he is fond of using as a point of pontifical departure in conversations with the other "middle way Mormons” in his social circle.⁸¹

Despite his “non-belief,” Josh never describes himself as an ex-Mormon. Rather, he prefers the term "cultural Mormon" or "middle way Mormon." For those like Josh, “ex-Mormon” reflects an ideology of secular intolerance, a scouring dismissal of religious belief and practice that is too antagonistic in its relationship to the church, and too black and white in its notions of spirituality and rationality. It reinforces the very barriers and boundaries he is trying to overcome.

As a member of the church Josh enjoyed “using the priesthood” in his daily life, the communal intimacy of leading family prayer, and the familial economy of care he oversaw in giving blessings to his wife and children. Reading the scriptures on a daily basis allowed for quiet reflection, while singing hymns at church ritually entered him into a state of collective effervescence.

Like other middle-way Mormons, Josh cherishes his Mormon heritage, and looks back with fondness on his life in the church. Losing his faith in Mormonism’s truth

81 Although the term “middle-way Mormon” is quite heterogenous, it nominally refers to those who have relinquished a literal belief in Mormonism’s religious teachings while still holding onto its community and cultural heritage. The “middle-way” has become necessary, according to Josh, because traditional ways of being Mormon have become untenable - given the easy access to faith challenging knowledge about the church - and at times even “harmful,” while outright rebuking their Mormon heritage is equally unthinkable. Middle-ways actively seek solutions to this contemporary predicament of faith vs. culture.

claims, its theology, mythology, and cosmology, did not mean he lost faith in Mormonism as a set of social relationships, cultural practices, and symbolic ordering of the temporal world. These he sought to hold onto. “I have too much to lose by walking away,” he said, “why can’t being a Mormon mean something bigger than how people typically think of it, even bigger than the church itself? I think that’s possible. And if I’m right, that means people won’t have to risk losing everything just because all the other stuff turned out not to be true.”

So despite experiencing his own crisis of faith in the "one true church" several years prior, Josh would proudly proclaim “I *am* a Mormon” from time to time when we would discuss the complexity of his disbelief, stubbornly holding onto the identity, the way of life, that was at risk of slipping away.

Indeed, as I came to appreciate, while he disavowed the theological tenets of his faith, he was striving to hold onto his cultural heritage. “These are my people. That’s why I poke fun at them so much” he once chided. So rather than outright rejecting Mormonism, Josh maintains a cultural identification with Mormonism that complicates an understanding of *loss of religious faith* as inevitably leading to a *loss of religious identity*. Instead, middle-way Mormons like Josh actively promote the blurring of boundaries between member and former member through imaginatively repositioning faith as a sufficient, though not necessary, component of church membership.

For example, part of Josh’s brand of middle-way Mormonism is his belief in the existence of a multitude of ways of “being Mormon” that do not require a literal belief in religious truth claims. I was once unwittingly made complicit in this imaginative redefinition of “Mormonism” when at a middle-way Mormon BBQ Josh enthusiastically

introduced me to a group of friends as someone “researching the plurality of Mormon identities,” or what Josh and other middle-wayers proudly refer to as “Big Tent Mormonism.” “Anybody is welcome here...” Josh proclaimed, looking around at the mass of people celebrating their spiritual diversity, “...no matter what you believe.” This imaginary community of Big Tent Mormonism allowed Josh to conceive of a mode of religious personhood and religious belonging big enough to encompass an almost infinite diversity of Mormon believers and nonbelievers, no one put at risk of being excluded, no one at risk of losing the communal embrace of the church.

While Josh is indeed aware of the “harmful effects” of religion, when defined in its institutional and ideological dimensions, and despite his atheism, he says religion can in fact be harnessed as a “force for good.” “Mormonism has so much potential,” Josh quipped one morning as we took our seats at a Sunday morning sacrament meeting we once attended together. As we sat together I noticed that there seemed to be an affective longing in Josh to tap back into Mormonism’s unrealized potential, a potential he said had been spoiled by Mormonism’s insistence on a dogmatic allegiance to absolute belief at the expense of religion’s inherent ability to bring people together by bridging social divisions and uniting them under a common identity and purpose. “The church is in a slow state of collapse” he whispered to me as we sat amidst his fellow parishioners in the crowded pews, “look around, no one really wants to be here. It’s all so rigid and unfulfilling.” Yet, as the piano began to play that morning, and the congregation sing, I saw Josh stand with alacrity, his baritone voice ringing out in unison with the congregation, wholeheartedly joining in the emergent symphonic sociality of the hymn. Later that morning, as we walked back to his car in the parking lot, Josh reflected on that

potential some more with equal parts melancholy and hopefulness. “All we need to do is take what’s good about the church” he said, “and let go of all the rest.”

This sentiment in fact informed much of Josh's activities during the time I knew him. Along with a group of other middle-way Mormons, Josh had begun to put this vision of religious redemption to work. For Josh, the ideal form of religious practice is one in which church members, while intellectually aware that the church is not literally “true,” act “as if” the actual “truth” of the church did not matter, thus granting them the ability to participate in its sacred rituals and relationships, gleaned whatever benefits may come, without experiencing cognitive dissonance when its “truth claims” do not hold up to critical scrutiny. Reflecting on what this might look like, Josh described for me a church of enlightened patrons free to mix intellectual and spiritual pursuits and allegiances under one “big tent Mormon” roof. “I imagine a church community” he said, “where at one moment we can discuss science and evolution, deconstruct religion with philosophy and rationality, then in the next moment sing hymns and read scriptures for all that they can teach us about love and grace and redemption...”

It seemed as if Josh and middle-wayers in general were imaginatively seeking a purer form of Mormon authenticity, not through promoting stricter forms of orthodoxy - as is the institutional church’s current tactic - but rather through glorifying heterodoxy. Indeed, a discordant understanding of scripture and theology, rather than undermining people’s religious identifications, is, according to Josh, a means of restoring and strengthening a more primary identification with the Mormon people, in more essential terms, as *volk*.

So despite his ostensible atheism, Josh’s identification with Mormonism seemed

genuine. This led Josh to consider it his personal duty to bring about a restoration of the church from within, to salvage what is best about Mormonism, and discard the rest, a feat he said he could achieve only if he further entwined himself in the church, and maintained his appearance as an active, faithful member. “That’s why it’s so important for me to stay on good terms with everybody in my ward. They need to think I’m one of them,” he says when talking about his plans to bring about an internal transformation of the church, “otherwise I’d never be able to talk to them about all this stuff.” In a sense, Josh was seeking to collapse the boundaries of being/not being “one of them” as conditional upon adhering to a set of orthodox beliefs. “See, what you have to do is make them start asking questions, make them start critically thinking, without activating all of their defenses. You can only do this if you speak their language and are able to get underneath their radar.”

Josh’s relationship to religion is therefore not one of antipathy but of productive, empathetic identification. So rather than arguing with church members directly, Josh says he aims to give them the “intellectual tools” to “dig themselves out,” seeing himself as a savior of sorts, preaching the gospel of the “middle-way.” “I think I can heal people by educating them” he says, referring to his participation in Sunday School classes where he attempts to “get people to start thinking” by creatively interpreting scripture, without being overtly heretical, and an online blog and podcast he produces in which he discusses Mormon scripture, theology, history, and culture in a way that will “challenge people” while still maintaining the semblance of being “faith friendly.” As such, he acts the part of a messianic Christ or Joseph Smith figure, ready to usher his people into a “healthier” appreciation of their Mormonism that focuses on the stories, values, and community that

make it great, and not the “mindless obedience” to the lessons and leadership who currently dominate it. He slyly tells me when he talks about the impact of his group on the church, that the ultimate goal of his work is to function as an “agent of disintegration” to the institutional church, while also providing a viable “substitute” for Mormons to flock to after it crumbles. Yet, Josh rather seemed to enjoy his “being one of them” status, his ability to sustain a mode of existence ambiguously straddling the boundaries of the church; for he could dress the part of a Mormon, wearing a white shirt and tie to church, sing hymns, and spiritually reflect on scripture stories, all while telling himself he was “helping” these other naive Mormons, and then return home, take off his garments, and drink a beer on his back porch while critically debating the existence of God.

For the middle-way movement as a whole, maintaining such identifications thereby actively mitigated against the various experiences of loss that arose in the wake of disbelief. Unlike ex-Mormons, who I discuss below, middle-way Mormons sought ways to “make it work,” to stay engaged with Mormonism *despite* their nonbelief, to blur and shift the typical boundaries constructed between what it meant to be a believer or nonbeliever. Middle-way Mormonism in effect arises in response to people’s inability, or unwillingness, to “let go of the church all the way,” and to in effect sustain the imaginary presence of Mormonism in their everyday lives, despite the actual loss of their belief in it as a “true” religion.

Middle-way Mormons were in fact actively working to create a parallel church, one in which the ideals of heterodoxy, inclusivity, and a nostalgic reclamation of Mormonism in its most basic form could be achieved. Unlike ex-Mormons, who met together primarily through informal social networks and in online spaces, middle-way

Mormons hosted quasi-sacrament meetings, during which participants could give their own versions of a “testimony” in support of whatever belief or value they held, and congregants could join together to sing Mormon hymns. While attending one of these meetings, held at a protestant church the middle-wayers had rented out, I sat next to a man in his early forties attending with his young son. The man clasped his son’s hand as they sang hymns together, his face pensive and intent. As we filed out of the pews after the make-shift benediction (consisting of announcements for other middle-way activities going on, and an invitation for people to attend the next meeting in a few months) he stopped me to say hello. As we got talking he described the “cloud” he had been living in over the past several months since he began losing his faith, a deep sense of despair that left him despondent and sad. “It’s so strange being here” he said, “but this is exactly what I needed. I feel like a weight has been lifted off of me.” Although his wife was still a believing member of the church, he said he was unable to attend sacrament meetings with her. He said he “couldn’t bring myself to go anymore once I saw through the charade.” “I missed all this though,” he confessed, looking around the room at the hundreds of people milling about. “I really did. I thought I’d lost it all forever. Maybe I’ll reach a point someday where I don’t need this kind of stuff anymore. But for now it’s really all that’s keeping me together.”

As I have discussed in previous chapters, leaving the church brings with it the loss of a sense of community and collective purpose. Middle-wayers know this, and rather than leave Mormonism altogether, rejecting their faith and the church community as a whole, they choose to stay engaged with Mormonism as a means of retaining a sense of collective and personal identity. By articulating their allegiance to the “benefits” of

religion Mormonism was neither negated nor denied, but rather strategically reappropriated and deployed as an essential form of identity that mitigated against the threat of fragmentation and dislocation they might experience should they “cut ties” completely.

Further, criticizing and disavowing the institutional church and its doctrines while simultaneously identifying with the “Mormon people” enables middle-way Mormons to create a collective (and even messianic) sense of purpose for themselves. This is illustrated in one woman’s comment on an online message board dedicated to middle-way Mormonism, when she says “We have a duty to hold onto our church membership as long as possible...Our families and friends need us...this is the burden we have to bear on behalf of those who are still victims of intellectual and spiritual repression in the church. We are their only hope.” Such seemingly contradictory positionalities and motivations are in fact not contradictory at all. As Georg Simmel writes, “One might even say that obedience and opposition are merely two sides or links of one human attitude which fundamentally is quite consistent” (1950:193). Only by maintaining some semblance of relations of obedience can the possibility of coordinated, purpose driven oppositionality be fully sustained.⁸²

Related to this, I also found that the “middle-way Mormon” groups Josh circulated in stayed engaged with Mormonism, despite their personal non-belief, partly because it maintained the feeling of sense of power and satisfaction at possessing certain secret knowledge unshared with the larger community. For example, during a

82 I further discuss this dynamic below in relation to ex-Mormons’ explicit, antagonistic oppositionality to Mormonism. In contrast to middle-way Mormons, ex-Mormons sense of purpose and unity is driven by vitriol for the church. Yet when that “anger” runs out, many ex-Mormons find that they lose their sense of connection or common purpose with the “ex-Mormon movement.”

conversation I was involved in at a middle-way bbq Drew began talking disparagingly about the historical circumstances of Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy. His wife Pauline, after taking a quick glance around her, nudged him with her elbow and whispered in his ear, pointing towards a woman standing nearby in earshot of Drew's voice. Looking over his shoulder, Drew cringed, dropped his voice, and said that he would "keep it down." I looked at Pauline inquisitively, unsure what the problem was. "She doesn't know about all that," Pauline whispered to me with a giggle, "she's still a believer, and we don't want to burst her bubble too soon." This pleasure of secret keeping is in fact quite central to religious groups like Mormonism who maintain a set of teachings and ritual practices held apart from the wider populace. In Mormonism church members feel themselves in possession of religious "truths" - found in scripture and ensconced in sacred temple rituals - which set their sacred community apart from the larger non-Mormon world. However, many middle-way Mormons, after losing their faith by reading about Mormonism's other "secrets" hidden in its historical past feel that they were "duped" by church authorities who "kept the real truth hidden." In effect they lost the feeling of control and satisfaction that their sacred knowledge had once afforded them - the pleasure of keeping secrets had turned against them. Now, instead of simply abandoning the church community amidst their personal disbelief, they have created a "shadow church" parallel with Mormonism proper within which their shared knowledge of "Mormonism's dirty secrets" grants them a comparable sense of electness. Like Pauline, they seemed to take pleasure in being the ones who would shoulder the burden of this knowledge on behalf of the larger church community who "couldn't handle it." And in some sense usurping and asserting themselves into the paternalistic position of

being “the ones who know.”

While such acts could be interpreted as promoting the respectful tolerance of people’s diverse beliefs, in line with Josh’s promotion of “Big Tent Mormonism,” they also promoted what I sometimes heard described as a kind of tyranny of tolerance, in which those who engaged in critical discussion or argument were marginalized from the “big tent.” Many of the people who eventually became self-described “ex-Mormons” indeed began their journey out of the church through the middle-way groups. This was where their disbelief matured and strengthened. However, once it did, once they became more vociferously critical of Mormonism and religion in general, they found themselves occluded from conversation (especially in internet forums where “moderators” would often revoke people’s access to the sites) within which respect for people’s beliefs took precedence over “open and honest” discussion about Mormonism’s “problems.” The middle-way, despite its advocacy of tolerance and pluralism, had become in some cases dogmatic itself. The continued vitality of middle-way Mormonism depended on the strategic identification with Mormonism not being disrupted.

Finally, by maintaining a marginalized position vis a vis the church, yet insistently inserting themselves into its signifying universe, middle-way Mormons like Josh were also able to create for themselves a renewed sense of individual purpose and power, to become the messianic saviors of a fallen church, much like Joseph Smith aimed to do over a hundred and fifty years ago. For example, despite Josh’s nonbelief, he put a tremendous amount of thought and study into understanding how Mormonism operated and the potential benefits it could bring to people if used correctly. By calling for a new form of Mormonism, defined by tolerance and inclusion of heterodox beliefs, and an

emphasis on Mormon ethnicity divorced from religious dogmatism, Josh and his middle-way compatriots were able to clothe themselves in a superordinate authority above and beyond that of the institutional church, and thereby appeal to the increasing numbers of spiritually disillusioned and disenfranchised people in the church. As such he was able to wield a form of cultural capital increasingly valuable and sought after within contemporary Mormonism - the ability to explain why life in the LDS church had lost its lustre, all the while providing hope and encouragement to those discouraged by doubt and confusion in the form of a "big tent Mormonism." On various internet blogs, middle-way writers like Josh touted ways to "make it work," that is, how to maintain church membership while also questioning the veracity of its religious truth claims.

While in some sense this reflects a creative adaptation to the struggles of maintaining ties to a church community increasingly entrenching itself in unquestioning orthodoxy, the mutability of middle-way Mormons' personas and positionalities at times frustrated me. It was not that they resisted some sort of facile categorization of belief and belonging that I was after. Rather, for those who organized and directed much of the middle-way activities and events, their enigmatic stance on issues of belief and belonging seemed to betray an attempt to capitalize on their ability to straddle, traverse, and blur boundaries between insider/outsider, member/former member, believer/non-believer. Indeed, in the various online communities, blogs, podcasts, BBQs, book clubs and conferences in which middle-way Mormonism's "shadow church" has taken shape, various "leaders" of the movement - like Josh - have achieved a highly localized celebrity status. With their own partisan factions and devoted followers, some even garnish wages from their work in the form of donations, membership fees, and fundraising drives from a

cadre of followers happy to pay a new form of “tithing” to their newfound quasi-religious community. Touting the middle-way has become, in many cases, the lucrative way.

Josh, and the phenomenon of “middle-way Mormonism” of which he is a part, reveal key dimensions about the contemporary transformation of Mormonism, and, I think, the concomitant creation of ostensibly “nonbelieving” people in the U.S. who have maintained a productively empathetic relationship and identification with religion. Let me now turn to another form of nonbelief which has resulted in a more explicitly antagonistic relationship to religion.

Angry Ex-Mormons

While middle-way Mormons seek to maintain an aura of faithful membership as they work towards reconciliation and transformation from within, “ex-Mormons” are up to something quite different. While middle-way Mormons are conciliatory, their goal to bring about an internal metamorphosis of the church, many ex-Mormons are vocally hostile, seeking the dissolution and dismantling of a church they deem morally bankrupt and patently false. Among faithful church members and even middle-way Mormons, such a stance has bestowed upon ex-Mormons the designation of being “angry.” The terms *angry apostate*, *angry atheist*, and *angry ex-Mormon*, pervasively used and circulated within Mormonism, characterize people’s alterity to religion as one defined primarily by animosity and acrimony. Indeed, even in wider American religious discourse, so called “new atheists” are often dismissed as vengefully vitriolic against religion, their diatribes

against the perils of religiosity arraigned for their illiberal intolerance of people's faith and spirituality.

But what of being angry at religion? How does this affectively marked stance reveal deeper processes of disidentification from religion? Anger, as I want to discuss it here, reflects and reveals a micro-politics of boundary making that ex-Mormons are attempting to navigate as nonbelievers. Boundaries, for ex-Mormons, are not something to be blurred or traversed, as they were for middle-way Mormons. Rather, ex-Mormons are at pains to identify, construct, and police the affective, moral, and social boundaries between themselves and their former faith, in the hopes of effectively insulating them from its pernicious influence.

Lori's Crazyness

I met Lori at a bi-weekly recovery from Mormonism support group meeting. She attended sessions off and on throughout the time I was in Utah, showing up flustered and agitated, greeting other participants with short, curt 'hellos.' She at first avoided eye contact when people spoke to her. But when it became her turn to speak she pensively locked eyes, as if desperate to convey her thoughts through the intensity of her glare. I grew to know Lori's story through these meetings and also visits to her house, where we would sit together talking, sipping gin and tonics, her stories growing increasingly animated the more we drank.

Since she stopped believing in the church a year and a half ago, Lori said she felt like she is going "crazy." Often, when I would arrive at her house in the evenings to catch up with her in-between support group sessions, I would go unnoticed for the first half

hour. Usually, she had just arrived home from work, and would scurry around the house, entrapped in her own world, while her husband offered me a drink and something to eat. This otherwise aloof demeanor, however, only thinly veiled the “craziness” broiling underneath. Soon she would pour a drink and let loose with her frustrations with the church. Lori was an example of the “angry ex-Mormon” my Mormon friends often spoke dismissively about. But as I came to appreciate, Lori’s “craziness” and anger were reflections of her particular subjectivity as a nonbelieving ex-Mormon woman stuck in a hegemonically Mormon world. As I grew to know Lori, her anger seemed to stem from a panoply of feelings of betrayal, insecurity and vulnerability, and a persistent sense of being inexorably entangled in Mormonism.

She said she felt angry, frustrated, and trapped by the church. “I’m just done. I’m done with it all. Everywhere I go and everything I do, it’s about the church. And I haven’t had a testimony in over a year!” Lori’s ongoing entanglement with Mormonism stemmed primarily from her husband, Jared’s, employment with the church. Jared worked in the church’s public relations office, where employees were told that they were the frontline defenders of the increasingly globalized church’s “public image to the world.” However, a crucial component of his employment was that he, and his family, maintain their “temple worthy” status in the church. Should anyone find out he or his wife had “become apostate” the church could quickly dismiss him, permanently revoking his pension and benefits.

Jared’s employment with the church put them in a precarious financial situation, necessitating a careful management of their public identities. “I have to be careful,” Lori said, “if they find out I’m an *apostate* they (the church) could get suspicious of him, and

he could end up fired, and I'd be the one to blame...No one would ever suspect him. Look at him, he's too cute to be an apostate. Me, on the other hand, ha! They could probably see it in my eyes." This meant Lori had to maintain a carefully managed existence, an illusion of faithful membership with her friends, neighbors, co-workers and family that hid the anger she felt, lest someone be able to peer beneath her faithful veneer and see the disbelief inside.

The church, she said, manufactured consent and passivity among its members by emphasizing uniformity in all aspects of church membership, including personal dress, hair style, and conversation topics and speech patterns, all of which she was obliged to incorporate into her daily demeanor as the wife of a church employee. "As soon as you start to show in whatever little way that you're not conforming to the rules or breaking the mold in how you think or act, you're going to get called out." Out of fear that her husband's job would be jeopardized should her nonbelief be discovered, Lori even continued to wear her temple garments on a daily basis lest someone see she was not wearing them and begin to ask questions. "I hate these things" she said, pulling down on the t-shirt portion she wore under her regular shirt and bra, "I can't even dress how I want...I can literally feel the church gripping my body everywhere I go."

Maintaining a façade of being the "good Mormon wife," while at the same time harboring internal discontent with the church, left her feeling repressed, fragmented, and invaded. "I feel like I'm living two lives," she complained - the toll of living "inauthentically" increasingly bothered her. She felt trapped by the need to embody and perform a religious identity that she resented. Lori felt increasingly stifled by the need to tacitly accept Mormonism's hegemonic control over, and *intrusion into* her life.

At times, she would unexpectedly erupt in manic outbursts that revealed this derision for the church and its leaders - “you know what that fucker Bishop said to me last week?!” she asked rhetorically, referring to their ward bishop. In a private interview with her bishop the week before, which Lori was obliged to attend, the bishop had suggested that she be more active in their ward, while also questioning her “commitment to the gospel” and warning her about what might happen to her children if she did not strengthen her testimony. Lori was incensed at his presumptuousness. “He can question my testimony, who cares. But don’t tell me how to raise my kids!”

Much of Lori’s anger indeed revolved around the church’s continued intrusion into her family life. Various “visiting” and “home” “teachers” - women and men in the church assigned to visit other ward members at their homes - frequently stopped by her home, uninvited, to “offer inspiration” in the form of prayers and scripture lessons. Other neighbors kept inviting her children to youth activities with the ward, where Lori knew “they’re just going to try and brainwash them.”

Lori saw such advances as an immediate threat to her family, and worried about the effect it would have on her children, because like other ex-Mormons I talked to, she now understood Mormonism to be a repressive, hypocritical and destructive religion, with professed “values” and “morals” that ultimately caused more harm than good. Indeed, ever since her disaffection Lori had increasingly scoffed at the lessons taught in Sunday School classes. “Everything we’re taught is meant to keep us enslaved to the church” she reasoned. In particular, Lori found the lessons on “honesty,” “virtue,” and “obedience” infuriating. Honesty, she said, was only valued as long as it worked in the church’s favor. Virtue is about teaching little girls to feel shame in their bodies and to

repress their sexualities. And obedience is to never question your male priesthood leaders' authority, whether he is your prophet, your bishop, or your husband. Indeed, whenever I saw Lori talk about the church's "values," she became visibly disturbed and vindictive against the church, trying with the force of her anger to verbally and physically purge herself of their lasting influence over her. "That's what makes it all so fucking ridiculous" she explained to me one night at her house. "Everyone's constantly hammering away at how we all need to live more righteously and how the world's this big, bad, sinful place. But they're all hypocrites. I can't believe I ever listened to that shit...That's why we need to get away. I can't let my kids grow up with that getting *inside their heads*."

Lori had indeed learned the duplicitous nature of church values early in life. As a young girl, Lori was sexually abused by her childhood bishop's son who lived down the street. In contrast to her often emotionally charged erraticism I saw at her house, at the support group meeting, recounting this story of abuse, she was composed and sober, temporarily disassociating from this traumatic ordeal. "There was a group of us who played basketball together everyday after school" she began. "That day, though, it was just the two of us. His parents weren't home yet, so we went in his house and he made me touch him." After returning home she told her parents about the abuse, but was ignored. And despite pleading and crying with her parents to believe her, they repeatedly accused her of lying, running interference for the bishop's son so as to avoid any unseemly public embarrassment for their priesthood leader. "I was told to keep quiet, to not make up stories that weren't true. They said he was preparing to go on a mission and that I had better think twice before I accused someone like him of doing something like that.

Because, you know, it would have ruined his chances of being a missionary.” Lori had felt betrayed by her parents, by her church, and its teachings of virtue, honesty, and obedience. To the church and her parents, maintaining the young man’s appearance of “virtue” was more important than her experience of being sexually violated. In learning that “honesty” was conditional, and “obedience” trumped justice, her violation at the hands of the boy was matched only by her violation at the hands of a moral order that refused to acknowledge her suffering. They had effectively allowed her personal moral and sexual boundaries to be transgressed, undermined, and dismissed.

In psychological terms anger is an emotional response to a threat levied against, or an outright violation of, personal boundaries. Though typically discussed in individual terms, emotions like anger should also be understood for their intersubjective dimensions. As a clearly recognizable and patterned emotive expression anger is also effective at explicitly reestablishing, marking, and policing social boundaries through sheer affective force. As such, anger emerges as an affectively based form of cultural practice used by social actors to effectively engage with and bring about change in their relationships with others and the world around them.

Ex-Mormons are often accused of being angry for the way they seek to “embarrass the church” by drawing untoward attention to the troubling parts of its history, or criticizing its peculiar beliefs and practices. And as I suggested earlier, within Mormonism, anger has become a stereotyped attribute of ex-Mormons’ vengefulness. After her disaffection, and despite the threat of her husband being fired, Lori indeed repeatedly looked for ways to retaliate against the church, to “express” her anger. For instance, she began working with a group of other ex-Mormons creating an online “Wiki”

devoted to encyclopedically documenting the Church's historical fallacies, lies, and coverups. And she anonymously "trolled" Mormon websites and online message boards, posting vitriolic diatribes against the church, attempting to provoke believers' defensive reactions. However, each of these outlets required her to remain hidden, anonymous, and faceless. And despite having these emotional "outlets," her anger continued as Mormonism's intrusion into her life went on unabated. In the last few weeks that I was in contact with Lori, she said her mother-in-law had become increasingly critical of her erratic behavior, calling into question her role as wife and mother, and their bishop had ominously called Jared into his office, threatening to not give him a "temple recommend," effectively putting his employment in jeopardy. Expressing anonymous anger online did nothing to quell her feelings of enduring violation at home and in her everyday life.

However, Lori eventually said she "couldn't take it anymore." She stopped attending church altogether, and made her misgivings with the church more public on Facebook for her friends and family to see, posting humorously insulting jokes and cartoons about Mormonism on her personal "wall." Though rumors started to circulate that she had "turned apostate," Lori was unphased. "I don't care what people think. I'm so pissed" she said. "I can't stand it anymore. It's my life and I'm going to do what I want."

Lori began to give into her anger, letting the craziness boiling within her take over her outward appearance and demeanor. Over several weeks I watched her appearance transform as she dyed her hair a harsh platinum blonde, shaving it on the sides and back, and began wearing intensely colored lipstick and eye-liner with increasingly deeper cut

blouses that prominently displayed her cleavage. She also said she had recently “told off” her bishop, fiercely yelling at him one day when he knocked on her front door. “I let him have it. I’m not holding back anymore. I want people to know how angry I am, they deserve it” she said. She had also moved out of the house, a temporary separation between her and her husband in order to give them both “time to breath.” During one of the last support group sessions I saw her at, she explained what she had been going through to the group.

The way I’ve been dressing and looking, I’m trying to be this outrageous statement in a way, just in being seen. I’m tired of being marginalized. I’m tired of when people find out that I’ve left the church suddenly my opinion doesn’t matter anymore. It’s my little ‘fuck you’ statement. And in fact I realized, part of my motivation for moving out of the house is *I felt so torn*. I figure now if I go public with who I am, then it’s like ‘oh the crazy wife that was just you know *bucking for separation anyway*,’ so how can they (the church, her husband’s employers) blame him if it’s his crazy wife who’s going to divorce him anyway because he’s just living with this crazy woman. And frankly that’s what I’ve been, is the crazy woman. So he’s gotten a lot of sympathy I think and a *very wide berth* from some of the church leaders. Because I found that *setting boundaries* and doing it a healthy way didn’t work, *I let out my crazy and that worked*.

Lori did seem “better.” A few weeks later she moved back in with her husband, and seemed more at peace with herself and her life. Yet, Lori was indeed an “angry ex-Mormon,” even becoming the very personification of anger in the last few weeks that I knew her. However, her anger was more than a vindictive and unjustified emotional reaction, as church members implied in their use of the phrase “angry ex-Mormon” or “angry apostate.” Instead, anger was an expression of her frustration at being unable to erect respectful boundaries between herself and the wider religious culture of which she

was a part, a religious culture that had violated, abused, and made her vulnerable throughout her life. Embracing her anger and craziness allowed for her to rewrite the dimensions of her own existence, pulling together the pieces of herself once “torn” apart by the need to “act the part” of a good Mormon wife, and even reclaiming those parts taken away from her as an abused child. Anger, when fully embodied, personified, and performed, allowed Lori to begin inscribing and policing new boundaries around her, effectively carving out a space of *autonomous* alterity for her life. Finally, anger was a purifying emotion for Lori, allowing her to effectively expurgate the church from her home, her relationships, and her life by signalling to those around her that she was no longer open to their influence - no longer open to hearing whatever the bishop had to say, the lessons the visiting teachers had to give, and no longer held hostage by the possibility of being branded an apostate. The issue of becoming “angry” in the context of ex-Mormonism therefore points less to individual persons' isolated emotional reactions, than to a pervasive social transformation of relations between believing and nonbelieving people and communities. And indeed, this transformation of social and moral boundaries is exactly what Lori achieved as she became the “angry ex-Mormon.” For at the last support group meeting I saw her at, she smiled and triumphantly proclaimed, “No one knocks on my door anymore to ask why I wasn’t at church!.”

Policing disbelief

Such moral, social, and ideological boundaries were also marked and negotiated collectively. At ex-Mormon gatherings, parties, conferences, and support group meetings,

the first question a newcomer would most likely be asked was some version of, “so what’s your story,” or, “when did you leave the church?”

I became aware of this as I saw two of my friends who had not previously known each other meet for the first time at a party. “So when did you find out it was all a lie?” Brian pointedly asked. Chris laughed, giving a perfunctory and scripted answer about “studying his way out of the church.” As Chris was talking, however, Brian only seemed half interested in hearing Chris’ story. Brian had heard the requisite answer, and responded only with, “You’re lucky. You figured it out pretty early. I was stuck in it for over thirty years.” Conversation then seamlessly turned to talk of sports, music, and each other’s taste in alcohol.

This obligatory exchanging of “exit stories” among ex-Mormons was not just a convenient conversation starter. I eventually came to think of them as an obligatory discursive ritual by which people communicated their disidentification from Mormonism. In these types of conversations, each of the participants was expected to give their “exit story,” a narrative chronicling their disaffection from the faith, their “awakening” from the deep “sleep” Mormonism had put them in. Informed by the logics of enlightenment rationalism, existential freedom, and individual sovereignty, such talk framed Mormonism as a debilitating and constraining religious mindset and church community that had to be utterly and wholly rejected. People described the church as something that had “brainwashed” or “blinded” them. While those who had left the church were understood to now “see things as they really are.”

These interactive rituals were a way for ex-Mormons to stake intergroup boundaries and maintain individual and group security. This in part stemmed from the

need for people entering and circulating within the community to clarify their absolute separation from the church, because aside from the occasional visible tattoo or low cut blouse, everyone still “looked Mormon.” As with the discussion between Brian and Chris, “When did you figure out it was all a lie” began a conversation in which each party obligingly disinvested themselves of a Mormon identity. As discursive ritual, it temporarily disenchanted the social space they inhabited and enforced an obligatory logic of secular rationality.

Obliging others to tell their stories indeed serves as an explicit means of marking group boundaries and auditing those who were entering into the space of ex-Mormonism. But as with any social or ideological boundaries, they are constructed not only to signify those who stand within its borders, but also to exclude those who may prove a threat to its health and vitality.

For example, during one ex-Mormon get-together held at a local coffee shop, a quiet, meek woman named Shawnee introduced herself to the table I was sitting at. As this was the first time any of us had ever seen Shawnee at an ex-Mormon function, Nathan, a longtime member of the group, began the discursive ritual of asking her when she “left the church.” Shawnee responded by saying that she “stopped attending” several months ago after she began to question Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy. Nathan immediately took notice of her word choice, and asked, “what do you mean ‘stopped attending?’” Then, without waiting for a response from Shawnee, he pressed further, unleashing a torrent of questions. “Do you still believe in the church? ... Who do you think Joseph Smith was? ... What about God, do you still believe in him?” His persistence unsettled Shawnee. She looked around nervously, not knowing how to respond to what

now amounted to an interrogation of her disbelief. I later found out from a friend of Shawnee's that she was "fresh out of the church," and was not sure where she stood on the questions Nathan had asked her. Although she no longer wanted to be a Mormon, she had not settled on whether she believed in God or not. She still maintained some semblance of "belief" in something, and Nathan immediately sniffed this out, sensing a threat to the acerbically secular space he and others in the group had created. No one was surprised when Shawnee did not return to the next week's meeting. The ritual had worked.

Such forms of boundary keeping are in fact defensive postures meant to avert the introduction of ideas and beliefs thought to be harmful to the secular life ex-Mormons were attempting to build outside of the church.

Cheryl, for example, usually avoided ex-Mormon gatherings. Though she no longer believed the church was true, she felt like the ex-Mormons she knew were always "angry," just like church members insisted they were, always "picking fights with people" or "fighting the church" - "it makes it hard to really be yourself around them," she confessed, "I don't always agree with what everybody else thinks." However, when her husband who was actively involved in the community pleaded with her, she sometimes attended. But at those times she seemed cautious and reserved, hesitant to engage anybody in conversation. All of their friends were also ex-Mormons, so avoiding talk of the church proved nearly impossible. "One way or another we always get stuck talking about the church" Cheryl sighed.

I sat next to Cheryl once at her house during a "board game night" she and her husband organized for the community. Kathy, a soft spoken woman who was avowedly

atheist and also virulently antagonistic towards Mormonism, sat next to us. I told Kathy that as part of my research I would be visiting an “energy healing” session with a Mormon woman who practiced various forms of “spiritual healing” later in the week. Kathy immediately dismissed the idea of “energy” as silly. I looked over to Cheryl, who though at first hesitated, confidently retorted, “I think it exists.” Explaining herself, Cheryl asked, “Haven’t you ever passed by someone on the street and you just feel something about them...or, when you go into a restaurant with a piano playing, and there’s dim lighting, and you just feel different? I think that that’s energy.”

In essence, Cheryl was trying to affirm the existence of a tacit empathetic connection with her environment that transcended the limits of her empirical senses. But Kathy read her defense of “energy” as a latent form of religious belief held over from her life in the church, and so became immediately argumentative. “Isn’t that just what you could call mood?” she challenged. “You’re just picking up on unconscious clues about a person or place because of some psychological disposition or personal experience you have” Kathy explained. Though Cheryl made an attempt at compromise, saying “I think we’re just using two different words to describe the same thing,” Kathy dismissively retorted by asking Cheryl, “why don’t you just call it mood then...do you think that you can actually sense this energy, like ‘the force’ in Star Wars?”

What’s at issue is not just the semantics of energy or mood. Rather, it seems there is an ontological distinction being negotiated that speaks to this ongoing relationship to Mormonism that must be collectively negotiated among members of the ex-Mormon community. Here, Cheryl is appealing to a somewhat mystical, implicit, tacit, and at times undefinable palpation to a person, event, or place. According to Kathy, however,

any concession to a metaphysical reality smacks of superstitious spirituality, and should be stridently disavowed.

According to Cheryl, such interactions evidence the “angry ex-Mormon” at work. However, as I came to appreciate, this insistence on a hyper-empirical rationalism is an at times crucial component of the politics of boundary keeping in the ex-Mormon crowd. In effect, it was aimed at enforcing equality in people’s interactions with each other, a way of fostering relations of political impartiality within their group, all which were widely felt to have been lacking in Mormonism. Specifically, in the church, a politics of feeling was often at work in which, when faced with a question or problem, a person could attest to having received personal “confirmation,” or “revelation” “from the spirit” that effectively stipulated the course of action that was to be taken. However, while two people - potentially a husband and wife, or two people in church leadership positions - may both “receive revelation” on a particular matter, whoever holds a higher position of “authority” in the church - the senior-most male priesthood holder - takes precedence. For Kathy, and other ex-Mormons like her, challenging the idea that one can “feel energy” was an attempt to curb this hierarchical and partisan system of decision making. Specifically, it was an attempt to level and democratize people’s status in personal interactions, to bring it back down to a “worldly” level, which disallowed either party to claim access to a higher power from which their authority was derived. “Everyone is equal here” I would often hear at community gatherings or on on-line message boards, “you can say whatever you want, and people will listen to you.” So from Kathy’s perspective, Cheryl’s appeal to “energy” threatened to reintroduce a division between those who could, and those who could not, “feel” energy, the spirit, etc. If energy did not

exist, then decision making had to be based on the inherent logic or rationality of someone's stance, not the force with which they "felt" it to be "true."

As I've described in this chapter, the category of "nonbeliever" is internally heterogenous. Not all who stop believing become publicly visible "apostates," either out of necessity – as with Lori – or by choice – as with Josh. Likewise, I have demonstrated in part how many of those who otherwise stay in contact with Mormonism, even maintaining an image of "faithful member," are not necessarily "believers" anymore. As seen in Josh's case, contemporary Mormon identities in many ways transcend issues of belief and faith, and perhaps even religion altogether. Josh's nonbelief, according to him, did not preclude his ability to maintain an intimate identification with Mormonism as a pseudo-ethnic, culturally distinct community.

Despite the inherent ambiguity of the nonbeliever category, many nonbelievers are in fact at pains to delineate boundaries between themselves and the church. This process of boundary inscription, as I've discussed, takes place externally through the use of emotional performances (Lori), and internally through the use of discursive rituals (exit stories).

Rather than an exception to the rule, these cross-cutting identifications indeed define, I argue, an ever growing portion of contemporary church membership. While LDS church leaders may assume that the church body is largely homogeneous in their beliefs and affiliations, I believe the Mormonism of the future will increasingly be characterized by such ambiguous identifications and ambivalent positionalities. In the few remaining pages I address some of the ways the church is responding to these

transformations, and its implications for the rash of apostasy now afflicting the faith.

Conclusion

By the end of my research, Taylor, the ex-Mormon man I introduced in the introduction to this dissertation, had moved out of Utah to take a job in advertising and start an altogether new life in Seattle, Washington. When I last spoke with him in 2013 he seemed happy and content, saying that he no longer thought about the Church all day, everyday. "I don't feel like a Mormon *or* an ex-Mormon anymore. I've moved on." Mormonism had ceased to form the unspoken backdrop to his life; he no longer intellectually or affectively felt consumed by his former life in the church.

"Moving on" is, for most of the ex-Mormons I spoke with, the ultimate goal. To reach a point where their thoughts, memories, emotions, identities, and everyday routines are no longer tinged with the touch of their former faith - where they have achieved some degree of existential disentanglement and social autonomy from Mormonism.

Such transformations, however, are not achieved the moment belief in a set of religious tenets, or participation in ritual practices stops. But rather, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, it unfolds episodically, over time, on multiple registers, in ex-Mormons' intimate, personal, familial, and communal lives.

While drawing on data gathered within a particular time and place, the descriptions and analyses that have bolstered this argument are of import not only for observers of contemporary Mormonism. They also speak to emerging debates within the anthropology of religion more broadly as the discipline continues to engage with and debate the ever unfolding epoch of secular-modernity.

Anthropology has, in fact, begun to take notice of Mormonism as a distinct religious culture worthy of investigation, with several more senior anthropologists of religion publishing articles and books tackling issues of gender, kinship, and race in the Church (Cannell 2013, 2013; Davies 2000; Hammarberg 2013). Over the past several decades the academic study of Mormonism has indeed burgeoned into a vibrant sub discipline. Multiple universities around the country now offer majors or concentrations in Mormon Studies,⁸³ while academic conferences grow more popular as academic and popular interest in Mormon culture increases.

My work, however, while operating within this same moment of peaked intellectual interest, diverges in several key ways, and critically responds to two distinct weaknesses in the literature. First, much of the scholarship has been conducted by scholars who are themselves members of the church. While I do not question their intellectual objectivity, history has shown that scholars in the church wishing to maintain full membership must learn to avoid certain topics deemed too controversial or not adequately “faith promoting.” Second, previous studies have tended to approach Mormonism in its idealized form, as a self-contained religious entity, with a religious culture described as oddly uniform and historically unchanging, resulting in analyses that either intentionally or unintentionally obscure internal conflicts and contradictions.

My data has instead revealed the extent to which Mormonism is undergoing major upheavals. As I detailed in chapter one, the phenomenon of apostasy in Mormonism is more than an addendum to or unfortunate distraction from Mormonism’s historical

83 Including Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University; University of Utah, University of Virginia, and University of Wyoming.

growth and increasing visibility, a transformation too often triumphantly hailed as proof of the Church's inevitable ascendancy on the world stage. Rather, I argued that its rise to stardom has instead in fact provoked a self reflexive gaze into a past that has, ultimately, not stood up to critical scrutiny.

For Mormon historians, and historians of Mormonism alike, this constitutes a watershed moment in the story of the church. Whereas previous writers could treat historical events as benign contextual backdrops against which a contemporary Mormon community and identity could be described (Flake 2003; Shipps 1987), these same historical narratives must now be approached with skepticism, footnoted by the controversy that now swirls around their claims to authenticity.

Related to this, my work draws upon and advances the study of historical memory found in the wider anthropological and philosophical literature. While the politics of memory and forgetting have previously been discussed in the context of the emergence and sustainability of political movements (Sturken 1997), nationalisms (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and ethnic identities (Sutton 2001), scholars have yet to pay attention to the role such processes play in processes of religious change and secularization. My work demonstrates, however, the extent to which how it is largely through processes of selective memorialization and forgetting that cultural and institutional coherency is maintained in contemporary religious communities. Similarly, as I discussed in chapter one, my work provides a way of thinking about the emergence of new forms of faith practice that take shape around a careful institutional and personal regulation of historical memory. As digital technologies and social media becomes more thoroughly inundated in everyday life, and the spread of knowledge and information ever more fast and fluid, I

have shown the inherent precariousness and volatility of such attempts to regulate historical memory on a communal level (Trouillot 1997).

In this way my work also contributes to a larger set of emerging scholarship focused on modern secular formations more broadly (Asad 2003). As a whole, my dissertation contributes to a growing cross-disciplinary literature on the subject of religious disaffiliation and the growth of contemporary secular subjectivities. In the past decade this subtopic of the academic study of religion has produced several new academic departments and research institutes at Pitzer College and Trinity College, and peer-reviewed journals dedicated to documenting and analyzing these global religious changes (*Secularism & Nonreligion*).⁸⁴ However, by focusing on a culturally specific and local iteration of religious disaffiliation, my work provides a much needed, ground-level, contextualization of theories of secularization that until recently have typically discussed changes in religious belief, practice, and membership primarily on a national or societal level, with little attention paid to its effects in individual church communities.

In this vein, my dissertation introduces the experience of disenchantment - with all of its emotional and psychological correlates - as an added locus of secularization open for anthropological investigation. As discussed in chapter two, I argue that this existential crisis of faith manifests as a form of psychological trauma emerging in the wake of the loss of religious certainty, constituting a hitherto unacknowledged, and imminently secular-modern form of social suffering (Kleinman 1989) with implications for studies of the intersection of religion, secularism, and mental health (Hwang, Hammer & Cragun 2011).

84 <http://www.secularismandnonreligion.org>

Chapter three similarly extended my analysis of the experiential dimensions of disenchantment and deconversion. While deconversion has been analyzed in terms of conversion “careers” (Gooren 2010), the negotiation of social identity (Mauss 1998), or changes in belief and ideology (Brinkerhoff & Mackie 1993; Winell 2006), little attention has been paid to its embodied and psychosomatic dimensions. Responding to calls for increased attention to the affective dimensions of secularism (Hirschkind 2011), my work demonstrates how deconversion entails a processual and joint transformation of both mind and body. In this way my work also therefore speaks to debates over the formation of contemporary secular subjectivities more broadly. However, rather than focus on secular subjectivities as hermetically sealed off from their religious counterparts, I argued that the process of deconversion entails a protracted disinvestment of lingering religious dispositions. Looking to sexuality and desire as the primary locus for such issues among ex-Mormons (chapter 3), my dissertation effectively opens a new avenue of investigation centered on the negotiation of and experimentation with bodily pleasure as a site of secular subject formation that complements previous studies focusing on death (Farman 2013), morality (Epstein 2010) or civic personhood (Berlinerblau 2012).

In addition to a lacuna in the experiential dimensions of deconversion and disenchantment, the literature has yet to adequately deal with the highly contentious micropolitics of disaffiliation taking place within religious communities. As I discussed in my introduction, the growth in non-religious populations around the globe has been fueled, not by an increase in persons being born into secular households, but rather, through processes of religious apostasy. As a result, as I described in chapters four and five, apostasy therefore also often entails an upheaval and fragmentation of religious

communities and the engendering of animosities between believers and non-believers, including the levelling of harsh stigmas against apostates. While previous authors have critically questioned the underlying politics (and legitimacy) of apostate narratives (Avance 2013; Johnson 1998; Payne 2013), including the ways in which apostates attempt to manage “spoiled identities” in the wake of their disaffection (Mauss 1998), my work instead turns a critical eye towards the generation and circulation of stigmas and stereotypes themselves, asking why and to what effect faithful church members conjure up such ideas about those who leave their faith.

While there is a long history of anthropologists investigating racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and even religious stigmas as machinations of deep seated social injustice and discrimination, we have yet to engage with these issues in a secular, non-religious context. Such analyses are crucial given the contemporary global religious landscape and its increasing emphasis on religious pluralism, tolerance, and cooperation with those from different faiths (Meister 2010). As seen in the United States, with the emergence of an increasingly non-denominational “civil religion” (Bellah 1967), divisions between faith communities are becoming more blurred. As a result, partisan divisions and animosities are increasingly being drawn, not between faiths, but between those who have a faith and those with no faith at all, including atheists, agnostics, and otherwise secular persons (Edgell 2006). In such an environment, it becomes increasingly important to understand the causes and consequences of anti-secular stigma, and to critically analyze how religious communities attempt to maintain internal continuity by conjuring up stigmas and stereotypes about the non-faithful.

On the flip side of these issues, my dissertation also analyzed ex-Mormons' attempts to engage in a nascent form of non-religious identity politics. The "ex-Mormon movement" - while nominally a localized bid for recognition and acceptance - reflects wider trends unfolding on the American religious landscape, including secular communities' attempts to raise awareness and garner widespread social momentum in their fight for political recognition and legal protection (Kettell 2013). Though various sociologists and political scientists have begun to write about secular movements and non-religious identity formation in the U.S., these developments have yet to be thoroughly engaged with anthropologically. My dissertation, therefore, makes two major contributions to this growing literature. First, while the word "apostate" has historically been a derogatory term meant to stigmatize those who have "fallen from the faith," my data shows that such labels are increasingly being re-appropriated and self-ascribed as a means of counteracting the negative connotation typically associated with it. Importantly, as I discussed in chapter five, when combined with ex-Mormons' attempts to foster ideological and political affiliations with wider national movements, this points to a local iteration of a new form of religio-political subjectivity emerging in the U.S. which anthropologists have only just begun to pay attention to. And second, my data demonstrates the extent to which new forms of social media have made such identifications possible and productive on a national level.⁸⁵ Social movements around the globe have begun to harness the power of social media to unify and communicate with followers (Shirky 2011). As seen with ex-Mormons harnessing YouTube, Facebook, and internet list serves, digital interactions and relationships are supplementing the loss of

85 <http://guardianlv.com/2013/10/social-media-growing-atheism-by-the-millions/>

religious ones and providing these disenfranchised communities the potential to create social networks on the internet that supersede the religiously dominated neighborhoods in which they are geographically embedded (Cimino & Smith 2011). This digital terrain indeed poses an existential threat to religious communities that often rely on peer influence and surveillance afforded by the immediate presence of other church members to maintain political power and ideological purity.

Pastoral Apologetics and the Future of Mormonism

As of the spring of 2014, Mormonism's crisis of apostasy continues unabated. In the time since my research, several more public demonstrations of "mass resignation" have taken place on the doorstep of the church's world headquarters in Salt Lake City.⁸⁶ Multiple relatively high ranking church members, including one time bishops and stake presidents, have apostatized, drawing attention to the matter of apostasy through newspaper interviews and articles describing in detail the reasons for their loss of faith.⁸⁷ Much to the church's chagrin, apostasy is no longer a private, personal matter.

In response to this threat to both its public persona and the solidity of its membership, the church has begun responding to the tide of disaffection wracking its ranks. To begin with, in 2013, just after the end of my ethnographic research, the church began publishing a series of informational essays on its main website addressing many of the historical issues underlying many (if not most) people's disaffection. The explicit goal being to promote a more "open" and "honest" discussion of Mormonism's past in light of

⁸⁶ <http://www.newsweek.com/when-saints-go-marching-out-245158>

⁸⁷ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kiwimormon/2014/02/a-former-bishops-doctrinal-dilemmas/>

the internet's ability to undermine church sponsored repression of disconcerting historical information. Marking the formal shift in church strategy, church historian Elder Snow remarked, "I think in the past there was a tendency to keep a lot of the records closed or at least not give access to information. But the world has changed in the last generation — with the access to information on the Internet, we can't continue that pattern; I think we need to continue to be more open" (Bennett and Pike 2013). As such, it seems as if Mormonism's hand has now been forced, its dogmatic institutional authority and unilateral control of information made to acquiesce and adapt to the ideological and technological transformations sweeping the globe.

To some extent this admission of fallibility and shift towards more institutional and historical transparency is a welcome sign from a typically unresponsive institution seemingly complacent in its unquestioned authority. Many ex-Mormons, long since disaffected, herald this as a step in the right direction, even if the essays continue to obfuscate facts or ultimately draw faith promoting conclusions. In writing and publicly publishing essays on the past abuses against black people, the prevalence of polygamy in the early church, the multiple contrasting stories of Joseph Smith's "first vision," among other topics, the church is at least tacitly acknowledging that such issues are, in fact, issues, collectively contributing if not directly causing the rash of apostasy, which can no longer be conveniently ignored in the hope that the average member will not notice. Furthermore, it implicitly validates the reasons ex-Mormons give for having lost their faith, thereby tacitly addressing the stigmas attached to ex-Mormons which too often paint their apostasy as stemming from either spiritual apathy or moral depravity. The

church has indeed seemed to take notice of apostasy as a broader issue afflicting their religious community than just a matter of a few isolated individuals getting "offended."

That an institutional and cultural shift is perhaps underway is evidenced by increased calls coming from within the faithful membership for a reconceptualization of the roll of belief, faith, and even God's personality, to allow for a "softer," more sensitive way of dealing with doubt and questioning in the congregation. In contrast to the combative and dismissive tone of polemical apologetics fostered by various Mormon apologists groups such as FAIR (the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research), and the BYU affiliated FARMS (the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies) some church leaders and scholars are now calling for a "pastoral apologetics," characterized by a more tolerant, non-judgmental, and even empathetic, response to doubters that attempts to communicate the "spiritual and moral benefits" of Mormonism, rather than argue with its evidentiary logic (Payne 2013). In this vein, Mormon professor of comparative literature, Terryl Givens, is spearheading an internal transformation of Mormon spirituality that celebrates people's individuality, affirms their doubts, and articulates a conception of God who is filled with empathy and commiserates in members' struggles and pains - who is, in essence, a "God who weeps" (Givens 2012).⁸⁸

88 Alongside this, various Mormon academics, apologists, and commentators have begun referring to the root of Mormonism's apostasy problem as stemming, not from problems in its doctrine, its leadership, or sacred history, but as a problem of a Mormon culture (distinct from "the gospel") that is to be blamed for members' "unrealistic expectations" about the church's past and the unseemly intolerance of doubt and dissent. If only everyone could "focus on the gospel" and not on "culture," these voices proclaim, there would be no problems. This is essentially an attempt to displace Mormonism's problems onto an imaginary "culture" that is distinct from "the gospel." However, in attempting to articulate a blameless and pure "gospel" devoid of responsibility, these voices willfully ignore, by constructing this false binary, the extent

While such developments perhaps point to an era of increased tolerance and respect for doubting, questioning, and challenging once unquestioned religious truths on Mormonism's horizons, for most of the ex-Mormons who have, or are currently in the process of, making their departure from the LDS church, it does not matter. Their lives have already been torn asunder by the discovery of a too long strategically repressed history, the stigmas that have been too callously ascribed to them, and a religious culture too ardently dismissive of doubt and dissent.

Though indeed living in the shadows of the church, apostates' unique positionalities and subjectivities, when paid attention to ethnographically, shine light into a religious world obscured by church leaders' rhetoric and public relations department's advertising. How does such public posturing reconcile the fact that its religious teachings and church culture creates an environment in which those who dissent from religious truth claims are made routinely subject to stigmas and slander, ostracized from families and neighborhoods, made to feel alienated and alone, facing their collapse of a whole "life-world" with no one to turn to for empathy or understanding? When pressed to answer for such inequities, church officials and average members profess that one must not focus on "a few individuals" who perpetuate such hostilities, drawing a conceptual divide between these individuals and "church culture" on the one hand and the sacred purity of "the gospel" on the other that must remain untarnished and uncritiqued. However, if any meaningful change is going to come, the church must recognize the extent to which its teachings, institutional practices, ritual traditions, and divinely authorized

to which "the gospel" is nothing but a set of social and cultural relations revolving around the church institution, its leadership, history, scriptures, theology, and membership.

pronouncements have themselves created and continue to perpetuate a culture of intolerance and bigotry towards former believers.

So, if a pastoral apologetics is to be fully realized in the church it must involve both a critical self-reflexive assessment of Mormonism's own complicity in fueling apostasy, and seek an empathy driven understanding and respect for people's experiences leaving the church. This means accounting for the fact that Mormonism's apostates were not uninterested, apathetic, or uninvolved church members who lost the motivation or willpower to maintain their faith, as they are typically understood and for which they are readily dismissed. Rather, the church must recognize that they were in fact one time faithful adherents whose earnest search for truth and "further light and knowledge" led them to to an inevitable confrontation with the contradictions and falsities of Mormonism's past.

However, beyond recognizing the legitimacy of their former membership and current grievances, this also means understanding the extent to which their anger, depression, sexual experimentation, atheism, and attempts to create an ex-Mormon movement, are neither examples of a pathology of losing faith, nor evidence of rancorous "anti-Mormonism." Instead, as I have attempted to show, they must be recognized as the by-product of, and reasonable response to, a combination of a lifetime of church membership and a litany of social and psychological traumas inflicted on them as apostates. This further means that Mormonism as a whole must begin seeing its apostates, not as spiritual turncoats and religious others that must be marginalized and purged from the church body, but rather as close friends, family members, and neighbors with whom relationships of mutual trust, respect, and congeniality can still be fostered. If

Mormonism truly seeks meaningful incorporation into a global world, one filled with a plurality of people and ideas distinct from its own, it must first learn to respect difference and diversity at home. Presenting an outward public image of acceptance and diversity cannot come at the cost of increasing internal strife and fragmentation.

A central goal of this dissertation has thus also been to make sense of apostasy and apostates as inextricable products of a constellation of historical, social, and cultural transformations taking place *within* contemporary Mormonism. Their spiritual, emotional, and psychological suffering, though obscured by the spectacle of the "Mormon Moment" and its admiration, if not outright glorification, of Mormonism as modern America's religious darlings, must be understood in more in-depth terms than as an inevitable byproduct of either the march of external processes of secularization, or in moralistic terms as the consequences of a world fallen into Godless disbelief.

Rather, apostasy is a symptom of Mormonism's own ongoing transformation as it seeks incorporation into mainstream America and a global religious landscape. Through apostates we catch a glimpse of the inner mechanizations and transformations at work in the contemporary church - a church struggling to define itself amidst its increasing acculturation to mainstream American society, struggling to hold onto a sacred past despite it being beset by scandal and plagued by internal contradiction, and a church membership made vulnerable, insecure, and anxious in the face of receding cultural and religious boundaries through which a sense of distinction, peculiarity, and ascendancy have so long been secured. And by paying attention to people's experiences of disillusionment as they discover previously unknown aspects of church history on the internet, we see the conflicts that arise in the midst of a religious tradition attempting to

adapt its historical identity to its ever changing present collective sense of self, a process that inevitably involves a litany of defensive reactions, shifting conceptualizations of religious authority, and carefully managed mea culpas. Through all of this the triadic relationship between religiosity, historical memory, and secular modernity is laid bare.

Finally, beyond its critique and assessment of Mormonism, I hope that this dissertation can complicate the conceptual categories, identities, and processes through which social science has hitherto attempted to understand the tenor and transformations wrought by secularization in the United States. What I hope to have ultimately demonstrated is the extent to which the conceptual categories of nonreligious, nonbeliever, secular, agnostic, atheist, apostate, etc. in the United States can only be understood by attending to processes of intimate, subjective transformation.

There are two dimensions to this. First, the psychological, emotional, and existential trauma of religious disenchantment must be seen as the intersubjective psychosocial foundation for a rising class of nonreligious people in the U.S. That is, if we are to make sense of emerging forms of secular sociality, ideology, and institutional practices, whether in the form of changing laws, marriage and family practices, political agendas, arts and music, or intellectual aspirations, we must first attend to the processes of religious disenchantment and disillusionment through which a nonreligious, secular citizenry has risen. Secularization, and the concomitant formation of the ideological principles of secularism, are not driven solely by the circulation and evolution of abstract ideas, nor the disembodied mechanizations of social, economic, political and legal institutions. Rather, they also take shape through experiences of personal crises of faith, the collapse of subjective lifeworlds, paradoxical confluences of feelings of alienation

and nostalgia, attempts at coping with a tragic sense of loss through personal exploration (and experimentation), and the formation of explicitly nonreligious socialities and identities while inhabiting places suffused with religion. And second, any attempt to describe the formation of contemporary secular subjectivities must take into account the various forms of intersecting religious dis/identifications and lasting feelings of embodied religious inhabitation at work within ostensibly "secular" populations. That is, we must never lose sight of the extent to which religion - as cultural identity, moral system, embodied habitus, etc. - constitutes an ever present antagonist against which, and through which, notions of the secular emerge and take shape.

In conclusion, I hope that whatever descriptions, arguments, or insights I have been able to articulate can ultimately contribute to a more ethnographically sensitive appraisal of these overlapping issues of secularization, apostasy, and disenchantment. For it is only by rehumanizing our discussions and debates over religious (dis)belief that the antagonism between competing factions of believers and nonbelievers in our contemporary society can be overcome.

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