

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface: Gender Trouble and My Hybrid Life</i>	xi
Introduction: Autobiographical Constructions of the Mormon Self(s)	I
1: Narrating Optimism, Faith, and Divine Intervention Mary Ann Hafen, <i>Recollections of a Handcart Pioneer of 1860: A Woman's Life on the Mormon Frontier</i>	30
2: Defending and Condemning a Polygamous Life Annie Clark Tanner, <i>A Mormon Mother</i>	55
3: Truth Telling about a Temporal and a Spiritual Life Juanita Brooks, <i>Quicksand and Cactus: A Memoir of the Southern Mormon Frontier</i>	79
4: Remediating Race and Religious Prejudice Wynetta Willis Martin, <i>Black Mormon Tells Her Story</i>	109
5: A Home Windswept with Paradox Terry Tempest Williams, <i>Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place</i>	145
6: Training to Be a Good Mormon Girl While Longing for Fame Phyllis Barber, <i>How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir</i>	171
Conclusion	194

Appendix A: The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	200
Appendix B: Official Declaration 1	202
Appendix C: Official Declaration 2	204
Appendix D: The Family: A Proclamation to the World	206
<i>Notes</i>	208
<i>Works Cited</i>	228
<i>Index</i>	237

Preface

GENDER TROUBLE AND MY HYBRID LIFE

The spectacle of a significant number of critics getting personal in their writing, while, not to be sure, on the order of a paradigm shift, is at least the sign of a turning point in the history of critical practices.

—NANCY MILLER, *Getting Personal*

Nearly all who spoke to me expressed their surprise that intelligent men and women should be found in communion with the Mormon Church. . . . How persons of education and refinement could ever have embraced a faith that prostrated them at the feet of the Mormon Prophet [Joseph Smith], and his successor Brigham Young, was to the enquiring mind a perfect mystery.

—FANNY STENHOUSE, *Tell It All*

Since the official founding in 1830 of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the “Mormon Church,” Latter-day Saint (LDS) women have felt compelled on many occasions to explain and justify their religious beliefs. Throughout the late nineteenth century in the United States, for example, Mormon women defended themselves at mass meetings and in writing against women social reformers who criticized or pitied Mormon women for practicing polygamy. Contemporary members of the mainstream LDS Church now contract only monogamous marriages, but many outsiders continue to criticize or patronize Latter-day Saint women for their allegiance to a patriarchal religion that valorizes motherhood and espouses strict religious codes. As a Mormon woman myself—but one without a husband and children—I have sometimes felt the sting of outsiders’ criticism.

From childhood, Mormon doctrine offered me the most explicit script for determining the “ideal” roles that women and men should perform to achieve “ideal” family life: men provide and women stay home

XII FAITHFUL TRANSGRESSIONS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

with children. My own family, like many others, did not fit this ideal. My mother grew up in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, among a small community of ranchers and farmers who, in 1896, first homesteaded along a ten-mile stretch of dirt road, dubbed “Mormon Row” by early detractors. My father was not a Mormon. He, too, grew up in Wyoming and fell in love with my mother when they attended high school together. In 1954, at nineteen, Mom bought her own beauty salon while Dad served in the army during the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. After they married at age twenty-one, Mom continued to build a successful small business that has thrived next to our house in Jackson for fifty years. By employing multiple hairdressers, she usually brought in more money than Dad could earn working first as a sawyer, then as a hunting and fishing guide, and finally, as a foreman for a road construction company before dying suddenly of a heart attack at age fifty-six.

As a hybrid child raised in this “part-member” family, I faithfully attended church each week, mostly with my twin sister, since Mom stopped attending services soon after she married Dad. Despite Mom’s inactivity at church and Dad’s aversion to religion, I dutifully attended services and strongly identified as a Mormon. Only with conscious effort have I begun to understand the significance of my non-Mormon identity. Literally and symbolically, I am the product of a “mixed” marriage. Much of who I am and who I am always in the process of becoming can be attributed to the cultural backgrounds and influence of both my mother and my father. Autobiographer and American cultural critic Richard Rodriguez refers to thousands of individuals with mixed heritage as the “brown” children of America. His recent book, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, poetically describes how “brown” children have been viewed historically as “impure” or “tragic,” particularly those who are categorized in such terms based on their mixed race heritage. Much of Rodriguez’s cultural explication of “the browning of America” focuses on miscegenation, but he also addresses other kinds of mixing or border crossing that American society both resists and participates in, including geography (east-west, north-south), sexual orientation (heterosexual, same-sex, bisexual), and religion (Baptist Buddhist; Jewish Muslim). “The future [of America] is brown,” he writes, “as brown as the tarnished past. Brown may be as refreshing as green. We shall see” (35).

Despite the growth of Americans’ obvious mixing, many forces still exist to try to deny or prevent it: “When the line between us is unenforced or seems to disappear,” laments Rodriguez, “someone will surely

be troubled and nostalgic for straight lines and will demand that the future give him the fundamental assurance of a border” (227). Rodriguez warns that any “desire” to “cleanse” or attempt to “choose” to be “one thing or another” endangers the individual and the society. “The brown child may grow up to war against himself. To attempt to be singular rather than several. May seek to obliterate a part of himself. May seek to obliterate others” (226). Critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic affirm Rodriguez’s philosophy about who we are: “No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity,” they write. “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (*Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* 9).

Paul John Eakin, a prominent theorist in the field of life writing, argues that rather than thinking of the “self” as “an entity,” “self” should be viewed as “a kind of awareness in process.” To avoid oversimplifying identity formation, he trades in his former phrase, “the story of the self,” for a new one: “making selves.” This postmodern shift in terminology, along with a shift toward “rethinking the nature of self-experience” by applying research in neurology, cognitive science, memory studies, and developmental psychology, better explains the complexity of selfhood and, thus, better demonstrates the complexity of autobiographical acts. As Eakin and many other contemporary theorists of life writing prove, “[T]here are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them” (xi).

Trying to understand the intersections, interplay, overlap, and internal conflicts that have resulted from my own Mormon and non-Mormon identities is complicated. I have always known that, in general, Latter-day Saints view a marriage such as my father and mother’s as undesirable. The preferred marriage is meant to occur in the temple between a Latter-day Saint man and woman; that’s the Mormon ideal—any other union is spiritually dangerous or flawed. Although I was not born within a temple marriage (so that from the beginning I was not securely “sealed” to my parents for “time and all eternity”), I knew that my mother and father loved each other. That always felt like enough security for me. What has not felt certain or secure is choosing a partner for myself. The complicated experiences I have had dating both members and nonmembers, however, are probably best left for another autobiographical act.

For now, I will admit that I frequently felt insecure and defensive about stereotyping and prejudices against Mormons. Mormons aren’t

XIV FAITHFUL TRANSGRESSIONS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

fun: they don't drink or smoke or swear; they're clannish and self-righteous; they've got a bunch of wives. In my small hometown, Mormons were a minority religion but one with significant presence and influence. Because I was committed to the ideals of my religion, I didn't drink or smoke, and I hardly dated until attending Brigham Young University (BYU) in 1981, where thousands of upstanding Mormon men gathered—magnificently—in abundance. At an LDS university, I felt relieved to finally fit in. Unlike in high school, I no longer felt like a prudish Mormon girl who didn't party or have sex. During college, I socialized with peers, did well academically, and participated in regular religious activities.

At BYU, the line between church and school is purposely blurred. This blurring felt good to me at the time because while growing up I sometimes felt split between two different worlds: church (Mormons, us) and school (non-Mormons, them). In contrast, when I arrived on BYU campus, I no longer felt compelled to live between these two worlds. In fact, for the next eight years while earning a bachelor's and a master's degree in English, I enjoyed the coherence of my academic and religious life, willingly participating in my own training toward obedience, perfection, purity, and a temple marriage to a returned missionary. Now, however, at forty years old and with a PhD in English, I am still single, and my relationship with the church has changed significantly.

I believe the foremost reason for the change originated in what theorist Judith Butler describes as “gender trouble” (*Gender*). From childhood, I preferred playing softball to Barbie dolls, and in school, I often sought opportunities to study women's achievements, since textbooks focused most often on the public lives of “great” men. By the time I turned twelve, I was already getting interested in boys. I was also a tomboy myself, who was being indoctrinated in a traditionally minded, patriarchal religion—just call me a human petri dish, ripe for breeding personal, political, and religious identity conflicts. As a graduate student of English, I began studying feminist literary criticism and history, paving the way for an identity split that only deepened when I began a full-time position as a faculty member in the Department of English at Ricks College, a church-owned school now known as BYU-Idaho. Internal conflicts between my feminist ideals and my Mormon upbringing grew more insistent with each passing year, helping me better understand the experience of marginalized or oppressed groups, something that I thought I understood as a marginalized Mormon. Prejudice and

oppression became (ironically) quite present for me as a feminist scholar teaching at a church-operated school.

The conflicts I experienced as a Mormon woman and a feminist literary critic sensitized me to the conflicts, contradictions, and paradoxes often played out in the pages of these six twentieth-century Mormon women's life narratives. Analyzing their autobiographical acts aided my understanding of twentieth-century Mormon women's experience, but it also exacerbated my own religious conflicts and questions. In addition, the gender trouble that presents itself in these six texts forced me to scrutinize practices in the LDS Church that discriminated against women or minorities and that I have experienced myself, both professionally and personally.

As a faculty member at Ricks College, for example, I was implicitly and explicitly cautioned against teaching anything perceived to be "radically feminist." While most of my students seemed to welcome my perspective and ideas as refreshing, others wrote anonymous, threatening notes or vandalized the feminist-informed cartoons and articles I posted on my door. Once I was questioned by an administrator about someone having accused me of teaching Mormons' concept of a Mother in Heaven, a concept that church leaders had specifically discouraged members from discussing since Mormon feminists had been speculating about the nature of Her identity for some time. In answer to this administrator's inquiry, I told him the truth: I had never had any reason to discuss our Mother in Heaven in class. This incident and others like it were clearly meant to let me know I was being watched and that I could be denied continuing faculty status (tenure), if I did not maintain a conservative agenda in my classroom.

Suspicious and surveillance such as these disturbed and disillusioned me. How could anyone assume that I was anything but a faithful Mormon? I always paid my tithing, accepted callings without hesitation, obeyed the Word of Wisdom, taught Sunday School, and helped people in need. I also earned high student evaluations and was recognized with a teaching award early in my professional career. But I soon learned that as an employee of the church, my past good behavior, excellent teaching, and devoted membership did not mean that I could not or would not be sacrificed if I didn't stay within the boundaries set by church authorities. Sometimes I did and other times I did not know what those boundaries were or what might happen if I dared to cross them. Within five years, I left this environment to pursue a PhD in English at Arizona

State University, a publicly owned institution. I have never looked back. But I do miss teaching and interacting with many of my Mormon colleagues in the Department of English. They were intelligent, caring human beings, who, for the most part, supported my work.

Disparities, contradictions, and formidable warnings against border crossing in my own life have led me to more closely examine similar tensions underlying the six life narratives I explicate here, further directing me toward the central issue of my book: these six women writers' submission, or not, to church leaders' authority. More specifically, I use the phrase "faithful transgression" to describe moments in the texts when each writer, explicitly or implicitly, commits herself in writing to trust her own ideas and authority over official religious authority while also conceiving of and depicting herself to be a "faithful" member of the church. Similar to these six autobiographers, I, too, have committed faithful transgressions within the pages of this book. Choosing to do so has not been easy. My research and critical reflection have forced me—repeatedly, endlessly—to wrestle with my own deeply ingrained religious beliefs and my equally compelling education in feminist theories that mean to liberate and empower women.

Mormon women writers and feminists such as me are not alone in our struggle, however. Sharon Presley, Joanne Weaver, and Bradford Weaver, for example, claim that the 1980 excommunication of Mormon ERA activist Sonia Johnson "brought public attention to a previously little recognized phenomenon: Mormon feminism" (51). Many non-Mormons may be surprised to learn that thousands of Mormon feminists exist and have formed loose but supportive alliances among a significant subcommunity of Mormon intellectuals, who sustain each other through various alternative publications, listservs, and annual conferences. Outsiders' astonishment about the existence of Mormon feminism is understandable since the majority of Mormon women would not refer to themselves as feminists. Still, Mormon women have long been the victims of reductive stereotyping. As Presley, Weaver, and Weaver explain, "The belief widely held by non-Mormons, that the LDS Church . . . vigorously promotes traditional sex roles for women, easily leads to an image of the Mormon woman as the stereotypically unquestioning and dutiful housewife." These LDS writers aptly point out, "The truth is, as usual, more complex than this" (52).

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, professor of history at Harvard University and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *A Midwife's Tale* (1990), understands the

challenges of claiming seemingly contradictory identities as a Mormon and a feminist. In “Border Crossings,” a personal essay she first considered entitling “Confessions of an OxyMormon,” Ulrich asserts, “I am a Mormon. And a feminist. As a daughter of God, I claim the right to all my gifts. I am a mother, an intellectual, a skeptic, a believer, a crafter of cookies and words. I am not a Jack (or a Jill) in a Box, ready to jump when my button is pushed” (Ulrich and Thayne 198). Throughout this autobiographical piece, her writing demonstrates how and why it is possible, even inescapable, for a scholar such as her to be a believing member of a patriarchal religious institution while also advocating for the rights of women: “I can no more deny my religious identity than I can divest myself of my Thatcher freckles or my Rocky Mountain accent. Nor,” she stresses, “would I discard my feminist values” (203). For those who may still have difficulty understanding how people’s identities do cross over any artificially constructed boundaries between a conservative religion and feminism, Ulrich declares, “Feminism may be larger than they imagined and Mormonism more flexible” (201).

By writing about Mormon women’s autobiographies, I hope the complexity of Mormon women’s life experience and Mormon women’s life writing will be better understood—and believed. In *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, editor and now-excommunicated Mormon writer Maxine Hanks traces four waves of Mormon feminism, demonstrating that whether arguing for “spiritual potential and suffrage,” for the ERA, or for a feminist theology, “there is no [Mormon] feminist consensus—we must validate our diversity” (xix). In my own writing here, I imagine radical Mormon feminists might view my interpretations as too tame, too cautious, not critical enough. Liberal Mormon feminists, on the other hand, might view my conclusions more sympathetically, while orthodox Mormon women (if they read the book) might condemn the majority of these ideas as apostate or bordering thereon. Regardless of member or nonmember responses to my work, however, I have tried to approach the six texts from both an insider’s and an outsider’s perspective, working to strike a balance between celebrating Mormon women’s writing accomplishments while also critiquing the Mormon context within which each of them writes. By analyzing and explaining the tradition of Mormon women’s autobiography, I hope to begin filling a critical literary gap, not only in Mormon literary studies, but also in the burgeoning field of women’s life narratives.

xviii FAITHFUL TRANSGRESSIONS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Similar to many other women's life writing, Mormon women's personal narratives have frequently been trivialized or considered quaint pieces of Mormon social history. In contrast, my examination of twentieth-century Mormon women's autobiographies intends to valorize these women's writing and to argue for them as both eloquent storytellers and astute rhetoricians in the American canon of literature. With regard to Terry Tempest Williams's writing in particular, Jan Whitt argues that Williams is an author who "believes that we can make sense of personal contradictions through literature and that we are healed by the stories we tell. That healing," observes Whitt, "is a result of the collision of opposites; it is the result of emotional violence" (84). In the case of all six autobiographers, I would add that such contradictions, emotional conflicts, and ultimate potential for healing in and through their texts abound.

For me, analyzing these life narratives has brought both rupture and repair. My hope is that, for others, this work will offer encouragement to read the primary texts, engage in discussions about these authors' arguments, take pleasure in their imaginative storytelling, and, at the very least, seek to better understand what each writer in her own way has to say about twentieth-century Mormon women's faithful transgressions in the American West.