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**COMING OF AGE IN THE LATTER DAYS:
ADOLESCENT FOLKLORE AND THE PARADOX OF MORMON IDENTITY**

A Dissertation in

American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation looks at Mormon folklore during the adolescent stage of the life cycle. Using primarily folkloric sources, it examines how Mormon youth, primarily in the Mormon Cultural Region (MCR), negotiate the competing demands of being both Mormon and American while competing with being both insiders and outsiders in both of those communities during a time of life where peer affiliation and being “in” with one’s peers is particularly important. While Mormon youth have greater demands on and expectations for growing up than many adolescents in America, many aspects of folklore have helped ease the many stresses as they come of age. This dissertation looks at official discourse from biannual church-wide meetings (General Conference), outdoor disaster legends, the practice of toilet papering and creative dating, and folk interpretations of scientific and archaeological evidence connected with the Book of Mormon and Japanese heritage to show the many ways that adolescents create traditions to help them build community and ways of coping with the stresses of growing up as both Americans and Mormons. Mormon adolescent folklore becomes a useful tool to help Mormon youth cohere as a group and successfully negotiate the tempestuous teen years despite high and competing expectations and value systems.

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Chapter 1

Coming of Age as a Mormon

Humor columnist Kelly Williams Brown's *Adulthood: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps* is marketed to "aspiring grown-ups of all ages." The jacket asks "If you graduated from college but still feel like a student... if you wear a business suit to job interviews but pajamas to the grocery store... if you have your own apartment but no idea how to cook or clean... it's OK.... Just because you don't feel like an adult doesn't mean you can't act like one." In other words, for those who have achieved some of the outward signs of maturity but still feel scared, anxious, or confused by what it means to be an adult in America, this book will help them finally figure things out. This and other titles seek to humorously or didactically help twentysomethings to grow up, to stop being kids, or to finally move beyond adolescence and into adulthood. It also underscores the fact that growing up is more of a feeling than an event.¹

Writing in 1821, Thomas De Quincy writes similarly of manhood. He wrote, "When, by what test, by what indication, does manhood commence? Physically by one criterion, legally by another, morally by a third, mentally by a fourth—and all indefinite." Whether about manhood or adulthood, his words would be just as relevant if they were written last year rather than nearly 200 years ago. The indefinite nature of these definitions is apparent in America today. Physical maturity could refer to sexual maturity which is reached during puberty between 12 and 14, but could also refer to when someone's body stops growing which in the late teens or early twenties. Legally maturity comes in stages at 16, 18, and 21 when youth can drive; vote, be tried as an

¹ "Adulthood: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps," Amazon.com. Accessed November 25, 2014. http://www.amazon.com/Adulthood-Become-Grown-up-Easy-Steps/dp/1455516902/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416951439&sr=8-1&keywords=adulthood.

adult; and drink respectively. Morally is a question for another book or books, and mentally, many sources say that the brain is finally finished developing at around age 25. The wide variety of these markers deals very broadly with American culture, but there are of course other markers for the many groups and communities of which adolescents are a part.²

For Mormon youth, there are various markers or milestones of growing up that occur at 12, 14, 16, and 18 when youth advance to the next Young Men or Young Women group or graduate altogether into either Priesthood, for boys, and Relief Society, for women. There is some ritualization, for the boys, and various leadership roles for both genders as well as awards youth can earn, all of which I explain in more detail later, but it is worth noting that Mormon culture is similar to American culture in that, as Garry Chick argues, there is no set time or way for youth to become adults, but rather numerous smaller, less definite milestones which extend growing up throughout adolescence.³

Adolescence of course encompasses many if not most of these ages and changes, but with few or no definite demarcations within all of these definitions, adulthood becomes a personal feeling which different people will feel in different ways. Lisa, age 25, recounts that “sometimes I feel like I’ve reached adulthood, and then I’ll sit down and eat ice cream directly from the box, and I keep thinking, ‘I’ll know I’m an adult when I don’t eat ice cream right out of the box anymore.’” Jeffrey Arnett found in a poll that adolescents “from their midteens to their late twenties,” saw “accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent” as the “most important markers of the transition from adolescence to adulthood.” Responsibility, independence, and economic independence are

² Thomas De Quincey, “Life and Manners,” *The Autobiography of an English Opium-eater* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1851). 154.

³ Garry Chick, “Rites of Passage,” In *Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America*, ed. Gary S. Cross, vol. 2, (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 210-18.

certainly common markers, but due to adulthood's subjective nature, they are not definitive and there are many more.⁴

In conducting an informal poll of my own, I asked friends and family members when they first felt like an adult. I received a wide range of enlightening and entertaining responses, some which echo Arnett's findings, and some which do not. One friend was in high school with a job and wanted the game *Donkey Kong 64* and suddenly realized he no longer had to wait for Christmas or his birthday but could go out and get it as soon as it came out. Another friend, echoing the money theme and the childish intentions, said she first felt like an adult when she could buy her own pizza and not have to share it. Others felt it not through the freedom of economic independence, but with the weight of economic responsibility. One friend felt it his first semester away at school, "1500 miles from home, paying my own way and broke." Another said simply, "the second I had to pay my own bills...." One had to sacrifice the economic spoils of youth for the realities of parenthood when he had to sell his motorcycle to pay for tires for his van. Still others connected adulthood not with money, but with responsibilities like the woman who, after getting cast in a show in high school, had to tell her softball coach she was quitting in order to do the show. Another friend felt it at 16 when she had to deal with a difficult family situation, another when he had to decide to put down a pet cat suffering from diabetes. A friend in his 30s felt it in his late 20s when he had his first "mutual(ly) honest conversation" with an emotionally distant father which helped him see his father as a "vulnerable, flawed" person. Beyond reaching a more equal footing with parents, parenthood seems like a likely benchmark of adulthood. Despite this and the fact that many of the respondents having multiple children, only two mentioned parenthood. One spoke of the moment she came home from the hospital and realized that her child was completely dependent on her and that she was now "in it (it being the

⁴ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004). 17-18.

land of grown-up responsibilities) for the long haul,” and the other spoke of sleepless nights and “sacrificing my vanity and body.” Still others had whimsical answers such as when they realized how much they liked golf, the first time they voluntarily entered a Jo-Ann Fabric store, when they started getting excited about cleaning products, or when they first purchased a major appliance. Still others noted physical infirmity. One felt it when their dentist warned them of “receding gums,” another when their body felt fragile and weak rather than invincible, and still another when they realized their peers were getting gray hairs. Still others with families and careers responded that they have yet to “feel” like an adult or deny understanding what that even means.

This long, perhaps perpetual, state of being betwixt and between youth and adulthood is a place where we would expect to find folklore to deal with these persistent and numerous uncertainties. This dissertation on the folkloric practices of Mormon adolescence investigates that space as it raises questions about how youth grow up in America, and how being Mormon affects that process. Many parents certainly impress upon their youth the importance of growing up when they tell them to study hard, to work hard, and to plan for the future. Any community needs its youth to become successful adults who can then perpetuate its culture, and so the government creates institutions, schools, and organizations to ensure youth are instructed properly. Churches educate and cultivate both values and commitment in the youth of their congregations through first hand instruction or via their parents. And yet, as anthropologist Ray Raphael argues, modern American society does little to help transition youth from childhood to adulthood as many traditional cultures have and do throughout the world. In looking at rites of passage from boyhood to manhood in America, Raphael argues that without “dramatizing and ritualizing” the passage from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood, teens are left to themselves, alone or with their peer groups, to dispose of their childhood identity and create a new one. A challenging task made all the more challenging without adult or community support. Despite the efforts of schools, friends, churches, and families, all involved to greater or lesser degrees, to offer adult support as

children navigate their way to adulthood, Ray's bleak portrait seems confirmed by many of the above examples. Further, there is no consensus in America on what it is to be an adult nor well-defined, commonly recognized rites of passage which might give a more definitive answer as to when youth ends and adulthood begins.⁵

If the popular perception is that children have anxiety transitioning to adulthood, less acknowledged is the tension for parents and society. Historian Steven Mintz argues that America is ambivalent about children. While envying "youth, vitality, and physical attractiveness," American adults also "resent children's intrusions on their time and resources and frequently fear their passions and drives." This may be connected, as Simon Bronner argues, with the guilt parents feel due to "decreased parental and community involvement with children," seen in the rise of daycare and "two-income homes." Concomitant with this guilt is increased adult and even legislative oversight and protection of children.⁶

Adding to the fears and anxiety attending the transition into adulthood is the sense that children must be separated and protected from that adult world they will be expected to one day inhabit. Folklorist Jay Mechling notes that, for middle class Americans, youth "came to be seen as a protected period of life," a time to play and learn, free from the worries of the adult world. This view agrees with Gary Cross who argues that before the opening decades of the twentieth century, children were viewed as innately corrupt, as little devils. But due to ideas formulated by John Locke and other philosophers, children came to be seen as a tabula rasa, a blank slate. As such, children could be bred to be good or bad depending on their surroundings. Children, it was

⁵ Ray Raphael, *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), x.

⁶ Qtd. in Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), ix, 2.; Simon J. Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1988), 35.

believed, needed to be sheltered and protected from corrupting influences and exposed to good ones.⁷

Despite this recent shift in seeing children in need of protection and sheltering, America's parents have worried about their children since the Pilgrims landed. The pilgrims feared "their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted,' in the Old World," as well as fearing who they would become in the new one. Steven Mintz notes that "sometimes the panics were indeed about the children, such as the worries over polio in the early 1950s. More often, however, children stand in for some other issue, and the panics are more metaphorical than representational, such as the panic over teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and declining academic achievement in the late 1970s and 1980s, which reflected pervasive fears about family breakdown, crime, drugs, and America's declining competitiveness in the world." Such fears can be seen in news today. Again this ambivalence is evident in adult's attitudes towards children in both fearing for their children and projecting their larger fears onto them as well.⁸

Many scholars have noted the dearth of rites of passage to help the youth in Western societies, including the United States, transition into adulthood. As Garry Chick puts it, "for the most part, American society lacks definitive markers of the child-adult transition." Rather "there is a series of events that, in *effect*, string out the child-adult transition. These include such secular events as moving from grade school to high school (perhaps with middle or junior high school in between), getting a driver's license, registering to vote, graduating from high school or college, and achieving the age at which consumption of alcoholic beverages is legal." There are some traditions to mark the growing up of teenage girls such as sweet sixteen parties and debutante

⁷ Jay Mechling, "Youth Culture," *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) (accessed Nov 11, 2014). And Gary Cross, "Wondrous Innocence: Print Advertising and the Origins of Permissive Child Rearing in the US," *Journal of Consumer Culture* Vol 4 (2): 183-201. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004), 184, 191.

⁸ Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), ix.

balls or even Quinceañera, but no parallel for boys in American society except within different religious traditions. Catholics and some Protestants have confirmation and Jews have bar and bat mitzvah... to “demarcate childhood and adulthood.” Finally, marriage is also a rite of passage, which, for Mormons especially, announces someone’s passage from the adolescent life stage to the adult.⁹

The challenge of raising youth in the face of a larger, secular culture with contrasting values is certainly not new to Mormons. In fact, other groups, the Amish and some Orthodox Jews, face even greater conflict in raising their children in America. Different religious groups help their youth become faithful adults who are invested enough in the group, so that they can one day perpetuate the organization. Various groups achieve this in various ways. Before looking in depth at Mormon efforts to accomplish this, it is worth briefly comparing some other religious groups and their efforts in not just bearing but raising faithful adherents.

The Amish have been remarkably effective at helping their youth transition into full amish adulthood despite their exacting expectations and the inviting freedoms offered by the American culture around them. Probably the most well-known aspect of the Amish teenage experience is rumspringa where the youth are allowed to experiment with sex, drugs, alcohol, and all the lures of sinful America. An astonishing 90% of Amish youth, after the excesses of rumspringa, choose the restrictive, quiet faith of their parents. And again, this despite the fact that church instruction is not even begun until after rumspringa, or after Amish youth have chosen to be a part of the community. While psychologist Richard A. Stevick argues that rumspringa actually helps reinforce the positive value of the Amish community by allowing youth to basically overdose on the worst that American society can offer—while keeping them in a community of peers rather than associating with non-Amish during their “running around.”

⁹ Garry Chick, “Rites of Passage,” In *Encyclopedia of Recreation and Leisure in America*, ed. Gary S. Cross, vol. 2, (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004), 210-18.

Stevick argues that more than rumspringa however, it is growing up in a tight knit community and the comfort of associating with it and the fear of leaving it helps explain the astounding retention rates of Amish youth. The tight knit community is vital for Mormon youth as well and can be strengthened, among peers, through the folklore they have developed.¹⁰

Despite beginning to emerge between the 1400 and 1600s, depending on the scholar, bar and bat mitzvah rituals (for boys and girls respectively) are relatively modern folk customs instigated to address the rising value of individual choice at the expense of traditional roles in modern societies. The ages 13 and 12 (again for boys and girls respectively) were chosen as a standard age of majority at which puberty had likely occurred. Aaron B. Seidman argues that these are legitimate coming of age rituals because while they do not introduce the youth “into secret rituals,” they do indicate a new adult status for the youth within the synagogue. Although there has been some post-WWII criticism of the materialism of the rituals, they do seem as though they are here to stay likely due to their value as a markers of maturity. And while this is a tradition passed down from adult to youth, Stuart Schoenfeld reminds us that the rituals are also influenced by peer groups and can become ways for Jewish youth to perform their masculinity or femininity to their peers.¹¹

¹⁰ Richard A. Stevick, *Growing Up Amish: The Teenage Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), xii, xiii, 22, 23.

¹¹ Stuart Schoenfeld, “Age and Identity: Reaching Thirteen in the Lives of American Jews” *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present*, edited by Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett, (New York City: New York University Press, 2015). 259–81. 259, 260, 273; Aaron B. Seidman, “Bar Mitzvah—An Approach to Social Maturity” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 13 (3). Rabbinical Council of America, 85-89. 86.

Adolescence

Up to this point, we have assumed a basic understanding of adolescence and perhaps a belief that if there is such a thing as adolescence, Mormon adolescents in the MCR experience this stage of life in a distinct way from other American adolescents, or at least that they respond to this cultural experience in distinctive ways as seen in their folklore. I now turn to clarifying and showing how that is in fact, the case. Let me begin with the first task of defining adolescence, clarifying the pressures they feel to grow up, and then proceed to describe Mormon's particular view of adolescence.

The dictionary describes adolescence as a developmental period after puberty when a child turns into an adult. The term comes from the latin *adolescere*, "to grow up." It is a transitional stage, and a particularly modern one that separates childhood from adulthood. Janice T. Gibson defined adolescence as the time from puberty "to full physical, social, and emotional maturity." Because puberty is the hallmark of the teen years, people often think of adolescents as teens. However, because adolescence is largely culturally defined and the social markers of "full" physical, social, and emotional maturity--such as career, marriage, and terminal college degrees—are coming later and later for various cultural, historical, and economic reasons for both Mormons and Americans, adolescence is also extending later in life. For my purposes, adolescence generally refers to the ages between 15 and 25 with some outliers popping up before 15 and people beginning to exit before 25 often through some culturally-recognized indicator like marriage or graduation from college.¹²

Despite its definitional roots in biology, adolescence is still a cultural phenomenon. Psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith notes that the status of youth varies from culture to culture, and

¹² Janice T. Gibson, *Growing Up: A Study of Children* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978), 463.

that particular status has some bearing on the traditions they develop. Adolescence may be an arbitrary cultural construct, but as Sutton-Smith also notes, “a group that senses itself to be distinct usually develops characteristic customs and ceremonies, many of which express opposition to those of the hegemonious surrounding culture.” So whether adolescents are told so or whether they truly see themselves as living through a distinct stage of life, amounts to the same thing.¹³

But is there anything truly distinctive about this stage of life to separate it from childhood and adulthood? Folklorist Sue Samuelson, from her work studying slumber parties and school gatherings of teenagers, has long argued that adolescent folklore exhibits distinct trends which separate it from the folklore of children, adults, and even college students. These distinctive features of their folklore included “concerns with sexuality, a sense of adventure and discovery, a need to test alternative forms of reality, and to express independence.” Samuelson admits that some of these have roots in children’s folklore and many adults remember much of this folklore, but it is active in and modified by the adolescent bearers of the folklore.¹⁴

Folklorist Bill Ellis agrees that “the adolescent years are ones of preparation for adult independence and are characterized by rites of rebellion.” He goes on to note that these rites “are, paradoxically, ways of exploring and internalizing adult religious and social mores.” I argue that Mormon youth internalize and work through the very Mormon desire to both assimilate to and remain distinct from their surrounding American culture. This Mormon paradox is a crucial one in the lives of Mormon youth and colors the ways they view growing up and how they seek to

¹³ Brian Sutton-Smith, “Overview: History of Children’s Folklore,” *Children’s Folklore: A Sourcebook*, eds. Brian Sutton-Smith, Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson, and Felicia R. McMahon (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁴ Sue Samuelson, “A Review of the Distinctive Genres of Adolescent Folklore,” ed. Simon J. Bronner, in *Children’s Folklore Review* 17 (1995): 13, 25.

achieve independence in their adult world even if they may appear at times to be rebelling against or transgressing the mores of that culture.

However long it lasts, adolescence is seen sociologically as a transitional stage, the main concern of which is to develop an individual and independent identity. Psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term “identity crisis” to describe this central challenge. Marked by change and transformation, adolescents struggle to develop distinct identities. Ironically, or perhaps due to this preoccupation with identity, adolescence is also a time when “peer identification” and “peer pressure is strongest.” As adolescents seek to define sexual and occupational identities, there are “infinite possibilities,” and, thus, “danger and uncertainty.”¹⁵

In developing an identity, Erikson designated seven identity crises that youth must navigate successfully to become successful adults. The first involved “gaining a sense of time and of the continuity of life;” the second, developing self-confidence to accomplish one’s goals; the third, the ability to experiment with identities in order to find one that fits; the fourth involved exploring career options; the fifth involved gender roles; the sixth involved one’s relationship with authority and being a leader as well as a follower when appropriate; and the seventh involved what values and beliefs an individual will commit to. Childhood, or adolescence, ended when individuals found satisfactory answers to these identity crises.¹⁶

Robert Havighurst, a psychosocial theorist of adolescence sees adolescence in a similar way, as a series of tasks required by “individual needs or society’s demands.” Whether the individual or society requires it, an adolescent needs to master eight major tasks to become an adult. While Havighurst does not mention the need to understand time as Erikson did, he adds the task of accepting one’s body and otherwise relies on the commonly accepted cultural markers of

¹⁵ Frank A. Salamone, “Adolescence.” in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon Bronner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) accessed October 30, 2014.

¹⁶ F. Philip Rice, *The Adolescent: Development, Relationships, and Culture*, 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1987), 95-97.

career, independence, marriage and family life, as well as gender roles, and adhering to some set of values or ethics. The overlap certainly emphasizes that achieving adulthood and maturity is the primary way many psychologists and others have conceptualized adolescence, as though its central concern is what comes next rather than what is happening, ie, adolescence itself. Despite this criticism, there certainly is something to the pressure placed on teenagers and felt by them to become something they are not. While much of this concern seems aimed at their peer group, adults and society might be the guiltier party for putting pressure on adolescents. In fact, the various evils of peer pressure may be a welcome and more manageable alternative to the pressures of “achieving” adulthood that adolescents are faced with.¹⁷

Harry Stack Sullivan viewed adolescence as a time when children shift their ties with parents and authority figures to their peers. Interacting with peers, Sullivan argues, helps “in the development of empathy, expanding worldview, and linking intimacy with sexual feelings.” Interacting with peers also allows individuals to discover more directly how their ideas match up with the larger world. Some also argue that peer groups are a surrogate for the lack of rites of passage in American society as they help “express the change in status from childhood to adulthood.” Whether this is true or not, it can certainly help mark a transition for the adolescent whose status can change simply from entering a different group with different values. In short, it is a time for children to prepare for their adult roles in society and become a member of a wider society in their own right rather than as an extension of their parent(s).¹⁸

As adolescents form these ideas, they try to answer the “who am I?” question, “adolescents must understand the physical changes that take place at the time, define their external environments, and define their roles within those environments. Adolescents are concerned also with making explicit their own personal positions in relation to the values and

¹⁷ F. Phillip Rice, *The Adolescent*, 110-111.

¹⁸ Qtd. in Frank A. Salamone; And Janice T. Gibson. *Growing Up*. 476.

beliefs of society.” Adolescents want to define their roles, so their folklore will either reflect or help them achieve that desire. However, this is complicated for Mormon youth in America as they establish their identity. They experience tugs in two directions, one towards the values and beliefs of their religion and another towards American society and values. Gibson notes that the main concerns with identity formation in adolescents are sex and sexuality, deciding on a career, and determining the morals and values to live by. These two value systems are fairly harmonious in terms of career and values, but much less so regarding sexual mores. Thus, in looking at how these two value systems work, there will be much more conflict—and thus greater negotiating and proliferation of folklore—between the two systems when sex or sexual issues are concerned, as well as when marriage and family issues are concerned because while Mormon practice has followed American society in delaying these more and more, there is still social pressure to not delay getting married in LDS society. When careers or other issues are involved, however, there is less conflict between the two value systems.¹⁹

Erikson argues that adolescents “want to discover ‘who and what they are in the eyes of a wider circle of significant people as compared with what they themselves have come to feel they are.’” For any subculture within America, that would mean at least two, perhaps more, significant circles. For Mormon youth, it often means they must discover who they are as a Mormon, and as an American, and ultimately as a Mormon American, a mix of the two.²⁰

¹⁹ Janice T. Gibson. *Growing Up*. 465, 469-473.

²⁰ Erik Erikson qtd. in: Elizabeth Tucker. *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), 182

Mormon Adolescence

While I argue that the church lacks true rites of passage for their youth, Folklorists Austin and Alta Fife argued that Mormon youth go “through a series of rites of passage,” throughout their youth. In the opening to their seminal work, *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, they outline the life cycle of a Mormon in a chapter titled “A Mormon from the Cradle to the Grave.” The majority of the chapter focuses on the teenage years as Mormon youth transition from youth to adults. Once maturity has been reached—after marriage—the Fife’s jump to the next big moment, when the Mormon couple’s children begin to go on missions and get married themselves. Certainly, the Fife’s saw adolescence as a key time in the infinite conception of the Mormon life cycle. Indeed, LDS leaders seem cognizant of this as there are a number of ways the church has instituted to help their youth pass from childhood to adulthood. This is reflected even in the terminology used within the church to talk about adolescents. Despite being familiar with and using the terms “adolescent” and “teen,” the most popular and inclusive term is simply “youth” or “the youth;” however, “Young Men” and “Young Women” are also standard terms for teens aged 12-18, and Young Adult for ages 18 to 30 or 31. However, once someone exits the teenage years, they can enter adulthood by getting married. While “youth” might emphasize a separation between the youth and adults, the terms “young men and women” seems to close that gap somewhat, or at least recognize their liminal status beyond childhood but not yet in adulthood. This gap narrows even more, or is perhaps leapt wholly over, for young men on missions who, at only 18 years old, are called “Elders.” Add to this the fact that adults in the church are most often termed “Brother So and So” or “Sister So and So,” terms that again lessen the distance between youth and adults.

The traditional hierarchy of age, at least in the titles for people, becomes much more fluid for Mormon youth.²¹

Further, young men and women are divided up into groups based on their age. Young Men are divided up into Deacons (12-13), Teachers (14-15), and Priests (16-17) with attending rituals and responsibilities that accrue as they “advance in the priesthood.” These advancements come with being “set apart,” by priesthood leaders after interviews with the Bishop to ascertain continued worthiness, but, barring any issues along those lines, young men will advance with and among their peers on a Sunday after they turn 12, 14, and 16. These advances are attended with additional responsibilities as well, mainly connected with the administration of the sacrament, performed each week in worship services and the most sacred ritual performed outside of the Temple. For Deacons, these duties include passing the bread and water of the Sacrament to the congregation each Sunday as well as gathering fast offerings (charitable donations derived from donating the money that would have been spent on the two meals Mormon’s abstain from the first Sunday of each month) from those who cannot make it to church. Teachers prepare and pass the sacrament as well as gather fast offerings if needed and serve as a messenger for the bishop as needed during the first hour of Sunday services, or Sacrament Meeting. Priests can prepare and pass the sacrament, but are also able to bless the sacrament and even baptize, confer the Atonic priesthood, and participate in ordaining other deacons, teachers, and priests.²²

There is much less in measuring Young Women and their official standing and progress through the church. Young Women progress through Beehives (12-13), Mia Maids (14-15), and Laurels (16-17) although their advancement is not attended with any institutionalized rituals, or additional responsibilities as have developed for the Young Men. There is, however, the Young

²¹ Austin and Alta Fife. *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), 11.

²² “Deacon,” “Teacher,” and “Priest.” *Duty to God: For Atonic Priesthood Holders*, last updated February 21, 2012, <https://www.lds.org/young-men/duty-to-god/deacon/priesthood?lang=eng>.

Women personal progress program that encourages Young Women to complete experiences and projects for each of eight “Young Women Values,” which exemplify womanhood for Mormons. These eight values are “Faith, divine nature, individual worth, knowledge, choice and accountability, good works, integrity, and virtue.” As they work towards earning the “Young Womanhood Recognition” award, usually presented to them in the form of a necklace pendant, Young Woman must plan and execute these projects, perform service, and participate as an active member of their ward by attending their church meetings, living the standards in *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet, keeping a personal journal, participating in seminary, reading the Book of Mormon, and recording their testimony of Jesus Christ.²³

A similar program for Young Men is called “The Duty to God” award where Deacons, Teachers and Priests are encouraged to become worthy priesthood holders by completing activities under the general headings of “Spiritual Strength, Priesthood Duties, and For the Strength of Youth.” While the former two sections are common to Deacons, Teachers, and Priests, the final section is more specialized, focusing on “Physical Health” for Deacons, “Education” for Teachers, and “Family and Friends” for Priests. Furthermore, most Wards throughout the United States have organized Cub Scout and Boy Scout Troops which include all the Young Men in the ward. How active a troop is varies by Ward and Stake, but often there is a robust presence of scouting in most LDS wards to the point that Scouting becomes a common feature for youth throughout the church and most Young Men are familiar with parental or ward pressure to become an Eagle Scout. Current President of the church, Thomas S. Monson, has earned a silver buffalo, an award for “noteworthy and extraordinary service to youth... national in scope.” Another indicator of just how close the Boy Scouts and the LDS Church are, the BSA offers a “Thomas S. Monson Award.” The LDS Church is not as closely linked to the Girl Scouts,

²³ “Young Womanhood Recognition.” last accessed January 17, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/young-women/personal-progress/young-womanhood-recognition?lang=eng>.

and Girls Scouts is less universally followed, but there is some activity in Girl Scouts among Mormon youth in some areas.²⁴

The *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet, referenced in both the Young Womanhood Recognition Award and the Duty to God Award, is a collection of guidelines for youth to follow on select gospel topics. The pamphlet seeks to take various doctrines and show how they might be applied in the lives of youth. There are 19 sections that cover topics like dating, dress and appearance, education, entertainment and media, language, music and dancing, physical and emotional health, sexual purity, and others. This pamphlet is full of guidelines the church encourages the youth to follow often in contrast with behaviors common throughout America. Some guidelines include not dating “until you are at least 16 years old,” and avoiding dating one person until you “enter your adult years.” The section on dress and grooming counsels against, and defines, “immodest clothing,” tattoos, and encourages women to only get one pair of piercings in their ears. Some sections contrast the standards encouraged for the youth with American culture. In the “Sexual Purity” section, it states, “Do not allow the media, your peers, or others to persuade you that sexual intimacy before marriage is acceptable. It is not.” While not always so explicit, the pamphlet in some ways codifies how Mormon youth can and should be distinct from the world around them. This both strengthens that sense of distinction and helps maintain it.²⁵

Youth Conference is for “young men and young women ages 14-18,” and occurs once a year, usually in the summer, and usually as an entire stake (a stake is an organizational unit

²⁴ *Fulfilling my Duty to God: For Aaronic Priesthood Holders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010.) 10, https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06746_eng.pdf?lang=eng; See also “Silver Buffalo Awards,” last accessed January 17, 2015, <http://www.scouting.org/scoutsource/Awards/SilverBuffalo.aspx>; and “Thomas S. Monson Award,” LDS-BSA Relationships, January 17, 2015, <http://www.ldsbsa.org/lds-bsa-scouting-history/thomas-s-monson-award/>.

²⁵ *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011). 1, 4, 5, 7, 35.

composed of multiple wards, the congregational unit where Latter-day Saints meet together each week.). The purpose of the Youth Conference is to “Build faith in Jesus Christ, strengthen testimonies, develop talents, make new friends, and have fun with youth who share similar beliefs and standards.” Youth conferences are often conducted in camp settings, include a lot of games and fun activities, as well as some activities that encourage their spiritual development as they always have “a gospel theme.”²⁶

Comparing the institutional treatment of boys and girls, it is clear, if it was not already, that growing up as a Mormon is different for boys and girls. Of course, even among boys and girls, Mormons are not a uniform group despite the most iconic Mormon image, the clean cut missionary boys in dark slacks, white t-shirts, and nametags. Beyond even regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences, Mormon youth, as Mormons themselves vary from one to another. So, while admitting that there are exceptions and deviations, I have tried to focus on some of the many possible points of comparison between the experiences of young LDS men and women in the MCR as well as some points of contrast. For instance, while both boys and girls go to summer camps, the experiences are vastly different. Girl’s camp has a somewhat more rigid hierarchy of 1st and 2nd years and so on which most boys going to scout camp would be unfamiliar with. They both have campfires, sing songs, and have some mix of structured and unstructured activities, but there are also many differences. While these and other differences offer rich avenues of inquiry, the examples I have used in the succeeding chapters focus on practices common to both genders and have focused my analysis on the adolescent experience generally which will not, of course, be true of every Mormon, but should offer general patterns of those youth who do successfully navigate the turbulent teen years as both an American and a Mormon.

²⁶ “Youth Conference,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, last accessed January 17, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/youth/activities/stake-and-multistake-activities/camps-and-youth-conferences/youth-conferences?lang=eng>.

The terms, organizational groupings, programs, and activities are all ways the Mormon Church help adolescents grow up into successful Mormon adults. These programs are not always successful, but they do reveal a great concern and effort in helping young Mormons achieve success in living their religion. While these programs do attempt to help youth grow up, they are not rites of passage. For Van Gennep, rites of passage included three stages: separation, segregation, and integration where youth are separated from their community during a transformational period before returning with a new status and identity. Rather than having a set rite or even quasi rites of passage, the “growing up” is split between these many milestones extending throughout the teen years. The one event that might be seen as a rite of passage is a mission where youth are indeed separated from their communities for 18 months or 2 years after which they return to their families and communities. There is ample evidence in vernacular as well as official speech about missionaries that show that Mormons see pre-missionaries as substantially different from returned missionaries. However, a mission’s primary purpose is not to transform the missionary’s standing in their community. Rather they are a time to proselyte and serve others. The change in status is a side effect or added benefit of the experience rather than the central purpose, so missions are quasi rites of passage at best.²⁷

Just as Americans have worried about their youth since the Pioneers, LDS leaders have been concerned with the faithfulness of their youth. Two surveys administered at BYU in 1935 and again in 1978, show that the religious adherence of BYU students increased as they have become more conservative since the 1930s to the point that, as one study noted, LDS youth are among the most faithful to their religion of any religious group in America. While this survey was only conducted of BYU students, it is not hard to see the results throughout the MCR. This result was not mere accident although the root cause may be hard to pinpoint. Armand Mauss describes

²⁷ See Jeremy Northcote “Nightclubbing and the Search for Identity: Making the Transition from Childhood to Adulthood in an Urban Milieu” *Journal of Youth Studies* 9 (2006), 6.

how the Church's education system of the thirties embraced scholarship and learning from scholars around the US. This embrace of the world, according to Harold T. Christensen and Kenneth L. Cannon, led to lower levels of belief and less strict adherence to distinctive Mormon practices such as wearing temple garments, drinking alcohol, and strict observance of the Sabbath. In response to this secularization, by the 1960s, the church education system instituted daily religious education for High School students (seminary) and college students (institute) which sought to increase belief and practice, and, according to the survey, succeeded remarkably well. Mauss attributes some of this increase to Family Home Evening, a practice where LDS families set aside Monday night for singing hymns, sharing gospel-themed lessons, and family-centered activities. He questions the efficacy of seminary but found evidence for institute being a strong indicator of continued activity within the church. Christensen and Cannon, on the other hand, explain the shift towards greater fundamentalism as a mix of BYU's selecting for more faithful students, "on-campus socialization," or from an indefinite but widespread shift "characteristic of the Mormon Church." While the final point is somewhat vague, the second points to the behavior, and folk practices of the students themselves which this dissertation explores from the beginning.²⁸

Mormons as Insiders and Outsiders to American Culture

Despite having some markers of maturity, Mormon Culture lacks actual rites of passage to ease the transition into adulthood. This does not mean that there is no need for cultural

²⁸ Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). 26-28, 71-73.; Harold T. Christensen and Kenneth L. Cannon, "The Fundamentalist Emphasis at Brigham Young University: 1935-1973" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (1978): 56, 57.; see Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 47.;

mechanisms to ease these transitions, however. Certainly becoming an adult and maturing are still changes marked by tension. Many scholars see adolescence “as a critical period fraught with promise and peril—a time of passage in which biological, emotional, and social factors converge to forecast the future of young adults.” The idea that adolescence is the formative moment when a person’s life trajectory gets cast in stone for better or worse is a great cause of anxiety for youth. For Mormon youth, however, this can be even more stressful when considering the eternal dimensions of the Mormon life cycle. With a cosmology that anticipates a life like God’s for endless eons, who a person becomes as an adult can be a rather more serious concern than for someone who is only worried about the next 60 to 80 years—although that is certainly a cause for stress and anxiety for youth whatever their religion.²⁹

Folklorist Steve Siporin comments on the weight of adolescence for Mormons in an article analyzing BYU coed jokes. Siporin notes that marriage carries “an enormous social, spiritual, and personal burden of meaning for contemporary America” which is only more so for Mormons. Indeed, while most American wed “Till death do us part,” Mormons wed “For time and eternity,” which carries enormous pressure to marry the right person in the right way. I contend that many of the transitions into adulthood for Mormon youth carry similarly heavy concerns, fears, and anxieties for Mormon youth because the person young Mormons seek to become carries not just lifetime consequences, but eternal ones. The promise and peril of adolescence are amplified accordingly.³⁰

Beyond these standard perils of adolescence, Mormon youth must also contend with a double insider/outsider status as Mormons and Americans. For most of the past decade, I have

²⁹ Patricia Phelan, Ann Lock Davidson, and Hanh Cau Yu, eds., *Adolescents’ Worlds: Negotiating Family, Peers, and School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 2; For eternal dimensions of growing up see Luke 16: 26; 1 Nephi 15: 28; Alma 26: 20; 2 Nephi 1: 13, and 1 Nephi 12: 18.

³⁰ Steve Siporin, “For Time and Eternity: BYU Coed Jokes and the Seriousness of Mormon Humor,” In *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds. Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013). 392, 395.

been teaching First-year writing to College Freshmen in Utah and Pennsylvania. A writing exercise I regularly have them do to get to know each other is to write about their names. Many students will provide stories about how they got their names or what they mean, but nearly half of the students will make one of two comments: “my name is so common, I hate it,” or “my name is so weird, I hate it.” In a recent class, students on both sides of the spectrum lamented their inability to find their name on novelty keychains, one because such keychains didn’t exist, the other because they were always sold out. One student even lamented both the commonness of their first name and the uniqueness of their last name. There seem to be as many reasons to hate common names, because there will invariably be many Jennies or Matthews in a class, as to hate a unique name, because their name is misread, misspelled, or mispronounced thus causing a scene in public. Still, the general response seems to be disliking names that are too common as much as those that are too rare. This distaste for veering too far in either direction reveals the conflicting desires of adolescents who wish to both find their place within a peer group (i.e. to fit in), but to also establish a unique identity or presence within that group (i.e. to stand out). This seems to be one of the core concerns of adolescence, and is a core concern for Mormons.

In Austin and Alta Fife’s *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, they present the Mormon life cycle, and Mormon adolescence as I have noted previously, that sees Mormons only as Mormons. In fact, the Fife’s stress the “inherent inflexibility of his spiritual make-up” when talking about how little missionaries’ world views are affected by foreign missions. They describe a cultural superiority which sees in “the other” little more than stunted half-truths if not outright abominations. While my experience makes me question their conclusions, perhaps such views were more prevalent at the time because they certainly still exist. However, William A. Wilson reminds us that we possess multiple social identities. While *Saints of Sage and Saddle* focus only on their Mormon subjects’ Mormon identity, a more complete view must look not only at one identity at a time, but at how various identities interact and even compete within the minds of the

members of a folk group. It is in the competition between their Mormon and American identities, both at odds with the other, and in Mormon youth's attempts to find a habitable middle ground between the two which generates much of their folklore. Contrary to what Austin and Alta seemed to assume—they give only one sentence in their introduction which even obliquely alludes to their subject's American identity--Folklorists must address how these identities, whether they be religious, occupational, familial, ethnic, or otherwise, compete and resolve themselves because the tensions between two competing identities are what produces the folklore in the first place. For Mormon youth in the MCR at the dawn of the twenty first century, the two main identities are Mormon and American.³¹

Mormonism and Americanism have long had an uneasy tension for Mormons. Armand Mauss argues that Mormonism seeks to both stand out while being seen as quintessentially American at the same time. This has created a certain ambivalence or even double-mindedness in Mormon culture in response to American culture. In trying to fit in and stand out at the same time, to assimilate and remain distinct, Mormon culture often both praises and vilifies American culture. This double-mindedness is rooted deep in Mormon history. Early on, Mormonism was what Armand Mauss terms a "high-tension religion," markedly different from its surrounding culture and viewed with mistrust. The response was widespread persecution of early Latter-day Saints culminating in the famous Missouri extermination order as the surrounding Americans tried to repress the new religion. After fleeing to the Utah Valley—then in Mexican territory—the Latter-day Saints eventually gave up their most threatening practices: "polygamy, theocracy, collectivist economic experiments," to achieve statehood. In other words, they began to assimilate to ease the tensions between them and America. Throughout the first half of the twentieth

³¹ Austin and Alta Fife, *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, 9-10.; William A. Wilson, "On Being Human," In *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore* ed. Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006). 205.

century, “Mormons became models of patriotic, law-abiding citizenship, sometimes seeming to ‘out-American’ all other Americans.” Mauss argues that assimilating to American culture to some degree was necessary for Mormonism to survive.³²

However, if Mormonism assimilated too much, it would cease to be unique and again be destroyed, so when, by the 1960s, Mormons had successfully assimilated, they attempted to, as Mauss puts it, retrench, or distance themselves from mainstream American society so as not to lose their distinctiveness. Despite being assimilated into American culture economically, politically, and even theologically and rhetorically, “Mormons continue to think of themselves as peculiar people.” Latter-day Saints do have some lingering lifestyle choices that mark them as different such as avoiding “alcohol and other mood-altering substances,” avoiding “sexual relations outside of marriage,” and being more likely to “marry within their own religion,” and to still marry younger and have larger families than the national average. However, Mauss would argue that much of Mormon distinctiveness is actually rooted in the past rather than emergent in the present. In contrast to that, however, is the rhetoric of many church leaders that continues to emphasize Mormonism’s difference from “the world.”³³

Consider Elder Robert D. Hales, of the Quorum of the 12, one of the 15 men (including the President of the Church and his two counsellors) who the church biannually sustains as “prophets, seers, and revelators.” In an April 2013 General Conference of the church, which was broadcast worldwide, Elder Hales recalled a devotional he gave in 1982 at BYU. To illustrate the gap between the church and the world, he placed a hand on one side of the podium, and indicated the world was a foot or two away on the other side. It represented, he said, “the very short distance between where the world was and where the Church standards were” when I was in

³² Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 9, 22.

³³ Armand L. Mauss. *The Angel and the Beehive*, 58, 60.

college. Even in 1982, he then indicated that “the world [had] gone far afield... it has proceeded way, way out, all the way out of this [building and around the world.]” This is one example of the ways that Mormon youth, all Mormons really, are taught of the great difference between their religion and “the world” or, for them, America.³⁴

The result, for many youth today, especially in the Mormon cultural region (MCR) centered in Utah, is a mixed message that both encourages patriotism and warns of the wickedness of the world they have been born into and are surrounded by. A place where one is as likely to hear of the cruel persecutions against the saints in the West, the abortive Mormon War (or Buchanan’s Blunder), the evils of “the world” around them, as the faith promoting rumors that in the last days the Elders of the Church will be found upholding the constitutions, or that the founding fathers appeared twice to third President of the Church Wilford Woodruff in the St. George Temple asking why their temple work had not been done. A painting in the St. George temple lobby commemorates this even today. This double-mindedness, Armand Mauss would argue, is because Mormonism must maintain an “optimal tension” between assimilation and separateness in order to survive. For Mormon youth, however, this complicates how they achieve success when what it means to be successful is defined in sometimes contrasting ways among the groups they identify with: Mormons and Americans. This is further complicated when it is played out within someone who considers themselves both Mormon and American and thus desires to succeed in both of these communities.³⁵

Despite the many ways Mormon youth can achieve success as both Mormons and Americans, folklorist Jill Terry Rudy asserts that “insider/outsider conflicts... have continually shaped Mormon experiences,” and that can be equally, if not more, true of Mormon adolescents

³⁴ Elder Robert D. Hales, “Stand Strong in Holy Places,” January 14, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/stand-strong-in-holy-places?lang=eng#d>.

³⁵ Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, 5. And Rick Satterfield, “St. George Utah Temple,” *Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ*. <http://www.ldschurchtemples.com/stgeorge/>.

who are at the point in their lives when peer groups play a significant role in their lives. Both American culture and Mormon culture encourage going to college, getting good jobs, and becoming contributing members of society. When Mormon youth in America are told to be honest, to work hard, to follow the golden rule, or that righteousness brings both spiritual and material blessings, their faith and America's basic Protestant beliefs line up nicely. However, vague warnings about the world can stress the importance of those things that differ between faithful Mormons and American society. Mormon youth are told not to drink alcohol or tea, that smoking and premarital sex are wrong, and to not profane or swear. Living in America, Mormon youth can see people, even other youth, in their high schools, on TV, in movies, or online who engage in all of these forbidden or restricted activities. These beliefs and behaviors centered on family, the Word of Wisdom, and the Law of Chastity—among a few others—which continue to distinguish Mormons culturally from other groups force Mormon youth to consider how and what they will incorporate into their peer group and individual identities as they decide which group they want to join.³⁶

In response to these pressures, Mormon youth have developed a distinctive folklore that allows them to successfully navigate the murky waters into Mormon and American adulthood. Folklorist William A. Wilson argues that Mormon folklore not only exists, but is central to Mormon culture and key to understanding Latter-day Saints. The “cultural heritage” that is passed on through folklore “bolsters their faith, builds a sense of community, ties them to the past, and provides them an escape through humor from the pressures that might otherwise be their undoing.” While all of these functions exist in adolescent Mormon folklore, it is this last function that most interests me. The Mormon adolescent folklore I present in these chapters may not always exhibit humor, but through various verbal, material, and performative ways, it allows

³⁶ Jill Terry Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies,” in *Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources*, ed. David Stanley (Logan: Utah State UP, 2004), 152.

Mormon youth to deal with the heightened stress and pressure of growing up Mormon in America. That increased pressure comes from higher expectations on their behavior, greater perceived consequences (i.e. eternal consequences) for failure to achieve maturity, and a concurrent insider/outsider status with the attendant competing measures for success as Americans and as Mormons. In other words, Mormon youth who desire to become both successful Americans and successful Mormons are told that they cannot be both since success in one area will mean failure in the other and vice versa. So into the already tumultuous teen years, burden is heaped upon burden, and expectations added to unrealistic expectations for Mormon youth with lofty visions of eternal progression and growth. Despite these difficulties, or perhaps because of them, the folklore of these embattled Mormon youth, particularly those in the MCR, has responded by reframing motifs, behaviors, and practices common throughout America into uniquely Mormon versions. These Mormon versions of common practices are modified to allow Mormon youth to first achieve success as Americans and as Mormons as well as easing the always difficult transition into adulthood in an American culture that has few standard ways of achieving that transition.³⁷

Mormonism, Mormon Culture, and Mormon Youth Culture

Who are Mormons anyway? Sydney Ahlstrom notes that they have been seen as “a sect, a mystery cult, a new religion, a church, a people, a nation, or an American subculture” also noting that “at different times and places [they are] all of these.” To this list Mormons themselves might add, Christians as there seems to be some doubt from other Christian groups due to Mormon belief “in the perfection of man to a Godlike state.” Still Mormons pray “in the name of Jesus

³⁷ William A. Wilson, “Folklore,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed., Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillian Publishing, 1992), 518-520.

Christ,” and “believe in the Atonement and the Resurrection, and partake of sacraments in his name.” Mormonism is also the religion founded by Joseph Smith in rural New York in 1830 as a restoration of the organization that Christ originally established during his mortal life. Joseph Smith also translated or received numerous scriptures as additional “testaments” of Christ to go along with the Bible including the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. The church has many distinctive doctrines including continuing revelation, temple work for the dead, the divinity of Christ, the importance of the family, and others. The previously mentioned “plan of salvation” undergirds many of these beliefs.³⁸

The life cycle, as seen by Mormons, is commonly referred to as “The Plan of Salvation.” This plan outlines the path a human soul takes from the Pre-earth life through mortality, resurrection, and judgment, to one of three Kingdoms of glory where they will live forever in varying degrees of glory and happiness depending on their faithfulness in this life. The purpose of life according to this plan is to gain a body and work towards learning and following the laws that will allow an individual to eventually become like God. As I outline the life path, doctrine gets interwoven with official and folk practices as well as traditions. Rather than follow only one thread, I hope to present the significant moments in the life cycle as they are experienced and understood by Mormons.³⁹

As folklorist Eric Eliason notes, “In the Mormon worldview, the life cycle rightly starts in the pre-earth life, where Latter-day Saints believe they dwelled with God as his spirit children.” It should be noted, however, that the life cycle starts even before that as, according to D&C 93: 29, “man was also in the beginning with God.” Joseph Smith taught that God did not create the universe *ex nihilo*, but simply organized materials that were there. The same is true

³⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 508.

³⁹ Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73

with people. In the King Follett discourse, Smith asserts that “The mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal [co-eternal] with God himself.” While many Christians view God as having created Adam, Joseph Smith taught that God placed a spirit in a body he created. In the same discourse, Smith also argues that it is only logical for a being which will exist forever, as Mormon’s believe, to have always existed.⁴⁰

Before birth even, Mormons see themselves, and everyone born on earth, as having already accomplished some major life stages. The first was being born in spirit bodies. Mormons believe that God is the father of our spirits. President Joseph F. Smith, sixth president of the church, taught that “man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal [physical] body.” We read in “Chapter 2: Our Heavenly Family” of the *Gospel Principles* manual that in order to continue progressing and learning, people needed to gain physical bodies and “be tested and gain experience.” We read about the second major milestone of the preexistence in the next chapter, titled “Jesus Christ, Our Chosen Leader and Savior.” It talks about a “council” and subsequent war in heaven where Jesus advocates for the free agency of God’s children and Lucifer who seeks to usurp God’s power. Lucifer, or Satan, and those who followed him were, as is written in Revelation 12: 9, “cast out into the earth,” and became ineligible to receive physical bodies. Youth are often reminded that because they “are on earth and have mortal bodies, ...[they] chose to follow Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Eric Eliason, “Mormons” in *Encyclopedia of American Folklife*. ed. Simon Bronner (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2013), 892-897. And Joseph Smith, Jr., “The King Follett Sermon (Part 2),” *Ensign* (May 1971). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/05/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng>; See also Richard Lyman Bushman. *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). 71-72.

⁴¹ “Chapter 37: Sons and Daughters of the Eternal Father,” *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith*. 1998. Pp. 335.; *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009) 10, 15-16, https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf?lang=eng .

Once born, it is common practice, although not doctrinally required for salvation, to give infants a name and a blessing in their congregations by worthy male members holding the priesthood. The next milestone comes when they turn eight and are baptized. Then, at some point in their teens, youth are given a “patriarchal blessing” which includes individualized promises and one’s literal lineage in the house of Israel. Until recently, many 19-year-old Mormon men and 21-year-old women found themselves away from home for two years serving a Mormon mission. Missions are a 24 or 18 month commitments, paid for by the member or their family, to serve and proselyte for the church in one of 406 areas, or missions, around the world. However, at the Oct 2012 general conference current Prophet and President of the church, Thomas S. Monson lowered the age requirements to 18 for men and 19 for women.⁴²

After their missions, Mormons generally marry and have children. They also enter the Temple for the first time either before going on a mission or before getting married. Entering the temple without having either imminent happens, but is certainly the exception. While the traditional and accepted ages for marriage and children have followed the trend throughout America of occurring later and later, Mormons still marry younger and have larger families than average Americans. This focus on marriage and family also leads to Mormon congregations being known for not providing a great place for those single members in their late twenties and beyond whose development along these milestones seems arrested.

After death, Mormon cosmology suggests that the life cycle continues, meaning that people will continue to learn and grow and change. The next steps in one’s progression are resurrection, the final judgment believed in many Christian religions, and finally the consignment of the body and soul to one of three “Kingdom’s of Glory:” the Celestial, the Terrestrial, and the

⁴² Eric A. Eliason, “Mormons,” 894; and “Missionary Age Changes,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [https://www.lds.org/youth/video/welcome-to-conference?lang=eng.](https://www.lds.org/youth/video/welcome-to-conference?lang=eng;); See also “Facts and Statistics,” Wednesday, 14 January 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-stats>.

Telestial Kingdoms. Mormons are taught that it is only righteous, married members—although these rituals can be performed posthumously—who can inherit the highest degree of the Celestial Kingdom where they will become “gods, even the sons of God,” and “equal [to God] in power, and in might, and in dominion.”⁴³

These lofty beginnings and ends in the LDS view of the life cycle put increased pressure on LDS youth to keep in mind eternal things as they navigate their transition from youth to adulthood, an adulthood already accomplished once in preexistence, but needing to be accomplished again in this mortal period of testing.

Where official doctrine, contained in the “standard works” or canonized LDS scripture as well as the many pronouncements from current and past prophets, ends, Mormon culture steps in to give form and guidance to Mormon life. Eric Eliason writes that Mormon culture centers around shared “religious beliefs and practices as well—at least for those in the Mormon Culture Region of the North American West—a shared historical memory of place and common experience of living in a relatively homogenous religious community.” This has led to the widely recognized existence and emphasis on Mormon folklore in the MCR, centered in Utah but with outposts extending as far as Canada and Mexico. The area echoes early settlements by Mormon pioneers. In *Latter-day Lore* Eliason and Mould outline key features of the MCR, much of it, they admit, historical and fading. These examples focus on distinctive features in city planning, architecture, landscape, regional traditions (particularly material culture such as furniture, textiles, and gravestones), and food ways.⁴⁴

However, in *Latter-day Lore* Eric Eliason and Tom Mould also note that “Utah Mormon culture cannot be generalized to all Mormon culture,” and that “expressive culture... in Utah may

⁴³ D&C 76: 58, 95

⁴⁴ Eric A. Eliason, “Mormons,” in *Encyclopedia of American Folklife*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe Inc., 2013). 875. And Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, eds. *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013), 32-35.

include both Mormons and non-Mormons.” They also point out that any study on Mormons must be careful not to equate Mormon culture with the regional variant found within the Intermountain Western United States. Certainly there may be some overlap as all Mormons share certain beliefs and practices, but right alongside those are both the regional cultures that influence Mormons in various geographic locations as well as different ways that groups with little contact will develop folklore unique to them whether within congregations, families, or peer groups.⁴⁵

In analyzing how Mormon culture (his main case studies are in Salt Lake City and San Francisco) has sought to assimilate into mainstream American culture even as it tries to maintain a unique message and appeal, Armand Mauss notes that Mormonism has often “borrowed from its environment.” In a rapidly growing and increasingly international church, this will necessitate different Mormon cultures in different geographical areas. Certainly the religious beliefs and practices shared by most Mormons encourages some similarities, but the ways that these beliefs and practices interact with local populations and develop independently, as they must to some degree and in some areas, will create variations. These variations can more accurately be termed Mormon cultures rather than Mormon culture.⁴⁶

The variation is not necessarily random. Geographer Donald Meinig identified a “*core* area of ‘greatest density of occupancy, intensity of organization, strength, and homogeneity,’ a *domain* where Mormon culture ‘is dominant, but with markedly less intensity and complexity of development than the core,’ and a *sphere*, where Mormon culture is represented ‘only by certain of its elements or where its people reside as minorities among those of a different culture.’” For instance, in interviewing LDS people for stories about toilet papering, found it rare for someone raised in the West, including Utah, Idaho, Nevada, California, Texas, Oklahoma, and Montana to not recognize the prevalence of toilet papering even if they had not participated in it personally.

⁴⁵ Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, *Latter-day Lore*, 25-26.

⁴⁶ Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*, 197.

On the other hand, Latter-day Saints in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, or New Jersey rarely if ever participated in toilet papering and associated it more with college and the activity of fraternities as most previous researchers have done. More on that in chapter 3.

Most of the examples used in this dissertation do come from the MCR and from practicing Mormons. So the findings and conclusions will apply most directly to them, and my analysis will focus on the cultural influences in Mormon doctrine and tradition. And while there are indications that these practices have gone beyond the Mormon corridor throughout the West with limited to no penetration into the East, we must ask why.

Why do some of these traditions make it from Utah to Texas, but not to New York? Is it due to geography or density among the Mormon population? Despite folklorist Alan Dundes's definition that a folk group consists of "two or more people with at least one common factor," and as Dan Ben Amos has said, "Folklore is artistic communication in *small* groups" (emphasis mine), folklore flourishes in larger groups. What is the ideal size for a folk group? That is hard to say, and could be the subject of further study, but certainly the more folk and the more groups there are the more folklore can develop within and even between those groups. In a place like Massachusetts where there are only a few adolescent Mormons who meet mainly under adult-structured or semi-structured conditions during church and weekly Young Adult meetings, there will be little opportunity for such a group to develop its own folklore or even a sense of group identity and cohesion. Such LDS youth will likely have peer groups they do regularly associate with that do not contain other Mormons, and so will not exhibit any particularly Mormon folklore. There are few if any opportunities for a distinctive culture to develop among Mormon youth in such a situation. On the other side of the spectrum, with so many adolescent Mormons throughout Utah and many places in the West, their sense as a cohesive group may weaken because while their church friends and school friends may not overlap and may indeed all be Mormon, there is nothing distinct in their Mormonness. The ideal size of a folk group—if there is

one—may indeed exist outside the MCR despite the MCR being, of course, an area rich with the repetition and variation of both traditional and emergent folkloric behavior which is the main reason my chapters focus on their folklore.

The discussion of the sizes and viability of folkgroups leads to the concept of Mormon youth culture, which I argue is a cohesive entity. By a culture, I mean that there are expressive practices, particularly traditions that can be called folklore, that are connected to shared ideas within a group of people. While Mormon culture is certainly not completely uniform nor completely distinct everywhere it exists, Mormon youth culture must also be seen as something that is not uniform across America, nor does it exist everywhere Mormon culture does. As seen in the previous example, if Mormon youth's only opportunity to socialize is at church meetings on Sunday and youth meetings on Wednesday evenings once a week, then there is little opportunity for the development of folklore. Further, there is little opportunity for a distinctive youth folklore because both of these times when they can interact are mediated by adult leaders to some degree. Even with some sleep overs thrown in a couple of times a year, it is easy to see how there will be a dearth of folklore in such a setting. Any folklore among the youth will either be minimal—as their interactions are minimal—or simply be adopted from their peers at school who constitute a more viable folk group. As Simon Bronner notes, folklore “provides social cohesion,” and thrives when “the same children see one another almost every day.” The more social contact, the more opportunities for expressive communication.⁴⁷

We have the opposite problem when we enter the MCR. Because so many people are LDS, when we examine their folklore, is it regional folklore or is it religious? Is it enough to be labeled “Mormon folklore” if the practitioners are Mormon, or does the practice need to be unique to Mormons or at least distinctive? Eric Eliason and Tom Mould, in dealing with this

⁴⁷ Simon J. Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1988), 29.

same question, opted for a middle space where the behavior must be shared by many Mormons but can include non-Mormons if it is prevalent enough among Mormons or instigated by Mormons. They conclude that a “tradition be shared by a substantial number of Mormons, or that the interpretive approach...focus on the role a person or group’s Mormon identity has on the performance of that tradition.” With that in mind, the folklore and folk practices examined in this dissertation are certainly prevalent among Mormon youth throughout the MCR, and my analysis of them is grounded in their Mormon identity. The examples used should be very familiar to anyone who has grown up in the Intermountain West or who knows Mormons from that area, and are Mormon folklore because they are so widely practiced by Mormons and so well-grounded in LDS thought, history, and practices.⁴⁸

Mormons and Adolescents in Folklore

Since Richard Dorson identified Mormons as a distinct regional folk group in 1959, Mormons have been prominent subjects in folklore research. The first generation of Mormon folklorists (Wayland Hand, the Fifes, and Hector Lee) worked, as many folklorists of the time, to preserve elements from the Mormon past. While the first generation emphasized Mormon geographic isolation as key to their uniqueness, the second generation of folklorists of the MCR (William A. Wilson, Barre Toelken, Jan Brunvand, Margaret Brady, and Steve Siporin) came to view the Mormon folk group having more to do with “distinctive beliefs and customs than with geographic isolation and an agrarian way of life.” They did continue, however, “to maintain the view of Mormons as a distinct regional group connected with the American West and having a unique heritage and belief system.” This second generation also “reflect(ed) the movement from

⁴⁸ Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, *Latter-day Lore*, 8-9.

comparative studies and survivalist attitudes toward studies of the function and performance of traditions in the ongoing social life of a strongly interactive group.” Prompted by William A. Wilson’s call to “redirect Mormon folklore studies away from assumptions of homogeneity, quaintness, and backwardness,” contemporary Mormon folklorists study “living religion” and look at how “theology and religious principles are enacted in everyday life.” This tradition continues today as Mormon folklorists seek to capture the variety of experiences by moving beyond Utah, examining previously underrepresented populations, deals more with gender issues, and moving towards more international studies to reflect a religion with more members outside of the US than within. In joining scholars of Mormons and Mormonism, my aim is to uncover the context and importance of youth experience in the formation of Mormon identity and practice which is rooted in the MCR, but which responds to national and international contexts as well. In looking at the performances, rhetoric, and activities of Mormons, I analyze how these emergent traditions express religious and cultural beliefs and attitudes.⁴⁹

Sue Samuelson often lamented that adolescent folklore was grouped with children’s folklore but is, she insisted, distinct from it. In a posthumously published article in the *Children’s Folklore Review* In reviewing the scholarship on adolescent folklore, Samuelson notes the prevalence of certain genres including “legends, slang, ceremonies, customs, pranks, games, parties, special clubs, verbal dueling, automobile activities, foods, songs and cheers (and their parodies) and autograph and yearbook verses.” The prevalence of legends, legend trips, and urban legends is particularly pronounced as she points out that many of them deal with sexuality, adventure, alternative realities, and both the dangers and ways to achieve independence. Still, she finds the great variety found in both in adolescent folklore and its research. She concludes that the folklore of teenagers show that they desire “more control over their lives” and often the genres

⁴⁹ Jill Terry Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies,” in *Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources*, ed. David Stanley (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004), 145, 148-150.

help “alleviate tension and worry” connected with their growing independence. Mormon adolescent folklore is no exception. The chapters that follow will outline how Mormon youth have produced their own folklore that not only alleviates tension regarding growing up, but includes practices that help them to not only grow up well, but to do so in a way that allows them to succeed as both Mormons and Americans.⁵⁰

Mormon adolescent folklore has not received a book-length treatment, but some articles suggest some early emphases. Kristi Bell Young’s “Now that I’ve Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations,” looks at how creative dating helps keeps dating “casual, fun, and on a teen rather than an adult level” for Mormon youth. Eric Eliason mentioned teenage rumors of famous Mormons in looking at “nameways” in Mormon culture, noting some concern with how these youth look at the connection between American and Mormon culture. Steve Siporin’s analysis of Mormon coed jokes certainly addresses Mormon adolescent folklore and the pressures surrounding marriage. And William A. Wilson’s “On Being Human: The Folklore Mormon Missionaries” certainly deals with an adolescent subgroup although one often seen as transitioning into adulthood. Still, his analysis shows how these young men and women attempting to maintain a sense of stability in an unstable world.”⁵¹

The chapters that follow will not be an exhaustive examination of how Mormon youth in the Mormon Cultural Region negotiate their place between the pressures and demands of church and state. It will analyze some of the most important aspects of Mormon folklore and adolescent

⁵⁰ Sue Samuelson, “A Review of the Distinctive Genres of Adolescent Folklore,” ed. Simon J. Bronner, *Children’s Folklore Review*, 17 (1995): 18-19, 28.

⁵¹ Kristi Bell Young, “Now that I’ve Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations,” *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds. Eric A. Eliason & Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 121.; Eric A. Eliason, “Nameways in Latter-day Saint History, Custom, and Folklore,” *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds. Eric A. Eliason & Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 134; Steve Siporin, “For Time and Eternity: BYU Coed Jokes and the Seriousness of Mormon Humor,” eds. Eric A. Eliason & Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 395; William A. Wilson, “On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries,” *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, ed. Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 208

folklore. Legends, for example, are extremely prevalent in the history of adolescent folklore. I examine a disaster legend of Mormon youth and its cultural and religious importance in my chapter on Boy Scout disaster legends. Sue Samuelson found the prevalence of pranks as a genre particular to adolescents, and I will interpret the ways Mormon youth take and reframe them as a more acceptable, community-building form that still partakes of some of the initiatory nature of adolescent pranks around the country. I examine creative dating, a pervasive practice in the MCR that reflects a central concern in Mormon belief and for youth: courtship, dating, marriage, and family. Finally, I take up the folklore of Mormon missionaries in Japan who seek to not only maintain a sense of stability, but help them connect Japan and the Japanese into a narrative more closely connected with their Mormon tradition rooted in the Middle East and America. These chapters and topics lead in the conclusion to my overall explanation of themes and concerns at the heart of the Mormon experience and Mormon youth's experience. Mormon adolescent folklore shows us that the Mormon adolescent experience, is central to the development of Mormon cultural identity and to the adult response by Mormons to the demands of their faith and their nation.

Chapter 2

And a Child Shall Lead Them: The Wise Child Folk Motif in Mormon Discourse and the Distance between Youth and Maturity in Mormon Thought

Prevalent in folktales throughout the world and in popular media in America, the “Wise Child” whose innocence sees through the deceptions, greed, envy, and ingratitude of his or her elders flourishes in Mormon official and lay discourse. While most Latter-day Saints would not be familiar with the term, the wise child is a staple of General Conference addresses, found throughout church magazines and instruction manuals for both youth and adult members, and finds its way into Sacrament Meeting talks and testimony meetings. Used by church leaders in General Conference to explicate doctrine as well as in memorates to share personal convictions of faith in testimony meetings at the ward level, the use of the “wise child” folk motif by adults and church officials differs markedly from its use in popular media where the Cartman, Bart, and Stewie have shed the innocence of the wise child in revealing the follies of adults.

In this chapter, I analyze the prevalence and use of the “wise child” in the 2012 April and October sessions of General Conference. General Conference is a biannual where Mormons have traditionally gathered to hear teaching and exhortations of the General Authorities or leadership of the church. This leadership is presided over by the Prophet, his two counsellors, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, all men sustained by the church membership as “prophets, seers, and revelators.” This leadership also includes a Presidency of the Quorums of the Seventy, a first and second Quorums of Seventies, a Presiding Bishopric, and General Relief Society, Young Women, Primary, Sunday School, and Young Men Presidencies.¹

¹ “The Sustaining of Church Officers,” *General Conference: April 2012* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/the-sustaining-of-church-officers?lang=eng>.

The prevalence of the “wise child’s” use across the pulpit is paradoxical in a church well-known for its firm hierarchical structure emphasizing the authority of “elders.” As Armand Mauss points out, “church organization has the appearance of a very tight ship with a command structure that reaches all the way down to the family level.” So why favor the wise child who is all about reversing and undermining hierarchies? While the wise child in traditional folklore runs the gamut from gentle satire to revealing the justice or injustice in the actions of adults, modern incarnations of the wise child in media favor biting satire as one can see from the rowdy to crude children on TV such as the kids on *Southpark*, Bart on *The Simpsons*, and the brilliant and diabolical Stewie from *Family Guy*.²

On the other hand, both Christianity and the Mormon tradition are full of examples of the wise child. The Old Testament has Samuel, a young boy at the time, given a message to foretell the end of the current Prophet, Eli’s house. Jesus conversing with the learned men in the temple is a great example of the wise child and, when grown, he praises children and sets them up as examples to adults, thus endorsing the wise child. Joseph Smith’s story falls in line with the wise child, particularly from a Latter-day Saint perspective. Smith, still a young boy, prays and is told that all the doctors of religion are wrong and he must tell them many lost truths about the nature of God and his plan for the inhabitants of the earth. The history of the church with its humble beginnings and relative newness on the world stage can itself can be seen as an example of the wise child, so the prevalence of the wise child can be seen as quite natural.³

The stark contrast of how the wise child can be used by both the faithful and the profane continues a theme running throughout this dissertation of how the images and symbols of culture can be used for such drastically different purposes by Mormon and non-Mormon depending on

² Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994). 110.

³ 1 Samuel 2: 10-14; Luke 2: 42-49; Joseph Smith—History 7-20, 33-42.

the frame, even when the groups involved are connected by a mountain of shared history, heritage, and culture. The use of this folk motif shows just how pliable folklore can be as groups adapt it for their own use. But in using, and choosing, the wise child as such a staple of official discourse, what use are Mormons getting out of their use of this popular folk motif?

The use of the wise child, usually a rebellious figure, by the church hierarchy can be seen as proof of the church's efforts to enforce a particular view of children. The prevalence of this folk motif in official doctrine may be seen by many as evidence of the power of the church's so-called "central command system." However, can we separate the church authorities from the culture that permeates the church itself? Rather, the prevalence of the wise child in official Mormon discourse reveals how Mormons view, and relate to, or want to relate to, the wise child, the one who, as many of their mythic heroes did before them, can plainly see and uncover hypocrisy and error in their struggle to be more like God's wisest child, Jesus Christ.⁴

The wise child, in official Mormon discourse, rather than challenging adults and exposing adult foibles to mockery, is used to gently remind all members of their shortcomings and encourage greater adherence to church doctrines. This is another theme that will run through many of the chapters in this dissertation, of the Church adopting a wide and popular practice, or in this case folk motif, and domesticating it. In this chapter, I argue that the wise child in Mormon official discourse lessens the perceived distance between the young and old, the child, the adolescent, and the gerontocracy who govern the affairs of the church. This lessening of the distance between where they are and what they need to become can help reduce the anxieties and stresses normally associated with coming of age for Mormon youth. Despite having an infinitely greater distance between them and growing up into potential godhood, they have a commensurately shorter distance between adolescence and mortal maturity.

⁴ See F. Reed Johnson, "The Mormon Church as a Central Command System." *Review of Social Economy* 37 (1979): 79-94.

The Wise Child in Folklore

Sources listed for the Wise Child, folk motif J120-J129, “wisdom learned from children,” in Stith Thompson’s *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1955-58) include tales from many cultures of the wisdom of children. Thompson records two instances of J120, one from Arabic and another from India. Of the others, J121, “ungrateful son reproved by naïve action of his own son,” is the largest with examples from Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Lithuanian folklore. Among the other subsets Spanish, Jewish, and Indian examples seem most prominent. These tales describe how a child’s actions produce knowledge or wisdom in an adult. Often it is the child’s naiveté that produces the knowledge, and often in the form of a rebuke, in their elders. For example, motif J121 tells of a certain son being reproved by his own son’s imitation of him. After a man gives his aged father half a carpet to keep warm, his own son keeps the other half, telling him that he is keeping it for him when he’s older. Sometimes the situation is reversed as when a father tells a son to only drag him to the threshold, but no farther, because that is as far as he dragged his father. The themes of old age, decrepitude, and a simple, naïve sense of justice are all features of these stories. The wisdom produced in these tales comes from both the child’s interpretations his father’s actions and the father’s subsequent revelation of the justice of his own actions. The child then, knowingly or not, is active in creating the story’s moral.⁵

Related motifs J122 and J125 follow this pattern. Motif J122 features the naïve remarks of children rebuking or uncovering the sins of their parents. In one a forgetful father wonders what he’s forgotten and his naïve son suggests that he forgot to strike mother, as he was an abusive man. In another a seducer is stopped short by a child lamenting that his mother is open to just the crime he aims to commit. In J125, children uncover their parent’s misdeeds such as an

⁵ Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Revised and Enlarged (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958).

innkeeper's wife who has watered down the wine, or the child who innocently reveals that the father's secretary has been having an affair with his wife. While the targets of the knowledge often changes—though is always composed of adults—the revelation in these stories is also a dialogic act between the child and the adult.⁶

Motifs J123 and J124 don't rely on the child's innocence and naiveté to uncover wisdom, nor do they rely on the child's innocence. Here the children can be either a passive object lesson or the agent who actively produces the wisdom in the tale. A King who judges a lawsuit wisely after observing a child's game and seeing the principles of justice present in the game earns his wisdom on his own without significant participation from the children. Here they seem to act more as object lessons rather than being involved in the meaning-making of the story. But there are also the cases of a clever prince overruling the seemingly just decision of the King with greater wisdom, and 124 which encourages the learning of virtues from children who can exhibit patience when their food is stolen. Adults can learn patience when they see the children search quietly for their food rather than crying or getting distressed. In these cases, the child is actually regarded as wise either through having a rare wisdom beyond his years as the prince exhibited, or an innate quality that is seen as desirable in the adult world.⁷

There are two spectrums at work in creating the central action and conflict in these stories. One is a passive/active spectrum where most of the tales lie on the active side. Usually the child is doing something and interacting with the adults in order to create the moral of the story, but sometimes the child's actions are only significant when the observing adult draws wisdom from the child that might be available to any observer. The other main spectrum is between the naïve and knowing child. Again, the bulk of stories feature children who possess their wisdom

⁶ Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*.

⁷ Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*.

naively. Their sense of justice is innate, or their fears real and guileless, and it is simply in voicing those pure, innocent, and honest values that creates wisdom in the adults around them. In this way they are valued as speakers of widely known but unacknowledged truths as in “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” The lone instance of the clever prince whose actions are indicative of wisdom in and of themselves without the interpretation or transfer of that wisdom to a corresponding adult is an exception that seems to prove that most of the wise children in folktales rely on being active but naïve.

The wise child is a liminal figure that both divides and bridges the worlds of children and adult. A child is often seen as passive and naïve, as an object rather than a subject. As they grow more active, and more knowing, they come to enter more and more the adult world. As such, the best bridge between the two worlds are children who partake of both the childlike and the adult. These wise children exist somewhere between the wholly naïve and passive child of popular imagination and the active knowledge associated with adults. This would suggest that the knowing, passive child would be the next most common, but there are no examples of passive, knowing children. This could be due to narrative requirements which prefer active children. Stories with passive wise children are more rare than the active, and possibly that a knowing child would not be passive. Knowledge seems to presuppose or be indicated by activity. In other words, a child can act naively, but a knowing child will show it through his or her actions. Finally, the next most uncommon category seems to be knowing and active children as they partake too much of the adult world and or no longer childlike. Thus they are no longer liminal, trickster figures who can instruct and delight.⁸

It is important to note that these categories are etic constructions (i.e., analytical rather than native terms) and don’t always reflect the use of the wise child motif. The speaker and

⁸ Rebecca de Schweinitz, “Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Child and Youth in Mormon History.” *Journal of Mormon History* 38 (Spring 2012): 125-138.

audience may not care whether child characters are active or passive, naïve or knowing, especially in the context of a didactic discourse such as General Conference is for faithful Latter-day Saints. Within the General Conference talks I surveyed, the most common child was an active, naïve child, but there were also numerous examples of the knowing passive child. The requirements of a good story or performance also influence how wise children are used in Mormon discourse. Active children are certainly more interesting than passive, while naïve and knowing children both have their narrative uses, and can both create interesting, artistically satisfying, story arcs and turnarounds.⁹

Other scholars have noticed these contrasts at work in Mormon culture. Kristine Haglund Harris studied changes in the Children's Songbook, a collection of approved songs for in Primary classes where children are taught each week during two of the three hours of Mormon church on Sundays) and found "that early Primary songs presume that young people will play significant roles in building the kingdom while later songs try to limit children's activity (think 'reverence') and suggest that children prepare themselves for future contributions." Harris found Mormon culture favoring passive children in reality but the evidence shows that LDS still prefers active children for use in official narratives.¹⁰

Categorizing wise children in Mormon discourse with these traits was sometimes unclear. Active or passive traits, while seemingly obvious, were often unclear in context, and naïve and knowing were even less clear, and sometimes less relevant. President Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke on the seeming difficulty in knowing or perceiving God in the world. In his talk he relates the story of his 3-year-old granddaughter visiting an open house of a temple, sacred structures to Latter-day Saints said to be houses of God. In one of the beautiful rooms, she

⁹ For a discussion on etic and emic in folklore see Alan Dundes, "From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 75 (Apr.-Jun., 1962). 95-105.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Rebecca de Schweinitz. "Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Child and Youth in Mormon History." 135.

asks her mother, “Mommy, where is Jesus?” Her mother responds that she wouldn’t literally see Jesus in the temple, but could feel his presence. After considering this, the child, Eliza, responds with “Oh, Jesus is gone helping someone.”¹¹

Is this child naïve in taking literally the “house of the Lord” title Latter-day Saints use in talking about the temple, or is she knowing in her realization that this is a physical building where the physical presence of Jesus is expected to be found? Obviously the child’s mother interprets it as naiveté while President Eyring goes on to comment, “No pavilion obscured Eliza’s understanding... of reality,” so President Eyring obviously sees Eliza as a knowing child, and yet the meaning of the story rests on Eliza being both a naïve AND a knowing child. It is faith that reconciles these two opposing forces. She is innocent and knowing in that her faith, or belief, in what she has been told is literal whereas her parent’s understanding seems more figurative, and yet, with faith, it is the literal that is favored. So the older, wiser-in-the world parent has come to interpret doctrine as figurative instead of literal and thus are not as knowledgeable as her daughter spiritually, so the mother does indeed have something to learn from her daughter as do all Latter-day Saints as implied by President Eyring including this in the text of his talk.¹²

This dichotomy between worldly and spiritual things in Mormon thought is relevant to the wise child and one of the reasons that the Mormon variants differ so much from the folk variants. In *The Book of Mormon*, the prophet Jacob speaks of this dichotomy. “O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not.” Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians, echoes the sentiment with “If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this

¹¹ Henry B. Eyring, “Where Is the Pavilion?” *October 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/where-is-the-pavilion?lang=eng>.

¹² Henry B. Eyring, “Where is the Pavillion?”

world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.” Paul’s words support the traditional folk use of the wise child, as a figure who reveals the foolishness of its elders through mockery and “taking them in their craftiness,” as it says. The differences become more fully explained with consideration of its performance context in General Conference. I will discuss this later, but first I will give another example where the division between the naïve and knowing child seems less relevant in the context of the story.¹³

Russell Osguthorpe, Sunday School General President, recounts a story of his son calling, wondering why Russell has not told them one of his articles was appearing in the Church’s magazine, *The Ensign*. Russell responds, “I just wanted to see if you were reading the church magazine.” His son says it was actually his daughter who brought it to his attention: “She got the *Ensign* from the mailbox, came into the house, and read it. Then she came up to our room and showed us your article.” Russell concludes, “My granddaughter read the *Ensign* because she wanted to learn. She acted on her own by exercising her agency. The First Presidency recently approved new learning resources for youth that will support the *innate* desire of young people to learn, live, and share the gospel” (emphasis added). It is obvious by his wording that Russell sees his granddaughter as an active child, but his wording also suggests she is a passive child. This desire to learn certainly exhibited itself in an active way, reading an entire magazine meant for adult members (young children and teenagers have church magazines aimed more at them), is certainly an active thing, but this desire Russell sees as innate, and thus is the source of knowledge coming from what she did, or the innate desire to do it?¹⁴

¹³ See 2 Ne. 9: 28; 1 Cor. 3: 18-19

¹⁴ Russel T. Osguthorpe. “One Step Closer to the Savior.” *October 2012 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/one-step-closer-to-the-savior?lang=eng>.

Depending on how one sees children, this granddaughter can be knowing or naive. Either she knows that she is doing a good thing, or is simply doing what she likes, and that thing happens to be an action Russell wants his adult listeners to imitate. It is obvious that this action in an adult member would be seen as active and Elder Osguthorpe is seeking to instill the knowledge of the value of that action, but it seems clear that for children, the assumptions are different: that this is not as volitional, that it is more innate and thus an expression of personality rather than an indication of one's use of free will. The message then is that while children are innately good (i.e. it is part of who they are), adults must choose to be good (it is not innate but must be worked for). Adults, the message is, be like your wise children. The cultural values inherent in this dichotomy involve religious beliefs in the innate goodness of children and the views that children are blank slates in need of instruction. Both of these ideas lead to assumptions in stories that divide how Mormons view adults and these wise children.

The Wise Child in Mormon Scripture and Tradition

Probably the most important example of the wise child for Mormons is the prophet Joseph Smith who, as a 14 year old boy had the wisdom to “ask of God” when he was confused about which religion to join. Mormon narrators reference and frame this act by a 14 year-old boy in a way that emphasizes both his youth and his wisdom—particularly as opposed to the religious leaders in his area at the time. In one example, Thomas S. Monson relates the aftermath of Joseph's vision of God and Jesus. In sharing his experience with a preacher, Joseph finds his story met with “contempt,” and began to be persecuted because of it.¹⁵

¹⁵ Thomas S. Monson, “The Prophet Joseph Smith: Teacher by Example.” *October 2005 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/10/the-prophet-joseph-smith-teacher-by-example?lang=eng&query=young+joseph>.

Monson also shares another popular story from Joseph Smith's childhood. In relating the story over two paragraphs, Monson uses "Young Joseph" three times. Certainly emphasizing his youth, but, as the talk's name suggests, is an experience that has something to teach the general membership. The story is told that after getting typhus, Joseph had a painful sore on his leg. To avoid amputation, the doctors decide to try a new surgery on Joseph. They want to tie him down because they don't have anesthesia. Joseph tells them he will not need that. When offered some "brandy or wine" he again declines and only asks for his father to hold him. For a seven year old, this is certainly a great example of "courage" as Monson states in this talk, but it has often also been used to show the prophet's goodness in avoiding alcohol even at a young age despite the Word of Wisdom—the Mormon law that forbids alcohol and other substances—not coming until 1833.¹⁶

Other scriptural precedents include many prophets in the Book of Mormon. Nephi, the first writer in the Book of Mormon, is still a child of his father, a prophet in Jerusalem and begins the Book of Mormon with "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents." Later, when recounting his conversion, Nephi mentions that he was "exceedingly young" when he came to "believe all the words which had been spoken by my father." It is significant that he is able to convince his *youngest* older brother to also believe, but his two *oldest* brothers, Laman and Lemuel, harden their hearts to his, and his father's, words. Alma, a later prophet in the Book of Mormon, is described as a wicked priest to a corrupt King when he hears the testimony of the prophet Abinadi. Alma, at the time, is described as "a young man" who "believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them [meaning the wicked King Noah and his priests]." Alma believes and must flee the

¹⁶ Thomas S. Monson, "The Prophet Joseph Smith: Teacher by Example."

court of King Noah and the older, still wicked priests who seek to kill him and put Abinadi to death.¹⁷

Later still, Captain Moroni, the Nephite leader in some of their most intense wars with the Lamanites is mentioned for being “only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites.” While aged 25 can hardly be said to be a child, his youth is still emphasized and in the succeeding chapters his wisdom is demonstrated as he prepares the Nephites for war against the Lamanites led by a rebel Nephite. He prepares his soldiers with various armor, and constructs ditches and walls and fortifications around their border cities making sure to make those cities which had been weakest into strongholds. The result is that invading Lamanites are at first too scared to attack these heavily fortified cities. Finally using a combination of spies and prophecy, Moroni traps the main Lamanite army as they cross a river and completely defeats them. When war returns a few years later, Moroni is again instrumental in securing peace from war and the stability of their main government.¹⁸

While the war Moroni is engaged in is started by a Nephite dissenter, it is the sons of Lamanite converts that help turn the tide. These converts are called the people of Ammon and, after their conversion, make an oath to never “tak(e) up arms against their brethren.” When the war against the Lamanites gets long, they consider breaking their vow for the greater good. They are “moved with compassion” at seeing “the danger, and the many afflictions and tribulations the Nephites bore for them... and were desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country.” Their spiritual leaders urge them not to, and they send, instead, 2000 of their sons, “who had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves against their enemies,” so they are mobilized instead, and join the war under the command of their spiritual leader, Helaman. Are these good examples of the wise child? Their youth is

¹⁷ See 1 Ne. 1:1; 1 Ne 2: 16-18; and Mosiah 17:2

¹⁸ See Alma 43: 17 and Alma 43:17-44:24

certainly a vital part of their identity. Rather than the wisdom, or cunning, exhibited by Captain Moroni, it is often their faith that is seen as praiseworthy and what continuously saves them. They are promised by their mothers, “that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.” Sure enough, in their first battle, “not one soul of them [had] fallen to the earth.” In a later battle, while casualties mount on both sides of the conflict, their faith in their mother’s words are confirmed again when “there was not one soul of them who did perish; yea, and neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds.” While this may not qualify as “wisdom,” the youth here are being set up as an example to follow, as ones from whose actions and faith adults can and should learn.¹⁹

The Hebrew Bible has its wise children too. Before Joseph becomes second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, he is the second youngest of 12 brothers, loved by his father, and envied and hated by his brothers. At 17, “the lad” tends sheep with his older brothers. He has dreams which indicate his parents and brothers will bow down to him. It may not be seen as wise to share those with said brothers, but in the end, the dreams come to pass, and Joseph is vindicated.²⁰

After receiving an answer to her prayers, Hannah promises her son, Samuel, to the Lord’s service, and so she gives him to the High Priest of the time, Eli. Eli, while described as a good man, allows his sons to mismanage the sacrifices of Israel, for which God judges and condemns Eli’s house. Samuel, while still a child, is called by God in the night time. He finally responds “Speak; for thy servant heareth,” and is told the calamities that will befall Eli and his sons and is set to be the next prophet. Young Samuel, is remarkable in receiving revelations from Lord at a time when, as the Hebrew Bible states “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there

¹⁹ See Alma 53: 11, 13, 16-18; 56: 47,56; and 57: 25

²⁰ Genesis 37: 2; Genesis 37-46

was no open vision.” Samuel however is innocent and good and honest. He even reveals God’s word of destruction towards the current Prophet, Eli, when asked to do so.²¹

Samuel is instrumental in anointing David as the King of Israel after Saul sins and loses his mandate to rule God’s people. When Samuel sees David’s oldest brother, Eliab, he thinks he must be the future King of Israel, but the Lord counsels him to “look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as a man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart. This is even a “scripture mastery” scripture that is one of 25 in the Old Testament emphasized in Seminary, a daily spiritual study class many Mormon youth of High School age take. Seminary students will focus on and often memorize scripture mastery scriptures.²²

As for David’s wisdom, his encounter with Goliath is telling. While all the armies of Israel fear the mighty Philistine Goliath, David asks “for who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” David, in opposition to his older brothers and King Saul who notes “thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth,” but David insists on his ability to defeat their champion and, without the traditional armor and weapons favored by the more experienced, he approaches Goliath with his staff, “five smooth stones,” and his sling. Goliath is insulted, David, undaunted, tells Goliath he’s about to die and that David comes in the “name of the Lord of hosts,” and that “this day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.” David does so, and is set up as a model of exemplary faith.²³

Finally, Jesus is a prime example of the wise child when, at only 12 years old, he is left behind in Jerusalem after a Passover feast and is found, finally, “in the temple, sitting in the midst

²¹ 1 Samuel 3; 1 Samuel 3: 1, 10, 19

²² 1 Samuel 16: 7

²³ 1 Samuel 17: 26, 40, 45-46

of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.” Jesus is a wise child who is wise beyond his years and astonishes those around him at his understanding of the scriptures and the law. Further, he is the source of many teachings that emphasize what people can learn from children. In Matthew 18: 2-4 “Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, “verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” In Matthew 19: 14, “Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” The emphasis on wise children in General Conference may reflect this precedent and a desire to emulate Jesus Christ’s example, and align themselves with his teachings.²⁴

The wise child that Jesus speaks of, and that appears most frequently in scriptures, is strikingly different from the examples of the wise child motif in Thompson’s index although they share some similarities as well. The examples from the Motif Index and the scriptural variants both emphasize rebuking elders, though those elders are less often parents. In the case of Nephi, it is his older brothers, David rebukes King Saul, Joseph Smith rebukes the religious leaders of his area, and Jesus rebukes his mother. These rebukes are different in that the youths in these examples are both active, and knowledgeable although they retain a naïveté as well. They are able to be both knowledgeable and naïve by being naïve to worldly things, and knowledgeable about spiritual things. As such, they come across as less caustic than the folk examples in their efforts to instruct and exhort people on spiritual things.

²⁴ Luke 2: 46-47; Matthew 18: 2-4; 19: 14

The Child in Mormon and American Culture

Scholars of American culture have identified two contrasting views of childhood: as a “tabula rasa” in need of “acculturation,” protection, or shelter, and the child as “specula naturae,” the mirrors of nature, or a type of noble savage. Gary Cross, for example, notes the connection between the Romantic era and the idea of the pure, innocent child. He quotes Wordsworth as saying children come “fresh from the hand of God.” Mormon speakers in General Conference are fond of Wordsworth and have quoted his *Ode: Intimations on Immortality* which includes,

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lives about us in our infancy!”

This quote has been used in General Conference 2-3 times a decade over the past 3 decades, and twice by current President Thomas S. Monson in 2012 and 2007. It portrays the child not as a blank slate, but a noble, pure, innocent being close to heaven and divinity. The rise of Mormonism during the Romantic Movement supports this connection as do numerous Mormon scriptures. Rebecca de Schweinitz also sees evidence of an Aristotelian view of children where “the child is important, not for herself or himself, but for his or her potential.”²⁵

²⁵ Rebecca de Schweinitz, “Where Nothing Is Far Away.” 136-7.

Support for this idea in Mormon doctrine is surprisingly hard to find. If asked for scriptures that indicate children's innate goodness, many members might quote the prophet Mormon's condemnation of infant baptism. However, his reasons don't necessarily indicate it is because children are good, but because they are innocent and unaccountable for their actions. Mormon writes that "their little children need no repentance, neither baptism.... But little children are alive in Christ.... For the power of redemption cometh on all them that have no law." Other reasons include the injustice of a God that would condemn innocent children to hell for failure to do something they have no knowledge of or power to do. His reasons focus not on children's goodness, but their innocence or, the term I've been using, naiveté.²⁶

There is however, some scriptural support for the idea that children are innately good. Christ encourages his disciples to "become as little children," and "humble himself as this little child." Invoking the difference between the natural (or worldly) sphere and the spiritual, King Benjamin states that all people are enemies to God and in a fallen state "unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father."²⁷

Syllogistically, if saints should be good, and saints should be like children, children must be good. The difficulty of differentiating between good and innocent children is still present however because the examples here, and elsewhere in Latter-day Saint scripture, could still be read as seeing children not as acting righteously, but as being innately righteous. While much maligned by other Christian sects as 'trying to save ourselves through works,' Mormon theology does require knowledge to act righteously and places prime importance on agency or free will.

²⁶ Moroni 8: 11, 22

²⁷ Matthew 18: 3-4; Mosiah 3: 19

While Mormon theology asserts that “salvation was and is and is to come... through the atoning blood of Christ, Joseph Smith reveals that “It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.” The goal seems to be a fusion of the inherently good qualities of a child—especially those of submission to a heavenly father—fused with the understanding, knowledge, and decision-making ability of an adult.²⁸

The problem, finally, with the syllogism is a difference in expectations. Children are seen as inherently innocent, and so good or bad applies less to them—forget the conspicuous absence in any scriptures of the crying, willful children filling the pews each Sunday—while adults, with full agency, are expected to act good, knowing that those actions are good. The wise child in Mormon folklore helps clarify these expectations by presenting the naïve goodness of the child as an example to the knowing, but not always good, consideration of the adults.

The child as a blank slate is prevalent in American culture and, if not explicitly stated in Mormon theology, implicitly assumed. The child of the blank slate needs acculturation, needs guidance, needs protection. Gary Cross would say the child needs “shaping.” Mormon doctrine speaks of a “veil” that has caused people on earth to forget their premortal life where they knew and lived with God and Jesus Christ. The veil is there so that people can exercise faith, and so that faith and obedience can be tested. The veil of the tabernacle Moses erected in the wilderness to “divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy,” represents this separation between the human world and God’s. Scriptures speak of a Book of Mormon prophet, the Brother of Jared, who was so righteous he “could not be kept from beholding within the veil. Joseph Smith speaks of the veil being “taken from our minds” so that they can behold the Lord, and later, explaining perhaps the physical workings of this veil, Joseph Smith records that “All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but

²⁸ Mosiah 3: 18; D&C 131: 6

when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter.” While generally the veil is a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank slate that erases the memories of people’s premortal existence, it is also used, folklorically, to indicate that children are inherently good—not just innocent—but that they have an “innate connection to spiritual realms.” You can often hear tales of good children which end with something like ‘the veil is very thin for children, who have recently come from God.’²⁹

Hearing General Conference talks, Mormons would seem to agree. While the wise child folk motif is the subject of this chapter, the protected child who needs shaping and the watchful care of parents is just as, if not more, prevalent in official discourse. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it,” is more than just an adage in Mormon families. After giving Moses the law, God commands that these things be taught to their children on multiple occasions. Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, encourages them to “bring up [children] in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, The Book of Mormon includes numerous examples of children being taught (like the aforementioned Stripling Warriors), Nephi and Enos both reflect on words they were taught by their fathers, and Lehi preaches to and corrects his children many times, King Benjamin exhorts his people to “teach [their children] to walk in the ways of truth and soberness,” and the Doctrine and Covenants include the injunction to “bring up your children in light,” and a warning for parents who do not teach their children. In any General Conference or sacrament meeting, members hear counsel about the importance of and how to raise their children in righteousness.³⁰

Beyond these examples, there are two magazines especially for youth, *The Friend* for pre-teen youth, and *The New-Era* for teens. Beyond that, the first presidency—the highest

²⁹ Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Exodus 26: 33; Ether 3: 19; 12: 19; D&C 110: 1; D&C 131: 7-8; and Rebecca de Schweinitz. “Where Nothing is Long Ago,” 134.

³⁰ Proverbs 22: 6; Deut. 4: 10; 6: 7; and 11: 19-21; Ephesians 6: 4; 1Ne 1: 1 and Enos 1: 1; 1 Ne 2: 8-9, 1 Ne 8: 37; Mosiah 4: 15; D&C 93: 40; D&C 68: 25

authority in the church comprising the President and his two councilors—has a message at the beginning of each issue of *The Ensign*, a magazine for adult members of the church. The message is meant for Home Teachers to share as they visit families in their wards. These messages now include special teaching ideas and examples for “Youth” and “Children.” The teaching of youth and children is a high priority for the church, and the members that compose it. The emphasis on education demonstrates a strong belief in and support of the child as a blank slate, and therefore the child is in need of acculturation and guidance to become a proper adult.

The Wise Child in General Conference

While current LDS Prophet, President Monson, is well known for his use of stories that would include the wise child, rather than focusing exclusively on his use of the wise child, I have chosen to focus on the use of the Wise Child folk motif in the April and October 2012 General Conferences of the church. General Conference is when church leaders address members all over the world from Salt Lake City. Although the topics and discussions are often familiar, the messages in these biennial meetings represent the most current word of the Lord available to church members. I have looked at each talk in these conferences and noted each use of the Wise Child.

The wise child in the folk motif stories were classified based on someone learning something based on the actions of a child, and the person who learned was usually an adult. Based on these broad similarities, the criteria for which stories I included as an example of the wise child included two main components: the story had to be about a child, and the child, knowingly or not, had to be the source of the knowledge the adult gained. Thus a story about a child who dies and the family who learns to cope with and overcome trials would not necessarily

count as a wise child because the learning comes more from the child's death, an event, rather than the child herself.

There were other border cases. For example, David F. Evans spoke of a young man who was not a member of the church but had many friends who were and came to many ward activities as a youth. After high school, he became roommates with an LDS friend who had not gone on a mission due to certain issues he was working through. They spoke about it and soon the boy was meeting with the LDS friend's bishop and came to be baptized. The purpose of the story was to show how conversion can often be a slow process, but one that allows many to eventually enter the church through the efforts of friends and church members. The teaching that occurs is from boy to boy rather than child to adult, but later, when the speaker talks of what he learned from this example, and makes the point to share that with church members listening to General Conference, it becomes a more obvious example of the wise child, as the actions of a young man are presented as exemplary, and thus something all can and should learn from. Even within the narrative when Evans remarks "What an invitation!" after the LDS boy invites his friend to come meet with his bishop, we see that he is being set as an example, and someone to learn from, a wise child.³¹

Some cases were not clear-cut. While parts of Joseph Smith's story includes moments of the wise child, only references dealing specifically with him as a wise child were included. Jesus is an even more complicated example because his "Son-ness" is emphasized much more often than the wisdom and learning he had to offer when he was a child. I have not included any references to Jesus as a child of God, but have included references made to his mortal childhood. This dual quality of Jesus as Father and Son, parent and child, will be discussed later in my

³¹ David F. Evans, "Was it Worth It?" *April 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/was-it-worth-it?lang=eng>.

interpretation of the wise child motif. Finally, I have included wise children used in talks aimed at youth or children as well as children as old as missionaries if the youth or “child-ness” of the missionaries was given as a defining feature. If it was important enough to stress, then it seemed fair to include it as an example of the wise child. I will show later that the idea of childhood and youthfulness are very broad and widely applicable in Mormon thought.

The April and October 2012 General Conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, featured 67 talks, 32 of which used the wise child motif with 49 unique instances. If a story of a wise child started at the beginning of a talk and was referenced towards the end, it still only counted once. However, if one speaker gave numerous stories about different children who taught or from whom the audience could learn, each instance was counted. So this year, the wise child figured in nearly half of all talks given by general authorities at General Conference. The unique instances show that it can be used numerous times, five was the most, in a given talk and that depending on topic and speaker, it can be featured prominently in a talk. When a primary president or a Young Men president speaks, or when the topic is what parents can learn from their children, the speaker often used numerous examples.

General Conference: The Authoritative/Exhortative Frame

At General Conference, leaders of the LDS church present talks of varying length to the entire church membership and, implicitly or explicitly, to non-members. The purpose of General Conference talks is to present doctrine and exhortations to live by gospel principles. Conference talks, like many talks in weekly church meetings, include exhortations, scripture quoting, personal experience, the experiences of others, and usually end with a declaration of testimony, or conviction of truth. Current events, references to magazine articles, or pop-culture references

happen, but are less common. Like sacrament meeting talks, General Conference addresses are monologic, and they are the most public speech act in LDS culture.

In most communicative acts, an interpretive frame sets up how things are to be interpreted. While I have defended various aspects of the wise child in Mormon discourse on narrative grounds, General Conference frames the speech acts as authoritative and exhortative. General Conference is set apart as a very special verbal event in Mormon life. It happens only twice a year and overrides the usual schedule of weekly meetings. Rather than meeting in their regular church buildings on Sunday during the regularly scheduled three-hour block of meetings, Latter-day Saints across the world will tune in online or via satellite to the Conference Center in Salt Lake City. In supplanting regular worship services, the message is that this is more important and of more authority than regular worship services. Further, it places Salt Lake and the leadership who reside there as the loci of the LDS world. Not only is it authoritative, but possesses the most authority. Similar to any classroom or auditorium, the leaders of the church sit around and behind the raised lectern from which speakers address their live audience of 21,000 and their televised audience of millions. The General Authorities are raised, literally, above the crowd to address the entire church membership.³²

Boyd K. Packer's talk in the April session of General Conference is a good example of the wise child motif used as a narrative device to reveal Mormon conceptions of children. The title of Packer's talk "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them," explicitly references the wise child. Accordingly, he cites many examples of children from whom he learned something. He begins his talk with the story of seeing an orphan beggar in Japan freezing, dressed in rags, covered in scabies, and holding a rusty tin can and a spoon. The beggar knocked on the door of the Elder's train. Elder Packer tried to open the door to give him some money, but the train pulled out. Elder

³² Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance." *American Anthropologist*. 77, 2 (1975), 290-311.

Packer ends the story by commenting “I will never forget that starving little boy left standing in the cold, holding up an empty tin can. Nor can I forget how helpless I felt as the train slowly pulled away and left him standing on the platform.”³³

Elder Packer is not explicit in what he has learned or what he intends his audience to learn at this point, and indeed, despite the exhortative frame he is speaking in which tends towards the didactic, Packer allows the audience to interpret his meaning. Still the idea that children can help us understand and know the purpose of life becomes clearer as he continues. In Cusco, Peru, another “starving street orphan” enters the meeting house and edges towards the Sacrament bread. A stern look from a woman causes him to leave, but he returns and, when Elder Packer opens his arms for him, comes to sit on his lap. Again, he offers little explanation beyond sharing it with then Prophet President Kimball, who notes “That experience has far greater meaning than you have yet come to know.” Next Elder Packer tells of a boy in Salt Lake City running around in the winter with no coat. He concludes that story with the moral “At night, when I pull the covers over me, I offer a prayer for those who have no warm bed to go to.” He has learned, or hopes to teach something about compassion from these children living in poverty around the world.³⁴

The wise children Elder Packer tells about in these stories are largely passive. What the children do is less important than who they are, poor, destitute, and children. Elder Packer’s next example includes a girl in Japan at the close of WWII. She goes about “busily gathering yellow sycamore leaves in a bouquet,” seemingly “unaware of the devastation that surrounded her.” Elder Packer is impressed by her ability to find “the one beauty left in her world,” and adds that thinking of her increases his faith, concluding “embodied in the child was hope.” The child is

³³ Boyd K. Packer, “And a Little Child Shall Lead Them.” *April 2012 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/and-a-little-child-shall-lead-them?lang=eng>.

³⁴ Boyd K. Packer, “And a Little Child Shall Lead Them.”

naïve in the wisdom she produces which is produced in both active and passive ways. Her actions of gathering the leaves are the catalyst for Elder Packer's revelation, but his interpreted focuses on an innate quality in the child.³⁵

Later in his talk, Elder Packer notes, "one of the great discoveries of parenthood is that we learn far more about what really matters from our children than we ever did from our parents. The role reversal is done differently from American culture or even many folk tales. In mainstream American culture, there is more conflict and thus more victory for the child and more humiliation for the parent when roles are reversed. Stith Thompson's wise child motif is often a trickster figure who will turn the tables on their foolish, stingy, or conniving parents. Here the second most senior member in the church, and a father and grandfather himself, cites this role reversal. There is no trace of the trickster, or humiliation for anyone involved, but is presented more as a simple fact of life. Parents are not necessarily diminished by it, and yet, children do rise to the role of teacher in the reversal."³⁶

This role reversal is well known in scriptures. Jesus rebukes his disciples for keeping a child from him and uses the opportunity to teach them that "of such is the kingdom of God," and "whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." The Book of Mormon also has much to say on the matter. As we saw earlier in Mosiah 3: 19, King Benjamin equates sainthood with becoming like a child. And children are not a *tabula rasa*, but noble savages with many, if not all, virtues inherent in them. This figure is placed in direct contrast with the "natural man" who is the carnal aspect of people who prioritize their physical desires. The naturally innocent and pure child must be worked towards once someone has become an adult and their natural desires grow stronger. There seems to be a pre-pubescent purity and post-purity proclivity toward physical appetites seen in "the natural man." As far as the wise child

³⁵ Boyd K. Packer, "And a Little Child Shall Lead Them."

³⁶ See Stith Thompson, "J120-Wisdom Learned from Children" *Motif-index of Folk-Literature*

goes, this corresponds to the passive child in the folktypes whose wisdom is outside its own knowledge. The child may have things to teach, but those things are merely attributes of who the child is, and thus the child can teach simply by being a child: good, pure, and obedient.³⁷

Primary, Young Women, and Young Men General Presidency members might all be expected to use children as examples of good action because their intended audience are children. Ann M. Dibb, Second Counselor in the General Young Women Presidency begins her talk with the example of a fifteen-year-old girl she saw standing in a line, wearing a shirt that said, “I’m a Mormon, are you?” Sister Dibb was impressed with her confidence in her identity. She was a passive but knowing child. Later she mentions a girl who joined the church because she finally found one that taught modesty and standards. Sister Dibb presents this young woman as having an innate knowledge of the importance of standards and modesty, she had a spiritual knowledge that general members, and other young women, can learn from. She even mentions Jesus as God’s son in the garden of Gethsemane being obedient and submissive to his father.³⁸

Other speakers mention wise children similar in some ways to the wise children of the folktales who are naively wise. Quentin R. Cook, a member of the twelve apostles, mentions a young man who realizes that society recognizes many things Latter-day Saints see as wrong, but not when it comes to pornography. This boy is set up as being wiser than much of American society, and Cook follows this up by citing himself the boy’s exhortation that primary is not too early to start warning and protecting children from society. Here we have a wise child being used by a General Authority to evoke the sheltered or protected child in need of educating by parents and leaders. Truly a dizzying interplay of authority and subservience.³⁹

³⁷ Mark 10: 14-15; Mosiah 3: 19

³⁸ Ann M. Dibb, “I Know It. I Live It. I Love It.” *October 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/i-know-it-i-live-it-i-love-it?lang=eng>.

³⁹ Quentin L. Cook, “Can Ye Feel So Now?” *October 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/can-ye-feel-so-now?lang=eng>.

Craig Christensen shares the story of going through a temple open house when, before a temple is dedicated, anyone is allowed to go through and view much of the interior. His six-year-old son accompanies him and remarks “what is happening? What am I feeling?” Elder Christensen credits his son for the wisdom he exhibits in noting not the fine and beautiful art and architecture that Elder Christensen and others were appreciating, but the spirit of the place, the spiritual importance of it. In realizing what was more important, his son showed greater wisdom and spiritual sensitivity.⁴⁰

Henry B. Eyring shared a similar story about his granddaughter who “illustrated the power of innocence and humility to connect us with God.” She went to the temple open house and asked, “Mommy, where is Jesus?” As the “house of the Lord” she had expected to see Jesus. Her Mother explained that she wouldn’t be able to “see” Jesus in the temple, but could feel his influence in her heart. Considering this, she decided, “Jesus is gone helping someone.” While her naiveté seems evident, Elder Eyring praises her for not having things obscure or obstructing her view of reality, that God is close, and can be felt by anyone. He adds that she had a good understanding of Jesus’s corporeal body, that he can only be in one place at a time, and that what Jesus was most often doing, was performing miracles. He adds that “the spirit could reveal to her childlike mind and heart the comfort all of us need and want.” The point is that the adults listening to Elder Eyring’s talk should be as childlike in their faith of gospel truths.⁴¹

D. Todd Christofferson tells a story about a fourteen-year-old boy in India who works two jobs, goes to school, and studies into the night to help support his family and prepare for a brighter future. Elder Christofferson praises the boy’s “diligence and courage,” and continues,

⁴⁰ Craig Christensen, “An Unspeakable Gift from God,” *October 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/an-unspeakable-gift-from-god?lang=eng>.

⁴¹ Henry B. Eyring, “Where Is the Pavilion?” *October 2012 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/where-is-the-pavilion?lang=eng>.

“he is doing the very best he can with his limited resources and opportunities, and he is a blessing to his family.” The boy is wise and very active, an example of work and activity Elder Christofferson wants church members to emulate regardless of their circumstances. The boy’s hard work is central to Elder Christofferson’s talk which repeats numerous times “Brethren, we have work to do.” Given in the Saturday evening “Priesthood Session” where all male members over the age of 12 attend together, this child is clearly an example priesthood holders should follow.⁴²

The Wise Child and the Distance between Children and Elders

Tom Mould argues that a cultural norm in Mormon culture is a striving for humility. The wise child may be one way of achieving this. By making the child the source of wisdom, even church leaders, those highest in the hierarchy, are able to achieve a level of humility by learning things from children. We see this in fact, in the many examples of experiences that involve children in the third world in abject poverty. In terms of humility there is the added implication that even the “greatest” in the Kingdom have something to learn from the lowest. This is certainly underscored when the greatest in the kingdom reference things they have learned from children. If even the leaders of the church learn something from children, then children or the youth are elevated to a very high position in the church.⁴³

Terryl Givens in *People of Paradox* reveals one reason why the wise child may be a popular motif in Mormon discourse. Givens identifies four fundamental paradoxes in Mormon thought, the first two relate to the wise child: authority versus radical freedom and searching

⁴² D. Todd Christofferson, “Brethren, We Have Work to Do,” *October 2012 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/brethren-we-have-work-to-do?lang=eng>.

⁴³ Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011). 62.

versus certainty. The hierarchical structure of the church and the equating of priesthood power and authority with God's authority has been examined and criticized by many writers and scholars who see the unquestioning obedience that often results. On the other hand the lay clergy and the emphasis on personal revelation support a radical individuality and disruption of those hierarchies. If any worthy member can hold a leadership position in the church, then there is something of a meritocracy in the power structure of the church. This mixing of clergy and member, officials and officiated, does establish a hierarchy, but a fluid one, where members can find themselves on either side. A member may be a bishop for a while, and called to the Family History Center afterwards. The wise child reveals a similar flattening between youth and adults, the knowing and the naïve, as categories are mixed or fluid.⁴⁴

The second paradox relevant to the wise child relates to the wisdom of the child. Givens notes that Joseph Smith's experience in physically meeting God the Father and Jesus the Son, having actual angelic hands placed on his head to confer the power of the priesthood, and translating 50 lb. golden plates imbued him and Mormonism with a predilection for certain knowledge. Contemporary evidence of this can be seen in the monthly testimony meetings in any ward or branch in the church where members are encouraged to proclaim before their fellow congregants the things they know to be true. The emphasis is more on knowledge than simply belief. On the other hand, Joseph Smith also taught that knowledge and progression were a ceaseless struggle that took not only entire lives but were something to work on "a great while after you have passed through the veil."⁴⁵

This paradox between certain knowledge in the form of testimonies and ceaseless striving for ever more and greater knowledge and righteousness extend the spectrum between naiveté and knowledge out to eternity. When using such a measure, even the most elder apostles and prophets

⁴⁴ Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁵ Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox*. 21-22, 30.

giving talks in General Conference are little more than wise children themselves. Wilford Woodruff recorded some words of Joseph Smith on this subject. At the conclusion of a conference Joseph Smith stated “Brethren, I have been very much edified and instructed in your testimonies here tonight, but I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap. You don’t comprehend it.” This was the prophet speaking to the whole priesthood of the church at the time. While his comment was specific to knowing the destinies of the church, the comparison of even the highest in the church hierarchy to “a babe upon its mother’s lap,” is an aspect of the doctrine of eternal progression. Anyone in mortality can be seen as a child, but hopefully a wise one.⁴⁶

Mormon teaching treats all people on earth as sons and daughters of God and thus spiritual siblings, but also focuses on the importance of the family consisting of a husband and wife, raising and teaching children. In a church where common addresses involve “brother” and “sister,” what is the role of the child in LDS religious discourse? For a religion that has been criticized for being patriarchal, and a Gerontocracy, what view of childhood emerges from looking at the official statements and faith-promoting stories given out by the church?

Elder Packer’s talk, mentioned previously, notes that “the ultimate end of all activity in the Church is to see a husband and his wife and their children happy at home, protected by the principles and laws of the gospel, sealed safely in the covenants of the everlasting priesthood.” Although husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, are often reminded of the need to protect their children, here they are in need of protection as much as their children. This is not unique. If the sheltered or protected child is prevalent in American and Mormon discourse, the protected parent and adult, is just as, if not more, prevalent in Mormon discourse. Scriptures are full of warnings for all people to continually beware temptation’s lure. Doctrine and Covenants 20: 33

⁴⁶ Wilford Woodruff. *Conference Report*. Apr. 1898. 57

reads “Therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation;” the same basic sentiment is repeated in D&C 31: 12. D&C 75: 11 and 88: 126 talk about praying always that people “faint not.” Matthew 26: 11 and Mark 14: 38 both exhort to “watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.” The Lord’s Prayer includes the plea to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” again indicating the ever-present nature of temptation and risk of falling to it. The Book of Mormon Prophet, Nephi when he is older, laments “the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me” (2 Nephi 4: 18). Alma 34: 39 states “Yea, and I also exhort you, my brethren, that ye be watchful unto prayer continually, that ye may not be led away by the temptations of the devil, that he may not overpower you, that ye may not become his subjects at the last day; for behold, he rewardeth you no good thing.” Clearly the danger of sin is prevalent, and the solution watchfulness, prayer, and, as Elder Packer States, the protection that righteous living offers. All people are like the protected child, in need of shelter and protection.

All Mormons are in some ways naïve, unknowing of all that God knows. As Isaiah writes, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Also, all are, as to their salvation, passive as Jesus is the one who is the “author and finisher of our faith,” a phrase quoted in both The Hebrew Bible, The Book of Mormon and periodically in General Conference.⁴⁷

These connections between children and adults go further. Other conference addresses note that most things done in the church are begun when we are children. President Monson, in April 2012 conference, notes that “in one capacity or another, in one setting or another, I have been attending priesthood meetings for the past 72 years—since I was ordained a deacon at the age of 12.” Often, the comparison is made between the newest and most senior members of the

⁴⁷ Isaiah 55: 9; see also Hebrews 12: 2 and Moroni 6: 4.

Priesthood having access to the same or similar power, that it is all based on righteousness rather than age or experience. A great way to teach this basic belief is to use children as examples of power to prove that very point. It deemphasizes age, seniority, experience, and other hierarchical structures for one that is more merit-based which, in this religious setting, means merits of morality, goodness, righteousness.⁴⁸

Julie B. Beck, then president of the LDS women's organization, The Relief Society, shared a similar message. She notes that "every year hundreds of thousands of women and young women become part of this ever-expanding "circle of sisters" [meaning the Relief Society]" and "wherever a sister lives and wherever she serves, she retains her membership and association in Relief Society." At 18 women go from being in the "Young Women" organization of the church to the "Relief Society." This change comes at the cusp of adulthood and lasts the rest of their lives.⁴⁹

Another way in which the line between child and adult is blurred is reinforced by essential rituals and practices of church membership are begun when children are young and continue into adulthood. Just as President Monson noted that he'd attended, and thus entered and continued in, Priesthood since he was 12. According to the "Articles of Faith" penned by Joseph Smith, the first principles of the gospel are "first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost." These principles are prerequisites for the ordinances of baptism and confirmation which commonly happen when children turn 8. Thereafter, as noted in 2 Nephi, Chapter 31, the main thing is to "endure to the end." There are certainly other ordinances and

⁴⁸ Thomas S. Monson, "Willing and Worthy to Serve," *April 2012 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/willing-and-worthy-to-serve?lang=eng>.

⁴⁹ Julie B. Beck, "The Vision of Prophets regarding Relief Society: Faith, Family, Relief." *April 2012 General Conference*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/the-vision-of-prophets-regarding-relief-society-faith-family-relief?lang=eng>.

rituals which only adults participate in, particularly the temple, but most of the basic and essential rites and rituals are done when members are children and simply continue on through adulthood.

Owing to the blurring of the lines between adult and youth that the wise child indicates, it also erases some of the distance between adulthood and youth. Further, as Mormon adolescents grow into gods, the Mormon perspective on the life cycle further shrinks that distance between even the most elderly of Elders and the youth of the church. The prevalence of this folk motif then reveals a very comforting aspect of the Mormon view of the life-cycle for Mormon adolescents. Despite the strict requirements of living the Mormon religion, the requirements of which may seem especially onerous for teens who, just as their sexuality is maturing are told to keep those impulses in check, and while seeing other teens experimenting and perhaps enjoying cigarettes and alcohol, are told to refrain, Mormonism may in fact alleviate many of the pressures of growing up through shrinking the perceived gap between youth and adulthood. Knowing or naïve, Mormons ultimately seek to be good. That is as important when they are young as when they are older.

Chapter 3

Confronting Disaster: Canyons, Caves, Water, Imagination, and Growing Up

I remember well hiking the Narrows in Zion National Park as an adolescent, sharing stories with my fellow scouts of the flash flood that had killed an entire scout troop earlier that year, or maybe the year before. We were sure it was some time in the previous couple of years. The troop had been hiking up the Narrows on a clear day just like we were. Although they had taken all necessary precautions, the clear sky above them hid the fact that farther upstream a storm was adding large quantities of water into the canyon. Out of nowhere the flashflood came and drowned the entire troop. Although we may have wondered why we had not heard about it at the time, or why we were allowed to hike the same area, we did not challenge the veracity of the tale since someone had read, or had heard from someone who had read, the news article or seen it on television. This was news not legend we were sharing as we sloshed up the icy water of the North Fork of the Virgin River. In our minds it was fact. The similarities between the ill-fated troop and ours gave it an ominous reality. Just like us, the scout troop had come from Northern Utah, and just like us they had walked past these towering sandstone canyons hung with the detritus of past flash floods as tangible proof that the stories were true.

The previous dissertation chapter looked at how Mormon discourse helps to shrink the distance between adults and youth, thus easing some of the anxiety of growing up. Easing the anxiety, however, does not erase the anxiety, and in this chapter I examine how nature can become a place for confronting fears and establishing independence and how the experience in these places and the stories about those dangers confronted in those places by others can help youth negotiate adolescent fears and hopes about growing up. In the case of the Zion Narrows,

the natural setting, the immediacy of the dangerous element (water), and dramatic details of the legend heightened the fear and anxiety experienced by the scouts and allowed the youth to confront and gain mastery over a somewhat imaginary obstacle which helped them gain confidence in facing the more real fears of growing up: facing a sometimes hostile world, and establishing their independence and masculinity.

Jeremy Northcote, among many others, notes the lack of definitive coming-of-age rituals in industrial societies and further argues that without a clear demarcation between childhood and adulthood, “Young adults in advanced industrial societies have taken it upon themselves to undertake quasi rites of passage in leisure-based activities.” While Northcote examines how children at nightclubs have developed their own ways to come of age by “indulging in adult behavior such as drug-taking, alcohol consumption and sexual intercourse,” these avenues are doubly forbidden to LDS youth. LDS youth, in natural settings, have found or developed a more religiously and legally acceptable way to “bridge the divide between... childhood and adulthood.” Doing this in natural settings allow them to face in relatively safety images and narratives of danger and adventure, allowing them to feel grown up not by indulging in the vices of adulthood, but by asserting, practicing, or playing with adult characteristics such as independence, self-sufficiency, and mastery. In contrast to the urban youth Northcote studied, many Mormon youth are getting out to nature rather than late night urban environments to create the rites of passage society has not provided for them.¹

That these personal rites of passage occur in the outdoors is partly a legacy of the progressive era which aimed at perfecting individuals and, in turn, society. The Boy Scouts of America is perhaps the most well-known of the many youth groups that began in that era and which persists today. It is, in fact, closely associated with the LDS Church with current President

¹ Jeremy Northcote, “Nightclubbing and the Search for Identity: Making the Transition from Childhood to Adulthood in an Urban Milieu,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 9 (2006): 2, 4, 6, 7.

of the Church Thomas S. Monson having a BSA award named after him. Many of the founders of scouting movements sought to make boys more self-reliant, to build their character and masculinity. The BSA is far from the only modern outdoor-oriented youth organization seeking similar progressive goals of personal improvement if not personal transformation and the personal rites of passage I discuss here are not completely without institutional framework or precedence. There is the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) which focuses on teaching youth how to become leaders and Outward Bound which stresses personal improvement like leadership, service, achieving goals, and taking personal responsibility.²

The Scout troop I described included 15 to 20 boys, ages 12 to 17, all LDS, all members of the same ward, and all from an upper middle-class neighborhood of Provo, Utah, a college town of about 100,000 people. Our troop was fairly informal. While we had different patrols, they were rarely, if ever, recognized or used in camp activities, uniforms were rarely brought on campouts, and we were organized loosely in terms of camp duties although everyone was expected to help with cooking, cleaning and other duties. We hiked and associated with our usual friends rather than having to confine our activities to those in our patrols. The older boys sometimes gave orders to the younger boys, which orders were usually followed. We shared tents, scattered around our site in the National Park's campground, with our friends and siblings. We were boys camping with 3 to 4 adult supervisors who also came from our LDS ward.

The legend I refer to above was a legend I encountered in my youth, and this chapter began as an exploration of the cultural and religious forces behind the legend which made such an impression on me as a child. In asking others about the legend, it does not seem to be widespread. Many were unfamiliar with it. Many who did know it had only a vague memory of the details and

² Robert W. Peterson. *The Boy Scouts: An American Adventure*. (New York: American Heritage, 1984). 17, 26, 31); "About Us" (Lander: National Outdoor Leadership School, 2015), <http://www.outwardbound.org/about-outward-bound/outcomes/>; "Outcomes," (Golden: Outward Bound, 2015), <http://www.outwardbound.org/about-outward-bound/outcomes/>.

usually in a context of explanations of why they did not go to Zion in their youth, or, in one case, why they were not going to take boys to Zion as Scout leaders themselves. The value of the legend and its analysis does not lie in the ubiquity of the legend, but rather how the legend connects to and reveals commonly held cultural and religious values experienced by adolescents and young adults in the MCR. These analogs will be discussed in the conclusions.

Scouting legends such as these do more than exert social control on scouts liable to get themselves into danger in the outdoors. They express deeply felt fears and values in lives of these Mormon youth. Folklorist Jay Mechling suggests that campfire legends, with their thematic obsessions with death and disaster, meet the psychic needs of those who share them. Beyond the obsession with death and injury in the material I remember, Mechling notes in his scouting material notes a preoccupation with sexuality and resistance to authority. These are the taboos against which children's folklore pokes and prods, looking for a way to handle these serious issues about which they are aware, but unable to talk openly about for lack of experience or fear of censure. For Mormon youth especially, sexuality and authority are hallmarks of adulthood, a world they are separated from, something they are warned of as often as they are encouraged to prepare for.³

Mechling describes these camps as an "exaggerated male group experience," for pubescent boys seeking to differentiate themselves "from the other gender." Harry Stack Sullivan argues that adolescence is a time when children try to differentiate themselves from their parents, mother and father. This shift from authority figures to peers allows adolescents to interact more directly with the larger world, and these disaster legends shared during a camping trip with their peers intensified this experience. Free of mother and father, they were able to become, in their

³ Jay Mechling. "The Magic of the Boy Scout Campfire." *Journal of American Folklore*. 93 (1980): 43

minds at least, independent adventurers in a frontier or wilderness setting, reliving and being supported by ideas of past modes of manliness.⁴

The Scouts at camp are betwixt and between in many ways. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, they are between the stricter parental oversight they know at home and the freedom of being among their peers. As adolescents, they are between childhood and adulthood, the worlds of sheltered life and direct confrontation with the world. They are also between the city and the wilderness, in a natural setting where they can imaginatively play out various possible consequences and dangers of life in a place that feels dangerous but is relatively safe. This is an ideal setting for adolescents who, as Janice T. Gibson argues, are seeking to understand themselves and “define their external environments, and define their roles within those environments.” The natural setting is actually an artificial environment for city boys, one ideal for testing limits and exploring possibilities precisely because it is a temporary and liminal space.⁵

Bill Ellis notes that camping, in the United States, “involves playacting, by its very nature. Adults and adolescents, mainly from the city and the suburbs, voluntarily give up modern comfort to live for a while in an imaginative recreation of the ‘frontier’ world.” The world they are going out to experience is fueled by nostalgia and full of the drama, heroes, and excitement of the Old West. And just as the homesteaders and pioneers encountered a land that did not conform to their myths and ideals, modern campers do not find a land that matched the dreams of nostalgia that often propel them there. More than a place to experience nature and prove one’s manhood, the scout camp can be a place of tedium. Scouts struggle to participate in domestic chores that are more tedious and difficult than they were at home. Rather than trading the comforts of home for the excitement of the wilderness, they find they have traded the comforts of home for greater

⁴ Mechling. “The Magic of the Boy Scout Campfire.” 45, 47.; Janice T. Gibson. *Growing Up*. 465, 469-473.

⁵ Janice T. Gibson. *Growing Up*. 465.

challenges to complete similar menial tasks. Cooking is more time consuming and cleaning requires multiple trips down to the river. Only making your bed is easier. Still, the absence of parental expectations and oversight may mitigate the increased difficulty of many daily tasks. The role of these disaster narratives, the poison lurking in branches, or the death that can descend without notice on a clear day, are ways of infusing the quotidian experience of camp life with the intensity of the frontier drama. These stories bridge the gap between lived experience and the world of the legend by transforming the natural surroundings of the scout camp into the world of the legend.⁶

How is this done? Anthropologist Victor Turner speaks of liminal monsters that are not intended to terrorize initiates but to startle them “into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted.” Often the legends told between scouts at a camp involve fearful figures who inhabit the geographical area like Bigfoot, the Wendigo, or more local figures like Jack Haggerty of Northern California. The Zion narrows legend does not involve a fearful figure so much as the fearful presence of nature. Hiking up the Narrows, river debris and drying tree stumps seen high up the canyon walls remind the scouts that a flashflood would rise far above their ability to escape and come with such power as to overwhelm them.⁷

Seen in this way, stories of death and injury in the outdoors can foster a ritualistic experience with nature that prompts a reevaluation of the teller’s relationship with the land. In this case, the legends and stories transform the land into the setting of the legend which the scouts are then able to inhabit with its attendant danger, masculinity, and independence. It not only allows adolescents to change their relationship with the land, but their relationship with reality.

⁶ Bill Ellis, “The Camp Mock-Ordeal Theater as Life,” *Journal of American Folklore*. 94 (1981): 486-505. 486.

⁷ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*. (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1967). 105. And Robert E. Gyemant, “‘Jack Haggerty’ and a California Legend” *Western Folklore*. 24 (1965): 105-108.

Genre: Legends, Legend Trips, and Rumors

Are these stories legends? Linda Dégh, in *Legend and Belief*, argues that a legend “informs, explains, instructs, warns, or exemplifies through the telling of an extraordinary, unexplainable experience that a known person has encountered.” The story of the scout troop getting washed away in a flash flood meets many of these criteria. Mainly it warned of danger and instructed the troop that danger would not be evident in rising water levels or a darkened sky, but could be completely invisible despite its potential immediacy. Jan Brunvand defines legends as a subcategory of narrative folklore (i.e., folklore that tells a story) and which are “alleged to be true.” This belief in the truth of the tale is necessary for the legend to achieve the functions outlined by Dégh although the narrative aspect of this legend is often only nascent. The warning the legend conveys is its most enduring and prominent feature, and the one that was noticed in similar stories that involved canyons and flashflood but featured different actors such as a girl in a version shared with me by Scott Nibley, a Northern Utah native, on February 24, 2015. He also noted that he first began hearing these stories when he and his friends started getting their driver’s licenses and cars, and began taking trips to Zion National Park. Upon returning, they would share stories of danger and disaster. Jordan Green has heard similar stories without reference to a specific person. He recalls being warned that “people die periodically in these canyons,” just a warning connected to their immediate surroundings in narrow river canyons. To return to the example of the scout troop, the deaths of an entire troop certainly counts as extraordinary, and, while it is not unexplainable, it was experienced by, if not a known person, a familiar group of people.⁸

⁸ Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). 98.

While this story shares many features of a legend, it also resembles a rumor. Patrick B. Mullen sees rumors as “usually brief” and without “a narrative element,” and Alan Dundes notes that they “usually consist of nontraditional material,” while Linda Dégh sees rumors as coming from “the unestablished, initial, emergent, and transitory but active form or forms of the legend which... [leave] the confines of a small oral or newspaper print circuit,” for other communities. In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, Jan Brunvand calls rumors “unverified reports,” and “proto-legends,” which differ from legends by lacking a developed narrative structure which could certainly be said for many of the vague warnings most people report with the scout troop washed away in the canyon. And like many rumors and legends, this story moved from news media to various groups, thriving where there were stronger connections to the place and to the people affected, and changing to match those details more closely as it did. Linda Dégh and Patrick B. Mullen both conceive of a spectrum between legend and rumor with only a few, as Dégh argues, “‘solidifying’ into legend.”⁹

This story also contains elements of the urban legend which consist of “realistic stories concerning recent events... with an ironic or supernatural twist,” the truth of which, “the storytellers assume... lie just one or two informants back down the line with a reliable witness, or in a news media report.” The story of the swept away troop is realistic, it must be for it to act successfully as a warning to others. The events, as we shared them, were recent, and while there is no ironic or supernatural twist in the story, it was seen as rooted in reliable sources of information, primarily the news while other sources rely on friend of a friend transmission. Brunvand also writes that “urban legends gain credibility from specific details of time and place,” and that the “legend’s physical settings are often close by, real, and sometimes even locally

⁹ Patrick B. Mullen, “Modern Legend and Rumor Theory,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9 (1972): 96; Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965). 247; Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. 83-86; Jan Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 12, 175.

renowned for other such happenings.” Since this story is shared primarily by people within the actual canyon, or one like, or those who had just been or were planning on going, the tale of the scout troop is most believable and relevant when people are in the canyon, the alleged place of danger.¹⁰

There are also elements of the legend trip or legend quest as Folklorist Elizabeth Tucker calls them. S. Elizabeth Bird defines legend trips as “stories or legends shared among people who travel to a particular place,” and who share those stories at the site. Bird does not specify here, as Dégh does, a common assumption about legend trips is that the purpose of the trip is to tell and experience the legend. Unlike the experience of the Boy Scout troop camping in Zion with an afternoon hiking the narrows as one of many activities, it seems that most legend trips are organized with the express purpose of experiencing the fear and horror of the place of the legend and they occur at night and consist of only adolescents while in this case there were a few adults present nor was there any “testing” of the legend that is so commonplace in legend trips. The relative distance of this particular site, and its setting among many other scenic landmarks may account for its relative obscurity, however, I argue as Bird does that “while this particular site is local, the legend trip as an adolescent communication activity is widespread,” as is its relevance.¹¹

And while I have already cited Bill Ellis’s observation that camping is a form of play, Elizabeth Bird quotes Gary Alan Fine who sees legend trips as “a form of play.” Bird elaborates that the legend trip creates “a frame of playful fear, [where] young people are able to explore and confront some of the concerns that face them in ‘real’ life, through the potent interaction of texts, environment, and action.” She adds that “legend texts have little power on their own,” which may account for the scarcity of the legend and its existence in its most basic form because the place

¹⁰ Jan Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. xi.

¹¹ S. Elizabeth Bird, “Playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend Trip,” *Western Folklore* 53 (1994): 191,192, 199; And Linda Dégh. *Legend and Belief*. 253.

where it is most potent is in a Boy Scout troop hiking in the Zion narrows. Something that certainly many, but not all, troops have done.¹²

The Legend and Reality

There are documented accounts of people experiencing some versions of the narrative that was told in my scout troop in the summer of 1994. While the story we shared involved the deaths of an entire troop where we were hiking in the Zion Narrows, there is an account of a group of three leaders and five explorer scouts descending nearby Kolob canyon when, due to high water levels, the canyon became dangerous and two of the leaders died. The remaining leader and all five boys were rescued after four days in the canyon. This was certainly a real event that was well documented and debated. The debates surrounding the tragedy centered on the dangers: who was responsible for those dangers, the leaders or the park rangers, and how to, or how they might have, avoided them. But those sorts of debates do not make a legend according to Linda Dégh who, in *Legend and Belief*, writes that a legend “entertains debate about belief.” Because the story, as I and others have experienced, was heard second-, third-, or fourth-hand it came to resemble a legend or rumor, depending on the amount of narrative included in the telling. This rumor-legend, as many are, was based on actual events, but through retelling had moved from actual news to folklore.¹³

The original story does not entertain debate about belief although it is often used to explain, instruct and warn. Brant Ellsworth, inspired by some beautiful pictures, planned a hike in

¹² S. Elizabeth Bird, “Playing with Fear.” 202.

¹³ Shane Burrows. “Kolob Canyon Disaster: Zion National Park.” *Climb Utah*. 2002, <http://climb-utah.com/Zion/kolob1.htm>.; Canyoneering USA. “Kolob Creek Canyoneering Route.” *Tom’s Utah Canyoneering Guide*. 2005, <http://canyoneeringusa.com/utah/zion/kolob.htm>.; Hanscom, Greg. “Feds Set ‘Terrible Precedent’ with Kolob Canyon Settlement.” *High Country News*. Paonia, CO. 5 Aug. 1996, <http://www.hcn.org/issues/87/2695>.; and Linda Degh. *Legend and Belief*. 97-98.

the Zion Narrows in the summer of 2003 with a roommate. Another roommate's girlfriend, hearing their plans, told him to be careful because "my cousin went to hike the narrows with his Boy Scout troop and got caught in a flash flood. A wall of water came and he died." Similar to the stories we shared on our trip, Brant was told that "A storm up in the nether regions caused a flash flood that came down and killed him." Certainly the message of the story was one of warning. Jared Rife, not a native to the area, heard about a scout troop camping in a dry creek bed "somewhere in Southern Utah" when a flashflood during the night—"which often happens in those areas"—wiped most if not the entire troop away. This version lacks many of the specifics of the other accounts but still carries the story's most basic elements: a desert canyon of Southern Utah, scouts, death, water, and unseen danger.¹⁴

While news accounts of disasters in Zion are not numerous, an article in the Salt Lake Tribune sought to identify the major disasters that have occurred there since 1927. The two leaders dying in Kolob Canyon is mentioned as well as two hikers dying in the Narrows in 1998 in a flash flood. The article adds that most people die falling from cliffs rather than drowning. However, in the world of our scout camp, it was not the precipitous cliffs our stories led us to fear, but the canyon and the unpredictable water. It seems it is the unlikely fear that is most compelling. Looking over the side of a cliff, the outcome of inching towards it is obviously death. But in our scout disaster narratives, it is the unlikely danger of being drowned in a desert, the rare surge of massive amounts of water where there is so little that inspires fear and the excitement of danger.¹⁵

Zion National Park's website contains a page outlining safety information. Steep cliffs come in at the top of the list followed by water (as in drinking and staying hydrated), driving, heat

¹⁴Brant Ellsworth, Personal Interview. 25 Aug 2011; Jared Rife, Personal Interview. 26 Aug 2011.

¹⁵ Mark Havnes, "Disasters Are a Part of Zion National Park's History," *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Utah, 5 June 2009, http://www.sltrib.com/outdoors/ci_12513410.

exhaustion, heat stroke, hypothermia, and firearms. The main warnings that have anything to do with the Narrows come from hypothermia, or the temperature of the water, rather than the amount encountered. On hot days walking up the knee deep waters, the temperature doesn't seem to be a major concern, nor does the amount of water, so why, of all the dangers a scout might encounter in Zions, do these fearsome tales center on the ones so unlikely, they are hardly mentioned? Why the huge disparity between the dangers we actually confronted and the dangers in the stories we told ourselves?¹⁶

There were many differences between the stories we told and the event we were supposedly recounting. We told stories of an entire Boy Scout troop from Salt Lake City being wiped out by a flash flood in the Narrows, the canyon we were then hiking. The facts of the story had been altered in transmission. The original troop was not Boy Scouts but Explorer scouts, older and more experienced. We imagined the disaster hitting the scouts when it was leaders who died in the real event. And while the two troops did indeed come from the same general area, Northern Utah, one was from Salt Lake while we were from Provo. Plus, the Explorer scouts were hiking in nearby Kolob Canyon, not the Narrows. While geographically near each other, they are vastly different canyons. Kolob Canyon, the site of the disaster, is a narrow slot canyon requiring a wet or dry suit, rock climbing gear for 150 foot rappels, and a permit which indicates the water flow expected based on the release of a dam above the canyon. The Narrows on the other hand, while sounding like a narrow canyon, is wide enough for two to six lanes of car traffic through most of its length and requires very little equipment beyond what any casual hiker would have. The Narrows do not require a permit though they do post general conditions for the hikers who come to hike part or all of the canyon.

¹⁶ "Your Safety." *Zion National Park*. National Park Service US Department of the Interior, last accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.nps.gov/zion/planyourvisit/your-safety.htm>.

Looking closely at what changed, it is clear how this local tragedy went from a news story to a legend told and personalized to apply to those telling the story. Returning to Dégh's definition of a legend, we see that some of the changes involved making the story come more from a "known person" which was not true of the original. What we lacked in actual knowledge of these people was made up for by making the characters as similar to ourselves as we could. Thus the Explorer Scouts were made into younger Boy Scouts, the tragedy fell on those we identified more closely with, the Scouts, rather than the leaders, and, what needed only slight modification, they were a troop coming from Northern Utah to Southern Utah, and the differences of the specific canyons were erased by trading the one we were hiking for the one where the tragedy actually occurred. Were the events extraordinary? Extraordinarily regrettable, certainly. The increased drama involved in the eradication of an entire troop was certainly an extraordinary aspect of the event as we told and experienced it. The story did entertain debate about belief, in that the apparent veracity of the tale was part of what gave the tale so much force in our young minds. As Robert Gyemant writes, "As it is with most legends, there is historical detail enough to imply historical truth." The accuracies and inaccuracies indicate that folkloric processes were at work in digesting the facts of the event into the details of the legend.¹⁷

Water: Cultural and Religious Marker

On the same trip to Zion, as with many scout troops, we hiked not only the Narrows, but Angel's Landing where more people die and where the danger is more apparent. So why had we not heard nor shared any stories about that hike? We certainly enjoyed it through the heat and the arduous hike and the amazing panorama of the three canyons meeting in the valley around us. At

¹⁷ Robert E. Gyemant, "'Jack Haggerty' and a California Legend." 106.

times on the trail cliffs dropped away on both sides, giving us startling views of the valley below as well as ample opportunity to imagine the fatality of any misstep. It is a site of actual excitement and danger which did not inspire stories like the fairly placid and safer Narrows. While we certainly commented on the possibility of danger and falling off the edges, we did not share stories despite the actual danger and the plentiful cues given us by the natural world: the steep cliffs, the sloping edges, the distant valley floor. Why that discrepancy? Part of it may be in the combination of thrill and safety in the Narrows. With less immanent danger, we were left to enjoy the thrill of possible danger at a safer remove through story and imagination. When real harm was more evident, we avoided increased involvement through narrative. The thought of danger is far more enjoyable than actual danger.

Water holds a mystery of danger that heights and heat, which kill more people in the park yearly than does excess of water, do not. Part of the reason is found in the environmental conditions of the West. Scouts growing up in or familiar with the arid West know the importance of water and their reliance on it. Droughts, water rationing, and children's folklore in the West emphasize the importance of water. "1, 2, 3, water hog!" and "Save some for the whales!" yelled at children taking too long at the school water fountain are good examples of children's folklore emphasizing the importance of water.

From familiarity with LDS scriptures, the scouts were familiar with scenes of water-based destruction. Biblical stories including the flood, the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, Jonah and the fish, and even Christ calming the Sea of Galilee as he walked on the water show that water can be a source of punishment and an unruly element. Although water is used in one of the holiest ordinances in Mormonism, baptism, as a person is immersed in water, it symbolizes their death and rebirth. Water then is equated with death and is a frequent scene of hardships. The Book of Mormon tells of the dangers Lehi and his family faced as they crossed the ocean to the Promised Land. Later in the Book of Mormon, the Jaredites also experience

difficulty when they crossed the ocean. Further, when Christ visits the Americas, he punishes the wickedness by sinking many cities into the ocean. In the Doctrine and Covenants, a more modern book of scripture, there are many pronouncements about the dangers of water. In a revelation given after some dangers experienced by early church elders as they canoed down the Missouri and after one saw “in a daylight vision... the destroyer riding in power upon the face of the waters,” warning about the dangers of water abound: “behold, there are many dangers upon the waters, and more especially hereafter,” “For I, the Lord, have decreed in mine anger many destructions upon the waters; yea, and especially upon these waters (meaning the Missouri),” “Behold, I, the Lord, in the beginning blessed the waters; but in the last days ... I cursed the waters,” “Wherefore, the days will come that no flesh shall be safe upon the waters,” and others. While water as an evil force is certainly not a pervasive doctrine and receives such specific focus in only one chapter of scripture, combined with the stories, they may account for a tendency to vilifying water. Combine that with the West’s reliance on the peskily absent element, and water becomes a dangerous element in need of such legends to explain, warn, and instruct us to be wary.¹⁸

In describing the importance of water in Utah’s folklore, folklorist Barre Toelken also discusses the verses in D&C 61. He includes many other examples as well, arguing that “floods are often interpreted more as moral equations than as natural disasters.” He mentions some Elders who went swimming during their mission, a practice forbidden to missionaries. They took pictures and found, to their horror, “a black figure in the water” in the background. There are other tales of a promise Brigham Young gave about a reservoir in Salem, Utah that no one would drown there as long as they didn’t swim on Sunday, but “since then, all eight people who have drowned there were swimming on Sunday.” To illustrate the connection between morality and

¹⁸ For sinking of Nephite cities before Christ appears in the Americas, see 3 Nephi 8 and 9; for dangers of the water in the D&C, see D&C 61:4-5, 14-15.

water, Toelken mentions stories of early Utah settlers to Fountain Green who believed there was not enough water in the area to support a settlement. But Brigham Young promised them water “if they lived their religion.” Accordingly, as the population grew, so too did the amount of water issuing from the local spring, receding again when the population dwindled. But Toelken shows that water’s importance in Utah goes far beyond floods and morality. In coming to Utah, there were prophecies and a “sense of responsibility to make the desert blossom, to regain cursed land in time for the Second Coming.” Water, via irrigation, was a way to do that. Toelken sees an ambivalence in the choice for Mormons to settle in Utah where such a potent symbol, water, is so scarce. Regardless of the reasons, water has come to be a very potent symbol which includes “ambiguity, humor, contradiction, friction and irony.” Water has the religious potency of symbol (both of death and evil), and is seen as a marker of or way to prove morality and righteousness. As such, it embodies the elements of a rite of passage as well as a way to prove ones masculinity by meeting this supposed trial and overcoming it.¹⁹

Nor are these symbolic connections to water made only in the West. Mythology and literature are rife with examples that connect water to death, evil, and judgment despite it being so necessary to life. Beowulf battles Grendal’s mother where she lives, underwater. Jormangand, the Midgard serpent in Norse Mythology, filled with venom, lies beneath the ocean waves until Ragnarok when he will destroy Thor and when the whole earth will sink beneath the sea, dead, later to arise and be reborn. For the Greeks, the river Styx formed the boundary between the Earth and the underworld, and Odysseus is kept from his homeland and encounters his ills at sea including the sirens who lure sailors to watery ends. We can go all the way back to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* when Gilgamesh must cross the Bitter River which he is told numerous times no living person has ever crossed to reach Utnapishtim and hopefully the secret of eternal life.

¹⁹ Barre Toelken, “Traditional Water Narratives in Utah,” *Western Folklore*. 50 (1991): 194.

Legends of disasters in the wilderness often act as explanation, instruction, or warning. When American Studies Scholar Brant Ellsworth heard from his roommate's girlfriend about her cousin who had died in the Narrows in a flash flood, she told it, and he heard it, as a cautionary tale. The warning included the knowledge that the danger might be unseen, "You won't see it overhead. But 10 miles upstream there could be a massive downpour which will cause the flash flood," and summarized by his roommate's words "yeah, people die down there." Here, Dégh's interpretation of the function of the legend fits perfectly with its function in the urban world, but to read the meaning of the legend as it was told in the setting where it occurred, we look at Elliott Oring's definition of the legend. Oring writes that legends are about "the creation of a story which requires the audience to examine their world view—their sense of the normal, the boundaries of the natural, their conceptions of fate, destiny, and coincidence." Beyond requiring the audience to examine their world view, these stories allowed our troop to re-imagine the boundaries of the natural world and place ourselves in the most dangerous, exciting version of that world as exemplified in the legend. Rather than live in the hot, weary, sometimes menial and tedious world of camping, it allowed us to immerse ourselves in a world of dangerous possibilities where we could play with the possibilities of death and disaster without having to experience the actual danger of death and disaster. In fact, as noted earlier with the absence of such stories on the more immediately dangerous hike on Angel's Landing, there were no stories. It seems pretend danger and real danger do not mix, and that, perhaps, is what made the stories so appealing.²⁰

Another part of what makes playing with death possible and compelling, is the immediacy of the natural details of the legend. While there are many definitions of what makes a legend, the "message" is only part of what makes this legend so persistent and vivid. The

²⁰ Brant Ellsworth. *Ibid*; Elliot Oring, "Folk Narratives," *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. ed. Elliot Oring. (Logan, Utah State UP: 1986). 126.

immediacy of the physical facts of the legend imbued our experience in the canyon with a heightened sense of excitement. The physical reminders of the plausibility of the legend gave the legend greater force and narrative power. While narratives of entire scout troops being washed away in desert floods are amazing enough, walking the very banks of the calm river while noting the stumps and debris of the flood forty feet above you on a cliff wall, a vivid reminder of the tales reality, emphasize the potential threat and actual excitement as one rounds corner after corner of the very canyon.

In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, Jan Brunvand discusses the function of legends. They can entertain, validate cultural ideals or institutions, explain the unusual or supernatural happenings of the world *or* they can “show that the prosaic contemporary scene is capable of producing shocking or amazing occurrences which may have actually happened to friends or to near-acquaintances but which are nevertheless explainable in some reasonably logical terms.” The legends and legend telling can infuse a boring situation with more excitement because of the possibility that something amazing will happen. In *One Space, Many Places* Mary Hufford makes the observation that “Through stories people deepen their relationship to the places surrounding them (8).” These particular stories deepen that relationship by infusing it with the drama, excitement, and mythos of the frontier where life was hard, but real men were made.²¹

This kind of play with danger is distinct from legend trips and what Bill Ellis terms, “mock ordeals” in that the legends and stories are evoked by the place rather than the other way around as in legend trips. Further the ordeal is real only in that there is a heightened sense of *potential* danger while experiencing the more mundane discomforts of camping life. And here is where playing with masculinities and adulthood enter into the stories and their appeal. The adult world, as well as the natural world, can appear mysterious and are connected with anxiety of

²¹ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981). 12.; Mary Hufford. *One Space, Many Places* (Washington DC: American Folklife Center, 1986). 8.

performance. Can I, adolescents wonder, become an adult? Imagining the dramatic danger of the world transforms the discomforts of camping life into more exciting, manly adventures; gives them a handle on perceived, real, but unrealized fears; and serves as an outlet for the fears and anxieties of wilderness, manhood, and adulthood.

Nutty Putty Caves

Caves are another site where adolescents can confront and overcome varying levels of danger and mastery in homo- and heterosocial peer groups or with some adult supervision within Scout Troops or church youth groups. There are many caves along the Wasatch front where, as with the rumor legends of the Zion Narrows, fact and fiction mix in the tales and experiences of people visiting, or choosing not to visit, the caves. For example, in a cave on the Y-mountain—just east of Provo, many students would go into a cave that required they swim underwater about 15 feet to reach another chamber. One female informant who made it in and out with a male friend ended with “we were lucky that day,” to have survived. She also mentioned the four teenagers and twenty-somethings who died there in 2005. Another informant, a male, had heard about the deaths at the cave but had also heard drugs were partly to blame. However according to news reports, no drugs were present, so it was an embellishment likely included to warn of the dangers of using drugs more so than the dangers of water and caves.²²

However, the most well-known cave in the area is the Nutty Putty Cave located West of Utah Lake in Utah. It took a bit of driving and off-roading to get there, but compared to the Zion Narrows, they were a far more accessible setting for adventure. The caves were officially closed in 2009 when a caver got stuck and died within the caves. The Deseret News reported that

²² “Four Hikers Found Dead Inside Provo Cave,” *KSL.com* August 18, 2005, accessed March 10, 2015.

“despite more than a full day of rescue efforts, John Edward Jones died around midnight Wednesday while trapped in a tight section of Nutty Putty Cave.” Jones’s was the first death in the cave despite many people getting stuck and needing rescue over the years. Due to the cost and difficulty of rescues, although there have been only four incidents involving six different cavers who have needed rescue, authorities had attempted to limit the number of cavers and ensure proper safety precautions. The people getting trapped as well as the debate about what to do about it, filtered down to the folk as rumors throughout the 90s and early 2000s like the one reported by Emily Morgan on March 9, 2015 of the caves being filled in with concrete “because they had had to rescue too many people in there.” Another informant whose father worked with the bureau of land management (BLM) heard that there were often plans to close off the caves and theorized that the underfunded agency, when faced with the cost of another search and rescue, decided to close it down.²³

Similar to the stories surrounding the scouts in the Narrows, the stories of Nutty Putty Cave inspired some people to go, and encouraged others to stay away. One informant, a female whose father had taken many young men groups to the caves, told me on 3/9/2015 that she never went nor wanted to go because of stories about “kids going in on a date and getting lost.” She recounted “one about a couple that went for a date and they never made it out.” She also mentioned a news story about a young boy being lost for days within the cave. She realizes now these stories were not true, but at the time they helped her conjure images of going to the cave and coming across two skeletons, “huddled together as they died,” truly a fearful experience for a teenage girl. Besides the scare images, this account exemplifies how these stories often get personalized as all of the documented people getting lost or needing rescue in the caves were

²³ Lana Groves and Emiley Morgan, “Man Trapped in Utah County’s Nutty Putty Cave Dies,” *The Deseret News* November 26, 2009, accessed March 3, 2015.

men. But for a young girl who imagines going there on a date, the story gains more impact by including details of two lovers trapped beneath the earth.

Two other informants, both male, told me that they did not consider it a dangerous or scary experience although one remembers a story about someone getting stuck in the “birth canal,” an appropriate named long and very narrow tunnel at one end of the cave. He does remember feeling nervous, but was reassured because he “knew lots of people went to” the caves. My other informant had similar thoughts that he didn’t think he or anyone would have gone if they “had thought it was truly dangerous.” Still, he compared the experience to dealing with “large, wild carnivores—if you respect them and understand them, you won’t end up dying.” This comparison indicates there is some sense of danger, although it is in a controlled setting where it can be handled and mastered. And it helped him feel a sense of mastery since if you knew what you were doing, there was no danger. That informant also mentioned that his brother in law planned on bringing his son when he “was as tall as his navel” to “com(e) of age in the cave.” When asked if he felt that in the cave, he agreed in that he was gaining familiarity with a place beyond and outside of his parent’s world. The other male informant also emphasized in his account that although he went with a school club group, they went “with no adult supervision.” In both of these accounts we see hints of the earned independence afforded by these trips to natural settings where there is a sense of managed danger outside of their usual world, a place where they can confront and gain mastery over something that can be dangerous. Instead of the water seen in the narrows, the cave itself is a potent symbol of death and rebirth, an ideal setting for personalized rites of passage.

And just as many religious and cultural traditions see water as a place of transformation, so too are caves common sites of challenge, testing, and transformation. Gilgamesh, before he seeks after eternal life, must face the monster Humbaba who dwelled “in an underground cavern” where he fights and finally overcomes the great evil. Before crossing the Bitter River, Gilgamesh

also travels through deep caverns which are connected with death. For the Greeks, the underworld was entered through a cavern. Temples of Mithras were built below ground often in natural caves.²⁴

Conclusion

Legend and rumors lie on a spectrum between the real and imaginary. Further, legends evoked by place lie on a spectrum between narrative and performance. These scouting stories and legends, like many others, are drawn from real stories and become legends only in their telling and retelling as fact surrenders to a good, gripping story which in turn surrenders to the power of potent cues from the surrounding environment. In moving towards the more imaginative and towards the more real, an interesting picture of why youth create, share, and perpetuate stories of disaster emerges.

If we move first towards the more fictive side, Susan Sontag, in *The Imagination of Disaster*, contends that the strength of science fiction films are “their immediate representation of the extraordinary.” In what she calls “sensuous elaboration,” these films allow viewers to participate in the fantasy of their own death, or the destruction of the world itself. Sontag privileges the spectacle over the words or story, but in the case of disaster narratives experienced in the wilderness, the story and natural cues combine to create a vivid, participatory narrative the boys can enter and feel at the edge of death and destruction, take a look around, and return unharmed, victorious, and more capable of facing the demands of the world and adulthood. Similar to the monsters in science fiction, nature as liminal monster seeks to not only kill them, but obliterate them, just as it has the other scout groups in the stories. Sontag concludes that the

²⁴ Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004). 21

imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an *inadequate response* which shows “the inadequacy of most people’s response to the unassimilable terrors that infect their consciousness.” Sontag’s hyperbole aside, the terrors being dealt with in science fiction are the same ones being escaped in the wilderness: an urban world dictated by forces more powerful than the boys such as parents, mothers, or school or work schedules. The legend of the scouting disaster allows them to confront a more fearsome but imaginary fear than the more real and perhaps less understood fears of how to become a successful adult, how to enter and become competent in an adult world they are sensing they are on the cusp of.²⁵

Moving towards the more factive, we might look at the anticipatory response to Hurricane Irene in the summer of 2011. The wind up to Irene held many comparisons with Hurricane Katrina which was similar in size and force to Irene. CBS news warned that “Irene could bring Katrina-style flooding to coast.” While other predictions were more accurate, like the loss of power to much of the affected areas, the comparison of Katrina to Irene seemed to ignore some vital facts—such as the levees which caused most of damage in New Orleans and their absence anywhere in Irene’s path—and focus on mother nature as monster and force of immanent destruction. She “slammed” into the coast, or “marched” up it. Similar to how scout legends can imbue an area with potential danger, many news accounts wrote of the potential dangers of the real storm, the “potentially affected population” and “potential damage.” Anticipation of the actual event, while very different from the imaginary anticipation experienced by scouts hiking in the Zion Narrows, shared with the scout’s anticipation an entrance into the realm of fantasy. Just as legends combine truth and fiction, our views of the future, even the immediate future, require imagination. Surely we base our concept on our experiences and seek to make them realistic, but any consideration of the future deals with the realm of imagination. While the scouts used their

²⁵ Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” *Science Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Mark Rose (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1956): 119, 127, 130.

imaginations to imbue their present with greater excitement, intensifying that potential danger even a bit can come to resemble the great fear and panic in anticipation of Irene.²⁶

Sacvan Bercovitch, in *The American Jeremiad*, explains how this might happen. The particularly American form of the jeremiad, he explains, rhetorically fused the sacred, supernatural world of God's will with the secular, natural world of man's actions. The legend, for many and these disaster legends in particular, seem to elevate the commonplace and everyday into a world of the supernatural. There is something proleptic in this exercise when we compare the legends with its cousins on the extremes of the fictive/factive spectrum. In all of them, science fiction, fact-based scouting legends, and anticipation of natural disasters, people fuse the supernatural and everyday worlds in mixtures to excite, appall, or amaze ourselves or others. As such, legends, like news, and science fiction, are a way we invent and interpret the world. As invention and interpretation they can be productive or destructive: ways to increase excitement, ways for urbanites to respond to the crushing demands of modernity, and added fuel for widespread panics. Seen this way, the legend is not merely a way to negotiate the possible and the actual, but is a persistent and pervasive human negotiation between our imagined world and our lived experience.²⁷

Looking at the spectrum between narrative and performance, the experience of this legend in its setting is transformative although it almost becomes a rite of passage because it features separation from one's normal environment, an experience or even imagined trial, if not explicit instruction, in a secluded, liminal space, and a reincorporation into society, but one which does not necessarily include a widely recognized change of status. The legend rather creates a

²⁶ Stephanie Condon, "Hurricane Irene could Bring Katrina-style Flooding to the Coast, FEMA Warns," *cbsnews.com*. 26 Aug 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hurricane-irene-could-bring-katrina-style-flooding-to-coast-fema-warns/>; David Ranii, "Hurricane Irene Slams North Carolina Coast, Targets Northeast," *Miami Herald*, 27 Aug 2011, http://www.edmondsun.com/hurricane-irene-slams-north-carolina-coast-and-targets-northeast/article_8987e704-65b8-55b3-ad3e-df53b46acadd.html.

²⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 9.

transformative experience that allows male youth to prove their masculinity and youth of any gender to prove their independence and mastery over themselves and their environment, a key feature of adulthood. The performance, or experience, of this story can help alleviate the anxiety of growing up and nearing independence by creating a personal rite of passage where a cultural one was lacking. In support of this interpretation, Barre Toelken argues that water expresses ideas of regeneration particularly for those in the Mormon West as well as evoking the liminal since geographically it often acts as a border and is closely connected with both life and death.²⁸

Eric Erickson outlined seven identity crises adolescents experience as they face the challenges of growing up. While all of them are involved in the transition to adulthood, two seem most relevant to these Utah Boy Scouts imagining fearsome but unlikely disasters: develop self-confidence and gender roles as they relate to ideas of masculinity. Robert Havighurst, a psychosocial theorist of adolescence, viewed adolescence in a similar way. He theorized eight major tasks which include independence and gender roles. He saw growing up as a series of tasks required by “individual needs or society’s demands.” Erikson argues that adolescents “want to discover ‘who and what they are in the eyes of a wider circle of significant people as compared with what they themselves have come to feel they are.’” Many adolescent theorists note the growing importance of the peer group in adolescent’s lives, and this setting then, among their peers, largely away from their adult supervision, these Boy Scouts were able to establish independence and show a masculine bravery as they shared this experience of facing and overcoming a dangerous place.²⁹

²⁸ See Ray Raphael, *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 4; see also Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).; Barre Toelken, “The Folklore of Water in the Mormon West,” *Northwest Folklore*. 7 (1989): 4.

²⁹ F. Philip Rice. *The Adolescent: Development, Relationships, and Culture*. 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1987): 95-97, 110-111.; and Erikson qtd. in Elizabeth Tucker. *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007). 182.; see also Frank A. Salamone. “Adolescence.” *Encyclopedia of American Studies*. ed. Simon Bronner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) (accessed October 30, 2014).

This legend, as a negotiation between adolescent fears and hopes for the future as well as a proleptic way of gaining or establishing mastery over being a grown up before they have to grow up in a setting safely removed from the actual stresses of growing up. The fear of a flash flood then is a surrogate fear that can both heighten excitement, but more importantly be faced and overcome safely in a way that establishes independence and masculinity for youth anxious of what will be asked of them as adults. This helps them face those requirements with more confidence because they have met and conquered them in a way already and among their peers whose recognition is more and more important in ratifying an identity of competence and a masculinity they are eager to prove even if it is one they do not yet possess.

Chapter 4

Saints of Subterfuge and Silliness: Toilet Papering among Mormon Youth

Pranks are rebellious. They attack the status quo. For a religion noted for its seriousness and often criticized for unthinking obedience and support of its leadership, as well as one well known for being law abiding, Mormons do not seem to be an ideal group for investigating pranks. Even more surprising perhaps, is that many of the pranks found in the MCR are not rebellions against the status quo, but, as journalist Neil Steinberg asserts in his book on college pranks, a way to assert identity. Along with asserting identity, pranks can also help define and strengthen community as well. As such, pranks can fulfill this purpose with delight and fun that recommend them to any group.¹

And yet, not all pranks are found among all groups. Those which are found in multiple groups can be done in different ways and for different reasons. Toilet papering, or TPing as it is known among LDS youth in the MCR, and “rolling” in other areas, is the act of covering houses, yards, and even cars in toilet paper. Toilet papering has been described by many folklorists as an anti-social act associated with rivalry and fraternities. Simon Bronner records the “ritual pollution” “tolerated” during Halloween, and engaged in as part of initiation rituals when pledges sleep at the chapter house and pull pranks on rival houses. He also mentions a more benign and communal form of toilet papering at Auburn University where students will cover an oak tree at Toomer’s Corner with toilet paper after their football team wins an away game. It is a tradition

¹ Neil Steinberg, *If at all Possible, Involve a Cow: The Book of College Pranks* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), xii- xv.

apparently going back to when Toomer's Drug had the only telegraph in town, and "decorating" the tree with TP was the easiest way to announce a victory.²

Toilet papering among Mormons distinguishes itself by its prevalence, its wide, if ambiguous, acceptance, and the many, often conflicting, messages it can express. Like those alluded to by Bronner, Toilet Papering can be a way to ritually pollute someone or some group, but it is far more commonly used to show affection. It can be aimed at peers, but it can also be aimed at adults in positions of power like teachers or ward leaders to express both affection and derision. It is most prevalent in the Mormon Cultural Region, but can be found among Mormon youth in most areas west of the Mississippi, and even, via export from the MCR, Australia and Germany.

The accounts of TPing I have collected have come from USU's folklore archive, from interviews both in person and via email that I have done, as well as accounts from a Master's Thesis written at USU. The accounts range in from the 1970s through the 2000s with at least one informant, living in Utah, lamenting that toilet papering may be on the way out after she tried to initiate her nieces into toilet papering around 2010 without much success. Still, that anecdote aside, TPing has shown considerable resiliency, and, as I will show, has been a versatile form of expression which, I expect, will persist for some time still.

Toilet papering in America seems most often associated with April Fools' Day, Halloween, and College (whether it be freshmen, fraternities, sororities, or after football victories). While toilet papering in America can be benign such as a way to announce football victories, or even as a way to induct new players onto the team, much of what is described by folklorists is adversarial, aimed at rivals or enemies. Mormon toilet papering, on the other hand, can be adversarial, but is most often aimed at friends, romantic interests, or beloved authority

² Michael B. Ward. *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context*. (M.A. Thesis, Utah State University, 2003). 160, 192, 254.

figures at school or within LDS wards. On a spectrum between adversarial and affectionate, toilet papering among Mormons has favored the latter side, while toilet papering in other areas seems to have favored the former despite there being some overlap. Further, rather than being limited to certain holidays, toilet papering in the MCR could occur during any weekend or nearly any night during the summer. It has been a nighttime activity with practitioners often dressing up in black, swiping rolls or even boxes of toilet paper from their homes, and heading out on clandestine adventures in the darkness.

Since its main, and most distinctive, use has been to express affection between boys and girls, toilet papering can be seen as a status symbol among the youth who toilet paper and get toilet papered. This is not unique to Mormon youth as an article from Mason City, Iowa attests. Michelle Sprout Murray, a reporter, describes the excitement she and her family felt when the football team TPed their house after her son made the team. It was obviously a way to indicate inclusion, even acceptance, into the group. In the MCR, the frame that makes such actions acceptable, even positive, have been much broader and include not just teams and school groups, but any group of friends. It is also more likely that a boy or girl, with a close group of their same-sex friends, will toilet paper the house of a crush. Sometimes messages will be written on the lawn or driveways in toilet paper to either indicate the target of the prank, a practice made necessary by the traditionally large Mormon families with often numerous children in Jr. or High School, or messages to indicate the identity of at least one of the people responsible. These messages, while not universal, belie the clandestine setting which mark toilet papering as a pre-dating activity. Still, it has been an ambiguous and plastic medium of expression as it upends the power structures of everyday life when youth toilet paper authority figures like teachers, religious leaders, and adult neighbors. Finally, rather than targeting anyone or communicating anything, toilet papering has also been seen as a way to act out or let off steam, or simply as a response to boredom. Toilet papering among and between youth is distinctive in how widely tolerated it has

been among Mormon adults with parents and police officers often helping their youth engage in this petty vandalism despite it being officially against the law in many areas of the MCR.³

What Does Pranking Mean?

As folklorist Richard Tallman defined it, “The practical joke, as a folkore form, is first an event, a competitive play activity in which only one of two opposing sides is consciously aware of the fact that a state of play exists.” For Tallman and many others, this one-sided play frame ends only when one side is humiliated or made a fool of or otherwise discomfited. Pranks and practical jokes are seen as synonyms by most authors, and most use one or the other almost exclusively. Tallman, however, uses the terms nearly interchangeably as does Moira Marsh who agrees that practical jokes consist of unilateral play frames. Marsh’s full definition of the practical joke is “a scripted, unilateral play performance involving ...[a] trickster and target with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both.” That being said, the practical joke seems to focus more on creating an unperceived state of play while pranks are those tricks or jokes which, while they may require preparation, are sprung or discovered in an instant without a strong narrative element. Toilet papering thus seems to fit better as a prank where the one-sided play frame is simply making a conspicuous mess of the victim’s yard during the night which the victim(s) will find and have to clean up in the morning. According to Marsh’s definition then, the script is the creation of a mess which will involve the necessary burden of cleaning it up on the target, usually the youth of the family of the house toilet papered and any of their siblings old enough to help, when the play frame is revealed the next

³ Michelle Sprout Murray, “TPing Can Be Good, Clean Fun for All,” *The Globe Gazette*, October 9, 2011 <http://globegazette.com/features/tping-can-be-good-clean-fun-for-all/article_72dc6e86-f066-11e0-99ac-001cc4c03286.html>

morning when the family members either look outside or leave their home. They have also become unwitting performers in their neighborhood of an unkempt house.⁴

Scholars have given more attention to categorization of pranks than the distinction between prank and practical joke. Marilyn Jorgensen noted that pranks can have malicious and benevolent types. Richard Tallman classified pranks according to how many tricksters and targets there were, whether the action was active or passive, the intent (and here he includes initiatory along with benevolent and malevolent), and the result of the prank. Finally, Erving Goffman saw practical jokes on a spectrum of relative complexity and scale moving from the simple and small to the complex and grand. Moira Smith included pranks that can be divided into eso- and exoteric depending on whether they are meant to create closeness or distance between the pranker and the prankee.⁵

Given these categorizations, TPing among Mormon youth has been fairly simple but can range from the small to the grand depending on how many rolls are used and certain other aesthetic factors like how evenly the TP was placed and how well and how high up in the trees the TP streams hung. The most distinctive difference in TPing revolves around whether it is benevolent and community-building or malicious and adversarial. As it is described in the folklore of colleges and fraternities, TPing seems malicious and adversarial while among Mormon youth it tends towards more benevolent especially as most informants I spoke to eschewed more malicious practices like forking and egging. Benevolent pranks seek to strengthen

⁴ Qtd. in Alan Dundes, "April Fool and April Fish: Towards a Theory of Ritual Pranks," *Ibid.* 7.; Moira Marsh, *Practically Joking* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015), 12.

⁵ Marilyn Jorgensen, "Teases and Pranks." *Children's Folklore: A Sourcebook*. ed. Brian Sutton-Smith, Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson. Felicia R. McMahon (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999), 213-224; Richard S. Tallman, "A Generic Approach to the Practical Joke." *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 38 (1974): 262-264.; Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1974), 262-265.; and Moira Smith, "Jokes and Practical Jokes," In *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life: A Filedguide and Sourcebook*. ed., George H. Schoemaker (Indiana: Trickster Press, 1990), 79.

relationships and malevolent ones seek to create distance between the trickster and the victim. While some toilet papering was aimed at adversaries and had malicious intent, the great majority were benevolent. Benevolent toilet papering was so common among Mormon youth that even when it was not benevolent, it was often interpreted as such. The benevolent nature of the prank was also why some parents tolerated and even helped their children TP neighbor's homes.

Folklorist Elliot Oring refers to the "license people ha(ve) to assault, insult, steal or destroy the property of, throw excrement at, or play pranks on certain categories of kin" as a "joking relationship." Radcliffe-Brown, who first came up with the term studying kinship groups in African tribes, outlined four features of joking relationships including restricted participation, restricted settings, involving sexual or scatological topics, and restricted to public encounters which James P. Spradley and Brenda J. Mann use to analyze the joking relationships within a Minnesota bar. They note that these restrictions include "complex... and informal rules that must be mastered," a loosening of restrictions on "normally taboo topics," and "occurs in the presence of an audience." All of these are evident in Mormon toilet papering. Participation is restricted to young adults, at least to do the actual TPing. It was acceptable for adults to take on a coaching or helping role, but they were rarely if ever known to participate themselves. In fact, one informant who toilet papered her teacher so many times it became boring was told by the teacher that he was eager to have his children toilet paper the girls who had toilet papered him so many times. Implicit in that statement is that he was ineligible to toilet paper them (which also comments on the asymmetrical nature of toilet papering to be discussed shortly) and had no recourse but to wait for his own children to be within the group allowed to toilet paper. Further, the restrictions on participation can be seen in the codes of conduct or self-imposed rules that many TPerers abide by when engaging in their midnight mischief. While I have argued already that there is less restriction in terms of time and place, there are still restrictions on settings which is the home or, in some cases, the car. While this may not seem very restrictive, the house acts in a similar way to

the bar in *The Cocktail Waitress* which provided the setting but also set the limit on the joking relationship in the bar. Similarly, the house keeps the two parties, the boys and girls, the parents and youth, separated from one another and allows communication and aggression that is not tolerated at other times and places. Further, the use of toilet paper certainly has scatological references that are socially unacceptable at most other times, certainly not in front of the crush's parents as it must be when toilet papering their homes. Finally, the relationship is conspicuously public. The incongruity of the toilet paper streaming from roof and treetops calls attention to the public nature of the prank and its need for an audience beyond the victim. As a pre-dating practice, the publicness connects it to older courtship behavior discussed in the next chapter. The primary audience for the public display is certainly the boy or girl being TPed, but secondarily the family, the parents, other youth of the neighborhood, ward, or school all become an audience to the public announcement of inclusion or affection.⁶

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who first proposed the term "joking relationship," divides this joking relationship into two types: symmetrical and asymmetrical. In the former, the two people tease or make fun of each other while in the latter, one member of the relationship teases the other while the other merely takes it in good humor or returns only a fraction of the teasing received. Mormon youth viewed TPing as primarily symmetrical, but will certainly TP asymmetrically when toilet papering an adult who, while they are known to help their children toilet paper, very rarely engage in it themselves. In fact, only one informant had participated in toilet papering as an adult and it was to help initiate her nieces who had not been initiated by their peers. However, despite Mormon youth feeling that they participate in symmetrical pranking since they are targeting each other, seen by the parents, TPing is asymmetrical since the medium of the message

⁶ Elliot Oring, "Humor in Anthropology and Folklore," *The Primer of Humor Research*. ed. Victor Raskin (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 185; James P. Spradley and Brenda J. Mann, *The Cocktail Waitress: Woman's Work in a Man's World* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975), 90-100.

involves the home and thus the homeowner or parents. Despite the temporary chaos introduced onto the parent's yard and house, since it was nearly always the intended targets who clean up the mess, the prank can still be seen as fairly symmetrical at least by the youth.⁷

However, Radcliffe-Browne would argue that the asymmetrical nature of the joking relationship indicates that those who have the license to prank are in a superior social standing in the society. For a religion often criticized for being a patriarchy and even a gerontocracy as Mike Wallace said in his interview with then President Gordon B. Hinckley, it seems impossible that youth enjoy a superior status. And yet, youth are certainly told they are special. One prevalent piece of folklore which “has been repeatedly disavowed by the Church,” has youth imagine being in heaven and meeting people who were with Moses when he parted the red sea or who fought with Book of Mormon prophet and military leader Captain Moroni when someone asks the contemporary youth when they lived. When they answer that it was during the presidency of Gordon B. Hinckley or some other recent prophet, “a hush will fall over every hall... in heaven, and all in attendance will bow at your presence.” Such is the tone and content of some of the folklore that emphasizes how honored contemporary Mormon youth are told they are. And while this story is certainly folklore and not church doctrine, much doctrine does emphasize the chosenness of youth in the latter days. One example with wording common to both official and lay messages to youth comes from then President Ezra Taft Benson. In an address to BYU students March 4, 1979, President Benson echoed some of the content if not the drama of the disavowed folklore by saying “All through the ages the prophets have looked down through the corridors of time to our day. Billions of the deceased and those yet to be born have their eyes on us. Make no mistake about it—you are a marked generation.... God has saved for the final inning some of his strongest children, who will help bear off the kingdom triumphantly.” Certainly grand words, and

⁷ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 13 (July 1940): 195-210

the idea of the youth being more valiant and special is echoed in the words of other church leaders. One typical example is Elder James J. Hamula of the First Quorum of the Seventy (the governing body of the church under the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles) who said in a General Conference talk in October of 2008, “Reserved to come forth in these last days and labor for our Father and His Son are some of the most valiant and noble of our Father’s sons and daughters.” Certainly the message in much of this praise is that the children are the most important. And yet they are also given many restrictions and rules particularly in the way of sex and particularly compared with their non-Mormon counterparts. In this light, TPing was a way of testing and confirming their status as a “marked” and “chosen” generation, testing the limits of this specialness by engaging in asymmetrical pranking against the homes of the parents and leaders who espoused so much admiration.⁸

The wide acceptance among parents despite their asymmetric position within the prank may have also indicated a large in-group included within the joking relationship. Sociologists David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson argue that “Mormons have a strong sense of inner solidarity,” and that they form tight bonds with each other. They go on to argue that Mormons are both quintessentially American and forever at the fringes as a peculiar people who have maintained distinct boundaries around themselves to form a strong ethno-religious identity. Religious historian R. Laurence Moore makes a similar argument and concludes that Mormons see themselves as both typically American and distinct from all other Americans. Their status as a peculiar people is certainly worn with honor and well attested to by the many studies

⁸ “An Interview with Gordon Hinkley: A Look Back at Mike Wallace’s 1996 Interview with The President of the Mormon Church,” last modified 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/an-interview-with-gordon-hinckley/4/>; “Mormon Urban Legends or Folklore/Bow to Those Living in Pres Hinckley’s Time,” last updated 24 September 2013, http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormon_urban_legends_or_folklore/Bow_to_those_living_in_Pres_Hinckley%27s_time.; Ezra Taft Benson, “In His Steps,” *BYU Speeches* (Intellectual Reserve, Inc, 1979), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson_in-christs-steps/; James J. Hamula, “Winning the War Against Evil,” *October 2008 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015).

that center on Mormon distinctiveness. This shared identity as a peculiar people, even an embattled minority, has held over from the persecutions and greater distinctiveness of the early days of the church which are still referenced and continue to hold a strong place in Mormon memory and identity. This shared identity allows for not just friends and peers, but the entire community to lie, perhaps somewhat uneasily at times, within the joking relationship that allows youth to toilet paper the houses of their elders—whether they are the primary target of the prank or not—with such impunity.⁹

Joking relationships rely on a mixture of friendliness and hostility. For Radcliffe-Brown, joking relationships develop when two parties have “divergent” interests, “so that conflict or hostility might result.” Joking helps prevent conflict while keeping the parties connected. The interests of the young men or women in the child of the parents who own the house may certainly be divergent—particularly in middle and high school before parents want their children pairing off or courting in earnest. While mainly focusing on familial relationships, Radcliffe-Brown also notes the prevalence of “horse-play between young men and women as a preliminary to courtship,” and indeed boys and girls have divergent interests and girls most often toilet paper boys and vice versa. Sometimes groups will toilet paper their own friends, but nearly always toilet papering is done among groups of the same sex and against members of the opposite sex. In that way, TPing reflects gender difference and distinction notable in Mormon theology and practice, but it was also a way for youth to both bond with each other and with their community.

⁹ David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5, 7; and R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 30-45.; For more studies on Mormons as a peculiar people see Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).; For a discussion of the legacy of persecution and its continued prevalence in Mormon discourse see Zachary L. Largey, “The Rhetoric of Persecution: Mormon Crisis Rhetoric from 1838-1871” (MA Thesis, Brigham Young University, 2006), 95-100.; and David W. Grua, “Persecution, Memory, and Mormon Identity in Parley Pratt’s ‘Autobiography’” *Journal of Mormon History* 37 (2011), 168-173.

TPing was, I argue, not a hazing or initiation ritual primarily, but a benevolent prank that expressed, or at least sought to, inclusion within the group.¹⁰

Toilet papering, like many expressive genres, was also about communication. Due to the taboo nature of discussing sex and sexuality openly, adolescents, still unsure how to appropriately communicate sexual desire, may have resorted to the ambiguity of TPing that not only targets their crush, but the adults who actually own the homes being TPed. While the message for the crush is, “I like you,” the message for the adults in the house and even the neighborhood may be, “This is the only way you’ll let us talk about sex!” Finally, since there were many performers in the creation of the message and their peers would likely see it as well, the TPerers were also expressing their own skill and mastery of the medium when they used a lot of rolls and “really got a house good,” and escaped without getting caught. There is, as Moira Marsh argues, an aesthetic element to pranking which even the prankee can appreciate. When people got toilet papered, they could still appreciate how well they were TPed and how skillfully it was done. Sometimes, when it happened early in the evening and they still avoided detection, there was further appreciation for not just the results, but the skills of stealth and subterfuge that were involved in quietly hurling rolls of toilet paper at and around a house while everyone inside remained oblivious.¹¹

This aesthetic feature of toilet papering as well as the clandestine running around playing at more serious delinquency made TPing fun for Mormon youth. Researchers found that children enjoyed “committing minor social infractions, such as teasing other children, making unauthorized telephone calls, ‘toilet-papering’ someone’s house, or ‘egging’ someone’s mailbox” when they were done in groups of friends. The skill or daring of a toilet papering job could be appreciated by those doing the toilet papering. Toilet papering around someone’s front door or

¹⁰ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “On Joking Relationships,” 197, 208-209.

¹¹ Moira Marsh, “Foiled Again: The Playful Ethics and Aesthetics of Jokes,” *Western Folklore* 71 (2012): 293-306.

windows could both heighten the thrill because the chance of getting caught and/or recognized increased, but it could also prove to a group of friends how skillful and daring an individual was. Beyond that, youth not even involved in the toilet papering could see how well someone was toilet papered the next morning: how well covered the yard was, how high up in the trees the TP hung, and recognize the skill that went into creating the disordered display.¹²

The Scholarship of Pranking

Back in 1999 folklorist Marilyn Jorgensen noted that there was little in the way of scholarship focused on pranking behavior let alone youth pranking. While pranks and practical jokes have received more attention since then, youth and Mormon youth remain largely understudied. Much of the literature covering adolescent pranking focuses on pranks associated with initiation and school and campus rivalries as well as seasonal pranks associated with Halloween or April Fools' Day. In other words, there are specific times and places where pranking is appropriate or at least tolerated. These bounds recall the medieval Feast of Fools when hierarchies were reversed and many social constraints loosened. Jorgensen mentions that "tricks and pranks... occur on special, set-aside days when such forms of deception and victimization are socially sanctioned and probably even expected." The social bounds are much looser for toilet papering among Mormon youth which is nearly always tolerated and at times even encouraged. Mormon adults seem to trust their children to apply appropriate restrictions on their own activity which, by and large, they do. Most TPer adhered to rules which limited their pranks to temporary inconveniences and targeted houses with teenagers who were able to clean up the

¹² Molly Reid, Sharon Landesman, Robert Treder and James Jaccard, "My Family and Friends": Six- to Twelve-Year-Old Children's Perceptions of Social Support," *Child Development* 60: 4 (August 1989): 906.; see also Michael B. Ward. *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context*. (M.A. Thesis Utah State University, 2003), 61.

mess. Most informants I spoke to felt that more aggressive and damaging pranks such as forking and egging went too far.¹³

April Fools' Day may descend from the feast of fools and thus the connection to "rule breaking and irreverence" is hundreds of years old. The feast of fools was a time when social roles and social hierarchies were reversed. Those at the bottom of the social ladder would play pranks on authority figures like the clergy by putting on mock masses. These masses mocked the usual dignity of religious rituals with men dressed as women; animals, including donkeys, being paraded through the church; and people gambling and feasting on the altar. The traditional prank for April Fools' Day was to send someone on a "fool's errand," or a "wild goose chase," where the fool is sent from place to place in search of a usually imaginary item until at last they come full circle to where they started to uproarious laughter and the revelation that there is no such thing as a left-handed wrench. The NFL even has a version of the fool's errand where a rookie is sent around on Thanksgiving looking for a free turkey which has always been handed off to someone else just before they got there.¹⁴

Halloween is another time when the "regular rules of society are suspended," and roles are reversed. While younger children trick-or-treat, older youth graduate into harassing authority figures and children alike. Both may be seen as role reversals since harassing youth is a vicarious way to challenge the authority of the adult-sanctioned trick-or-treating which they disrupt by scaring trick-or-treaters and stealing their candy. They also target authority figures directly by toilet papering and egging their houses or stealing Halloween decorations or jack-o-lanterns from porches and smashing them in the streets. Folklorist Jack Santino notes that many of these

¹³ Marilyn Jorgensen, "Teases and Pranks." *Children's Folklore: A Sourcebook*. ed. Brian Sutton-Smith, Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson. Felicia R. McMahon (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999), 213-224.

¹⁴ Linda S. Watts, ed., "April Fool's Day." *The Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Fact On File Inc., 2007), 21-22.; Jack Santino, *All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 96-101, 175.

activities are age specific, and the pranksters nearly always target those in other groups, showing a somewhat adversarial aspect to Halloween pranks.¹⁵

Alan Dundes studied pranks during April Fools' Day, Halloween, and "traditional hazing or initiation ceremonies" as well as wedding Charivaris where newlyweds are harassed and prevented from consummating their marriage by the banging of loud pots outside their home until candy or some other gift is supplied. Dundes identified the essential roles in a prank or practical joke as a prankster, "a gullible dupe," and often an audience to both "enjoy the prank" and "assist with the eventual humiliation of the victim." For Dundes, the structure of the prank included first a "deceit... proposed by the prankster," a gullible victim who acts based on the deceit, and finally a revelation of the deceit. This he compared with Arnold van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage which involve, "separation, transition, and incorporation" back into society with a new status. Because many pranks are played on "individuals who are placed in some kind of new situation or status" like new people in the neighborhood, newlyweds, fraternity and sorority initiates, or new kids at summer camp or boarding schools, Dundes argued that pranks can be seen as miniature rites of passage, ushering these outsiders into incorporation with the local group. Toilet papering a house can certainly be seen as separating those who live there from their community. It illustrates that quite forcefully by creating chaos and disorder which disrupts the usual order and tidiness of the suburban homes around them.¹⁶

Simon Bronner has detailed some of the pranking behavior of college students in *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* and *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life*. Many of the pranks fall under the subset of "hazing ritual" often perpetrated on freshmen by sophomores. Colleges seemed to allow the retaliation freshmen periodically sought on their sophomore tormenters in the form of "rushes and

¹⁵ Jack Santino, *All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life*, 159-161.

¹⁶ Alan Dundes, "April Fool and April Fish: Towards a Theory of Ritual Pranks" *Etnofoor* 1 (1988), 4-14.

scraps” where they would come to blows. Fraternities would often attempt “ritual pollution” of each other through toilet papering or mooning rival houses. Finally, officials seemed to tolerate toilet papering and other pranks during Halloween and football victories. While I argue that toilet papering among Mormons is largely a positive activity, the youth living in the MCR are also living in America, and they are familiar with the ability of TP to pollute a house and express anger or derision. In these cases, however, usually more than just toilet papering is required. Those wishing to toilet paper with malicious intent may need to include eggs thrown at the house, forks stuck in the lawn, or garbage strewn across the lawn. While these were present in toilet papering in the MCR, most prankers I spoke to avoided them as “going too far.”¹⁷

In *Piled Higher and Deeper* Bronner argues that Halloween pranks were tolerated because it was seen as a release for students studying for exams. Other pranks college students pulled included tormenting faculty by placing incongruous items or animals around campus. For instance, students smuggled cows or pigs into classrooms, disassembled and reassembled wagons in inconvenient places, installed working phones or houses on towers, set up privies in the quadrangle or even moved all the dining hall tables and chairs into the quadrangle. Other pranks included painting or otherwise decorating revered statues with sunglasses, hats and even lingerie. While toilet papering in the MCR was connected more with the weekend and summer than any holiday, toilet paper streaming from trees, woven into bushes, wrapped around cars and stuffed in mailboxes was certainly incongruous. The incongruity is also a reversal. Toilet paper, usually reserved for one of, if not the, most private room in a house where even family members find

¹⁷ Simon J. Bronner, *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 114, 118, 119, 160, 166, 192, 224.; Michael B. Ward. *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context*. (M.A. Thesis Utah State University, 2003), 58.

privacy within the privacy of their own home, was suddenly made brazenly public. So in some ways, it was not only a pollution, but a violation and exposure of the home and those within it.¹⁸

Bronner further argues that pranks are a way for groups of strangers thrown together to socialize: “Under the protective frame of play, pranks [] focus on the fear of being alone, of entrapment, and confusion.” To do so, students will “pollut[e] another’s clean space, bring[] disorder . . . , and disrupt routine.” Similar to pranks against teachers and adults, students will move furniture, short sheet beds, set up cans of water to fall when a door opens, smoking students in their rooms, or jamming pennies in doors to “lock” someone in their room. Many pranks, particularly among men, take on “scatological and sexual themes,” such as mooning, stealing underwear, or giving wedgies to people sleeping in their underwear, or pantsing and exposing their underwear when walking around campus. Other scatological pranks centered around the bathroom such as “covering toilets with plastic wrap, filling toilets with gelatin, coating black toilet seats with shoe polish, covering other toilets with petroleum jelly or shaving cream” or sneaking a cat that has been given laxatives into someone’s car or room. Other hazing pranks involved throwing pledges in water or leading them to rural areas and scaring them with shot gun blasts and fake injuries. Certainly there is a strong scatological element to many of these pranks, and many of them seem connected with Greek life on campus.¹⁹

The initiation pranks seen in Greek life is also seen among other groups. In *On My Honor* Jay Mechling describes some pranks that a group of Boy Scouts played. One was called “Atomic Sit-Ups.” It involves blindfolding an unknowing scout and tricking him into doing a sit up right into another scout’s bare bottom. Mechling, echoing Dundes, sees this, and other pranks, as a test, a “part of the initiation into the group,” and that “‘taking the joke’ shows deference to the group

¹⁸ Simon J. Bronner, *Piled Higher and Deeper: The Folklore of Student Life* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, Inc., 1995), 89, 114-117.

¹⁹ Simon J. Bronner, *Piled Higher and Deeper*, 117-120.

and bonds the victim to the group.” It also, Mechling continues, maintains the group hierarchy as long as all members of the group accept the “play frame” of pranks that indicate a deep trust between the boys. This deep trust and acceptance into a community was true of toilet papering. It was a way to test whether someone has a good sense of humor, or really a mark that the prankers believe they do have a good sense of humor since TPing is often seen as a form of social prestige and inclusion in the MCR.²⁰

Folklorist Bill Ellis describes one of the most famous camp pranks, the snipe hunt. In it, uninitiated campers are told how to “lure snipe(s) to their bags.... Only after... enduring an eternity of bag holding, flashlight waving, and clucking, do [they] realize” a joke has been played on them. Similarly, TPing forces the prankee to endure the cleaning up they will be forced into by their parents the next morning. A common rule among TPerers was to target only those houses with youth who could clean it up. So not only was there a public branding, but the prankee was now obligated to clean up the mess, restore the order out of the chaos the pranksters created.²¹

Folklorist William A. Wilson describes the pranks played to initiate “greenie” missionaries, newly arrived to the mission field. While the first folklore he may encounter will be “directed against him,” Wilson maintains that its purpose is to “create an esprit de corps, a sense of solidarity among themselves.” Thus a new missionary in Norway was sat down with a light shown on him and “interrogated” on his moral life before his mission. After admitting to kissing a girl, the older missionaries convinced him that he would be a junior companion his entire mission. In London new missionaries were told to save their bus tickets for a “halfpenny rebate per ticket.” After saving drawers full of them, even ironing them, they realize they are actually useless. Other pranks involve church members posing as a “musically inclined” investigator” and

²⁰ Jay Mechling, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 107-108.

²¹ Bill Ellis, “The Camp Mock-Ordeal: Theater as Life,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 94 (Oct-Dec 1981): 488.

telling him to “sing him the discussions” which the greenie dutifully did, much to their delight. While these types of pranks are never called hazing, they are, Wilson argues, “initiation rituals,” for missionaries to “develop camaraderie and a sense of community... in a common struggle against an alien world.” The greenies are made first to feel dumb or “humble” and then, through shared laughter much like that described in the camp pranks, become members of the group. In a way, especially when they are done to friends or “crushes,” TPing is able to do the same for Mormon youth, and, as the initiation pranks played on missionaries often required members to help them, TPerers relied on the good humor of parents or other adults who must either have their TP stolen by their own children, or have it strewn across the yard by someone else’s.²²

Toilet Papering in the MCR

While I have tried to outline the distinctive features of toilet papering among Mormon youth, there is variation in every group. As I describe the prevalent features, I will try to note exceptions and how they might be explained. For instance, most people I spoke to had been involved with toilet papering either as TPer or TP-ee and most had fond feelings for the practice, but there were certainly those who saw it as deviant and had wanted nothing to do with it even as teenagers. On the whole, however, it was seen as a much more positive, commonplace, and socially acceptable behavior than it seems to be regarded in other areas of the United States and among other folkgroups.

It was common for an informant to mention “having nothing to do” as the backdrop to toilet papering. This is, of course, only a partial explanation because why, of all the options available, do Mormon youth in the West choose to go toilet papering when they have nothing to

²² William A. Wilson, *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, ed., Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 208-210.

do. Certainly it can be fun and adventurous, and toilet paper is relatively easy to get and relatively well suited for decorating houses and trees with. Other informants reported planning these pranks or having an ongoing plan to toilet paper nearly every weekend, and still others Tped as part of a long tradition they felt compelled to continue.

Toilet papering in the MCR was not associated exclusively with April Fools Day, Halloween, Homecoming, or big football games as it seems to be in other areas of the United States. It is more closely related to the weekend, the summer, and nighttime. In other words, there were a lot more acceptable times to go TPing among Mormons than most other folkgroups in America. It was also more associated with elementary, middle, or high school rather than college.

TPing is primarily a youth activity although it also involves adults. One informant stated “I was in sixth grade when my mom took me toilet-papering for the first time.” Since then, she has gone so many times, she has lost count. While parents taking their children toilet papering was not the norm, the fact that it happens at all is a stark difference from TPing outside the MCR. Another informant told me in an interview on Jan 3, 2015 that there was plenty of adult support for toilet papering in her small, rural community in Idaho. There was even a local police officer who advised youth on best practices when toilet papering. This advice would range from where there were few lights and low probability of getting caught (presumably by the parents since it is doubtful the police was going to stop them) to good roll-throwing techniques. She also mentioned mothers that would drive their daughter and her friends to the target house. This kind of parental involvement was seen as necessary in small farming communities where the children may not have had their driver’s licenses or access to a car. Tyler Ellison recounted how, while toilet papering, he and his friends had seen lights flashing, stuffed their toilet paper into their shirts, and run off into the backyards. Their friend who was driving and still had hundreds of TP rolls in his truck couldn’t make a getaway; however, the cop merely warned them about running a stop sign

they had run on their way to the house and simply asked them what they were doing, told them to “be careful driving,” and left them to finish TPing the house.²³

While these examples may sound like parents are aiding and abetting their delinquent children, one family went even further. An informant who grew up in Montana told me on January 17, 2015 that a group of boys toilet papered a young couple in their ward who had specifically invited them to do so in order that the boys could experience the excitement of toilet-papering without the fear of having the police called on them. This kind of mock fear or excitement for excitement’s sake was common. In another interview on January 6, 2015 a woman from Idaho told of an alternative prank called “polka dotting” where girls would cut out and tape polka dots of various colors all over someone’s garage door. Usually they would target friends and neighbors. She mentioned that this prank was easier to clean up than toilet paper but also mentioned getting caught as an exciting part of the activity. She and her girlfriends were polka dotting a boy whose older brother came out and chased them off, not that they were doing anything bad, but everyone seemed to want to maintain the play frame of the prank that stipulated they were doing something bad even though polka dotting is hardly even nominally transgressive.

There were also cases of parents who were not told and who did not approve. Brittany Goodsell toilet papered an “ornery” neighbor who they thought they could gain some notoriety if they TPed his house. Before they could finish, he appeared with a shotgun, fired it into the air, and took aim as they “took off down the street as fast as we could.” Brittany and her sister reminisced about this story while home from college on a visit. Their mother was present and appalled at their behavior, telling them it would have been their own fault if they had gotten shot. Their mother’s disapproval is belied by the fact that the sisters are comfortable sharing this story

²³ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Sharley Thayne. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.; See also Michael B. Ward. *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context*. (M.A. Thesis Utah State University, 2003), 64.

in front of their mother. This shows how acceptable toilet papering is and how little taboo it has among even those who disapprove of it.²⁴

Hiding TPing from parents may occasionally have been necessary, but it may also merely have heightened the fun by reifying the play frame that this was forbidden behavior despite its widespread and tacit acceptance. Shelly Michaelson mentioned “it was exciting to sneak around in the dark, against our parent’s wishes, breaking the law, and risking being caught.” Another reason may have been that, as Kara Singleton noted, they needed to steal the toilet paper they needed from their parents. Collecting the toilet paper was an ongoing project for them, and when she and her friends had collected enough, they planned a slumber party “at a friend’s house whose parents were overly relaxed,” which ended up being “every other week in the summer.” Again, even when hiding TPing from some parents, it is obvious the practice relied on the presence of adults who permitted it. In Kara’s account, her and her friends were caught by the police and taken home, but since the mother at the slumber party was “overly relaxed,” “they were not punished further.”²⁵

Another testament to TPing’s acceptability is how many people did get caught and how few were punished. In an interview on March 8, 2015, one informant told me about a night where he and his friends were apprehended no less than three times. He and some friend’s first toilet papered one of the youth leaders in their ward, but a dog alerted the leader who “came out and laughingly gave us our toilet paper rolls and told us to find someone else to toilet paper.” They then proceeded to a friend’s house where, after doing some toilet papering, were yelled at through a window to stop which drove them to the third house. Their driver assured them he knew the

²⁴ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Brittny Goodsell. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah. See also FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Shelly Michaelson. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

²⁵ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Shelly Michaelson. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah; and FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Kara Singleton. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

perfect place to toilet paper. This house they toilet papered “amazingly,” with “a stunning 3D effect that only an experienced toilet paperer could appreciate.” Sadly, before they could make their getaway, a car pulled up and someone started yelling at them. He and his friends scattered, but the person in the car caught up to them, told them that two old people lived there and their son was away. Feeling guilty, they went back and cleaned up all the toilet paper job and finally “gave up on that night,” but not on toilet papering.

As seen in many of these examples, toilet papering was most often done in homosocial groups, who mainly targeted romantic interests, or crushes. An informant who grew up north of Salt Lake City, Utah, affirmed that although he had only toilet papered a couple of times it was “always with his buddies and always girls they had crushes on.” However, just as toilet papering crushes was common, so was it common to TP people who had just broken up with a friend as Kara and her friends did the night at the sleepover when the cops caught them. Kara also mentioned that when their friends were not together toilet papering someone else, they were often toilet papering each other. Shelly Michaelson described her group of friend’s toilet papering each other in turn much like gangs with a member of one group getting toilet papered which called for someone in the opposing group to get toilet papered the next weekend in retaliation. While this may begin to sound more combative, this combat was still good-natured and a sign of friendship or community since, as Shelly wrote, they never toilet papered strangers. Toilet papering was a sign of inclusion in the group. Rather than being seen as antisocial, it was a way to play with delinquency. While technically they were breaking the law and curfew, the tacit acceptance of parents and police seem to recognize to some degree that the behavior is just playing with being bad more than engaging in truly violent, disruptive, dangerous, or damaging behavior.²⁶

²⁶ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Kara Singleton. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

At times this widespread acceptance of toilet papering got in the way of the play frame, thus creating a tense atmosphere. Another example from an informant who was living in Orem, Utah at the time mentioned “a light job on a guy we flirted with at school” and who, as they were finishing, “came outside and chatted with [them].” Still, the self-proclaimed “goody two-shoes” mentioned that she had “felt guilty” and “terrified” the first time she had gone toilet papering with some friends. However, despite that guilt and terror, her decision to stop toilet papering was not due to a bad experience toilet papering but came from trying to get back into her own home after toilet papering. Her father had locked the doors, so she had knocked on the window where he was reading. Her father “went into fight or flight mode and literally tore down the blinds,” and looked ready to kill before he realized who it was. When he let her in, he did not censure her for toilet papering. It was simply the fear of getting back in her house that kept her away from clandestine activities at night.

Because TPing was a way to “show... interest in” whoever they were targeting, one distinctive, if not universal, feature of toilet papering in the MCR was to include the name of the person they were TPing. Likely due to large families, the prankers wanted their target to know they were singled out for attention. Sometimes the name would be spelled out in toilet paper, sometimes written in chalk inside body outlines. In one case, the toilet paperer wrote out “Aloha” in leis on the front lawn. It was an inside joke between the toilet paperer and the target, included so that the girl he was toilet papering would know who it was from.²⁷

Knowing that you are the one getting TPed is important because it confers prestige. Shelly Michaelson mentioned that TPing was common among the popular or semi popular kids in school, and since it was a way to show interest in someone, it was a prestigious thing to have

²⁷ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Shelly Michaelson. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.; Michael B. Ward. *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context* (M.A. Thesis Utah State University, 2003), 59.

happen. Barbara Lloyd shared an experience when her daughter, an early teen, had had some friends over for a sleep over. When they awoke, they found that they had been toilet papered. Later her daughter confessed to having done it herself in order to look like “one of the ‘cool’ kids.” Another informant who hated getting TPed in High School admitted to feeling a bit jealous when she saw other people had been toilet papered. This wide recognition of the social value of being toilet papered indicates that the youth understood this as a “do-it-yourself ritual of integration,” where youth humiliate and prank each other and are willing to be humiliated and pranked to show their willingness to be members of a group. Moffatt describes a similar but much more overtly sexual practice among the co-eds at Rutgers University in New Jersey in their yearly Secret Santa tradition. Secret Santa may sound innocent enough, but it involved choosing a partner of the opposite sex to whom you gave gifts throughout the week before the floor’s Christmas party. However, the presents came with challenges that forced students out of their comfort zones and into doing inappropriate things in inappropriate places such as one shy young man who had to take a shower in the girl’s shower while singing loudly, “I’m a Virgin,” or the girl who had to do a mock presentation of the university’s contraception presentation. Moffatt concluded that while the Santas tried their best to expose and play on the insecurities of their counterparts, the embarrassment was taken in good humor and it did indeed tighten the bonds of community as toilet papering did among Mormon youth. At the very least, that is certainly the aim for many who toilet papered their friends and crushes.²⁸

Although less common, TPing was also a way to show anger. Sharley Thayne mentioned that they would “either toilet paper someone they like or someone they dislike strongly.” Tyler Ellison mentioned getting toilet papered and having someone pee on his Jeep. Another informant told me about a time when some kids toilet papered his house, stole some figures from a nativity

²⁸ Michael Moffatt, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 104-109.

scene and spray painted swastikas on his house. The viciousness of the latter one is striking compared to so many of the benign examples, but toilet papering could move into a serious and malicious activity. Two informants shared experiences of toilet papering after a break up. In both cases, one male and one female, the person who had been dumped and a group of their friends targeted the person who had done the dumping. The male informant emphasized using 100 rolls to toilet paper the girl who had dumped his friend while the girl and her friends ended up getting caught by the police.²⁹

If toilet papering could mean someone was interested in you and that someone was mad at you, however, how does one tell the difference? And how can one action mean opposite things without any apparent confusion within the same folk group? Some people put the name of the person being toilet papered and some put inside jokes to hint or flat out say who did it, but recognizing whether it is a form of flattery or an expression of anger seems to rely on context. For instance if you were toilet papered after dumping a boy or girlfriend, chances are it was them and their friends. Some pranksters used this to their advantage and purposely misled who was toilet papering whom to create an even greater prank. Benton Shober and his friends toilet papered their friend's girlfriend without him knowing but in a way to indicate it was him. They cut out hearts, wrote "I love you" on them, baked some cupcakes, and covered them with Crisco instead of frosting. This prank created a strain in his friend's relationship because of the Crisco topped cupcakes edging it from a fun prank to a more malicious one. This type of prank sounds similar to the humiliation and feminization (in Mormon culture it is much more common for a girl to bake cupcakes for her boyfriend) Clover Williams associated with Bachelor parties. Thus this was a

²⁹ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Shaley Thayne. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.; FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Kara Singleton. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

way for Kelsey's friends to prank Kelsey and challenge the relationship that was taking him away from their group.³⁰

Another explanation lies in the fact that while toilet papering crushes seems most prevalent in the MCR, adolescents are aware of other meanings of toilet papering that are associated with shaming or polluting and bringing disorder to someone's life who, through breaking up with them or beating them in an athletic contest, has brought shame or disorder to the toilet paperer's life or lives. Also, as with the case of authority figures we will examine next, it could be a way to overturn power structures and redress the hurt and vulnerability of being dumped.

Authority figures were also targeted. Sharley Thayne remembers toilet papering a particularly hard, but also beloved, High School teacher. She and her friends toilet papered his house so many times, it became boring until he bought a dog which, "rose the challenge to a whole other level," thus encouraging more toilet papering. After more toilet papering, the dog became familiar with them and stopped barking, so again there was no challenge or fun, and it got boring. Finally, the teacher would simply wait outside his house for the inevitable "with a pitcher of water or something to combat our attacks." Now that they've grown up and moved away, the teacher is getting toilet papered less but has mentioned that he is eager to have his children toilet paper the houses of the girls who have toilet papered him so many times. While an outsider may not describe this relentless and persistent targeting of one victim as affectionate and light-hearted, combative rhetoric aside, for both perpetrators and victims within this play frame, it seems a largely positive and pleasant experience.³¹

³⁰ Clover Nolan Williams, "The Bachelor's Transgression: Identity and Difference in the Bachelor Party," *The Journal of American Folklore* 107 (1994): 106-120.

³¹ FOLK COLL 8a: USU: Group 6 Sharley Thayne. Special Collections and Archives, Merrill-Crazier Library. Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

As a participant of this activity myself. I remember one night the young men of my ward had planned to camp up Rock Canyon, but on getting out of the cars and feeling how cold it was in the canyon, turned around and set up our gear in our leader's back yard. Once that was done we had a night to kill and ended up catching a movie, and then deciding to toilet paper our ward bishop. We had the perfect alibi, so we thought our plan was fool proof. We bought a large box of toilet paper, enough for the Bishop and his two counsellors. Late at night, we toilet papered all three although towards the end we had to keep ducking for cover when some people started driving by, noticing something suspicious. Well, we knew the neighborhood well and ran behind houses back to our tents and sleeping bags. The next morning we toured the neighborhood, admiring our handiwork, and feeling we had accomplished something great. None of us had any ill will for the leaders of the ward, but we still enjoyed the pleasure of reversing that power structure if just for a night. And while there was some hiding from some adults, we never could have accomplished it without the help of our adult leader at the time.

Sometimes no one was necessarily the target. Jennifer related how she, her brother, and his friend inadvertently ignited a cheerleader toilet papering war between the local rival high schools. Her brother and his best friend, Sam who went to the rival high school, were having a sleep over when Jennifer and her brother decided to "introduce" Sam to toilet papering. Their parents had recently bought "3 or 4... packs containing 48 double sized rolls of TP," so they grabbed two packs, stashed one, and picked a good house. Their rules, commonly recognized if not always articulated, for choosing a target included houses without dogs, people who slept soundly, were "not notoriously ornery old codgers," had kids who could clean up the mess the next day, and with good "trees, shrubbery or other toilet-paper-able landscaping." One of the houses that fit the bill was the home of a varsity cheerleader. As they taught Sam the ropes on this house, they decided to spell out a big THS on the driveway to point blame on the rival school. Soon they heard a noise, so Jennifer and her brother ran away while Sam, who was working on

the cars, rolled underneath a van. The varsity cheerleader and her brothers came out, saw the THS, some unused TP, and jumped in another car to go get some revenge. They heard from Sam later that the cheerleaders kept TPing and getting TPeD throughout the summer. That night, undaunted, the trio went on to toilet paper “four more houses.” They even returned to the cheerleader’s house only to find everything cleaned up, so they redid the THS before returning home and using their last few rolls on their own house since, over the course of the night, they had succeeded in toilet papering nearly every other house with kids their age. The next day in Church, despite talk about the TPing spree, Jennifer and her brother were able to honestly say they had been toilet papered too.

Despite Jennifer inadvertently setting off a rivalry between cheerleading squads, toilet papering has been a tradition that bonds rivals. Tyler Ellison recounted how the Boys and Girls Federations in his Idaho Falls High School had a tradition of toilet papering each other’s leaders. Whenever a new presidency was chosen, the members of that presidency would toilet paper the other’s presidency and vice versa. While this may sound like a classic rivalry, Tyler’s account shows that there is very little animosity in the activity. Tyler helped one year and one of the girls came out and told them to stop, but they just kept doing it. Whether they were caught or not, it was part of tradition, so they continued. At another house, the mother of the presidency member came out and, knowing one of the boys asked him what he was doing. The boy just told her to have her daughter clean it up in the morning and to go back to sleep, which she did. Tyler also mentioned toilet papering a certain girl three weeks in a row for the challenge it presented. The girl was a good friend, and doing it successively was a way to heighten the fun, the adventurousness, the adrenalin in a similar way that toilet papering around someone’s front door or windows would heighten the thrill because the chance of getting caught and/or recognized

increased. It was a daring way to increase the excitement and prove oneself more daring and skillful within your group of friends.³²

Anita from Queensland Australia shared a unique account of missionaries toilet papering her house in the 1990s. While she was young, her mother was sociable and they invited the missionaries over weekly and she would prank them which opened the door for them to respond. And they did. Not only did they toilet paper their house while they were on vacation, but they turned their light switches upside down, covered the toilet seats in plastic wrap, put garlic in the shower head, and covered the door handles in Australia's very own vegemite, making them slippery and staining their palms. Anita believes this was in retaliation for her mother putting garlic oil in one of the Elder's hair. Her mother retaliated in turn by putting fish in their car which, in the summer heat started reeking and the smell lingered for months. This looks like a symmetrical joking relationship, but distinctive in terms of the missionary pranks William Wilson has reported. This certainly does not represent the initiation pranks that Wilson found prevalent among missionaries, but they could still serve to help solidify the missionaries with the members of their ward. This can be important because as foreigners and missionaries, there are still many things that separate them from ward members, however, with many non-LDS around them who were apathetic or hostile towards them, expanding their circle of insiders beyond just their companionship or perhaps district could have been very comforting. Strengthening that relationship by proving it with pranks, especially ones associated with home, surely helped these young missionaries so far from home feel more a part of a larger community.

One American informant raised in Germany was introduced to toilet papering by his best friend and another Expat from the States, Peter. Jimmy and Peter toilet papered the mission home in Frankfurt, Germany. Mission homes are where the Mission President, his wife and family, and

³² Michael B. Ward, *Toilet Papering and Mailbox Vandalizing: A Matter of Context*. (M.A. Thesis Utah State University, 2003), 59, 61.

the Elders who help run the mission live. Mission presidents while not in most direct lines of authority for most members, are widely respected authority figures who preside over the church's missionary efforts in various geographic areas throughout the world, in this case Frankfurt and its surrounding areas. To their credit, they bought the TP themselves and "went to town" on the many trees and high walls around the property. They were not caught, but found out later that "the missionaries had to cancel their appointments to come in and help clean up." Jimmy felt so bad about it, that he ended up confessing to his bishop before going on his own mission a couple of years later. They also toilet papered General Authorities and other church employees. Once they tried bringing some German friends along, but the Germans were appalled at how wasteful it was and that they used something connected with defecation to prank authority figures.

Certainly toilet papering is far from the only prank connected with defecation. There is the classic prank of filling a paper bag with dog feces, putting it on someone's porch, lighting it on fire, and leaving after ringing the doorbell in the hopes that whoever comes will panic and stomp the fire out and thus cover their porch and their shoes or feet in feces. Folklorist Lauren Dundes records an example of pledges at an Indiana University fraternity who "were blindfolded and made to eat peanut-covered bananas floating in johns, and were for routine defecation forced to sit on the john backwards." Other fraternities used bananas or apples and toilets whether real or lined with plastic in similar hazing and pranks. Others, rather than being told they were consuming excrement were given oil and water as a laxative, "thus forcing them to defecate." Dundes argues that these and other hazing rituals are meant to infantilize and feminize the initiates much as it supposedly turns the young boys into mature young men. Clover Williams describes similarly cruel pranks attending bachelor parties including, on the very tame side, "toilet-paper bridal veils," a clear pollution of the feminine and marriage. Williams argues that

the pranks aimed at humiliating the friend is meant to feminize and expel him from the group of friends.³³

While these examples are using the same defecation-centered symbols of toilet papering, like many beyond the MCR, they are much harsher than most of what is common within the MCR. Or are they? The Germans aghast at the waste and the connection with bodily waste are right to be skeptical of toilet papering as a benevolent prank as I have argued. Is it simply the joy of the incongruity as Jimmy and many other TPer might argue or is there more to it? I believe the harsh connotations of the symbol are part of metacommunication that is going on. As Bateson argues, metacommunicative acts is a way to say “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote.” Mormon youth, in other words, must be aware of the befouling, polluting symbols most often associated with hazing they are using because using them denotes those very symbols and that hazing context. However, by employing a play frame using them does not denote what those symbols denote. In order for toilet papering to be *playful*, and thus artful and effective, for it to be a sign of affection, popularity, and even inclusion, the symbols used must be offensive and denote exclusion or else it is no longer play.³⁴

Moira Marsh argues that for pranks to be successful they must mix the benevolent and the malicious, noting that “practical jokes are in fun, but they are not all in fun.” The amusement comes from “some transgression that the jokers have framed as play,” and which they invite the audience to tolerate the violation of everyday values, in this case thrift and respect, temporarily.

³³ Lauren Dundes, “The Elephant Walk and Other Amazing Hazing: Male Fraternity Initiation through Infantilization and Feminization,” *Bloody Mary in the Mirror: Essays in Psychoanalytic Folkloristics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 95-121.; Clover Nolan Williams, “The Bachelor’s Transgression: Identity and Difference in the Bachelor Party” *The Journal of American Folklore* 107 (1994): 106-120.

³⁴ Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* eds., Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006): 317.

The fun comes from the joke skillfully and playfully poking at the boundaries of the community. TPing is a pointed violation in that it exploits the large families of Mormons who must stock up on toilet paper to then violate the order of the home; the tradition of respecting others, elders, and other people's property; and finally treads a line of broaching courtship and thus sex in a culture that sees such things as inappropriate for the youth pre- and adolescent youth.³⁵

Conclusions: TP and the Social Uses of Ambiguity

There was an interesting ambiguity in toilet papering for Mormons who have yet to agree on just how antisocial or acceptable this behavior was. Jimmy confessed toilet papering the mission home to his bishop years later, but he also toilet papered General Authorities and church employees numerous times. Another informant said she was too “goody-two-shoe” to go toilet papering while others perhaps excused the regressive nature of their behavior by abiding by a set of rules such as targeting houses with kids who could clean it up and avoiding more aggressive pranks such as forking and egging. Another informant, Beth, exemplified this ambiguity. She toilet papered her High School swim coach with the rest of the team at the behest of a popular and “good-looking senior boy,” who instigated the prank. The swim team did not like their coach who came from a rival school, was still in his twenties, did not seem to know what he was doing, and still lived with his parents. They started at 10 p.m. and got caught fairly soon into the job. Despite scattering and hiding behind cars, the coach had seen some faces and, recognizing them, called them out. Rather than being angry or reprimanding them, as Beth expected, he seemed happy to see them. Beth even mentioned that most of the team “were extremely serious students who had reputations for being clean cut, ‘good’ kids” who had probably never been toilet papering before.

³⁵ Moira Marsh, *Practically Joking* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015), 76-78.

Despite this feeling that this is fairly antisocial behavior, their victim, the prankee, is happy and pleasant about it.

This ambiguity is one reason why toilet papering was so prevalent. It allowed people to participate in a nominally transgressive behavior for a variety of reasons. People who liked being a bit rebellious, could go toilet papering. People who tried to be good but wanted to feel a bit of danger, adventure, or excitement could also go toilet papering. It lowered the perceived dangers of getting caught, but also raised the sense of danger and rebelliousness to make it a fun and exciting activity. Toilet papering was a safe way to be bad. It was a good way to feel like you were jumping over some boundaries without jumping over any serious ones. This may be why many parents and authority figures accepted, even welcomed, the activity. They may have also seen it as a measured release of the strict expectations on Mormons and their youth who live in America's more permissive culture. Mormon youth are frequently reminded of the gap between what their religion expects of them and what America expects of them in media as well as from injunctions from their parents and leaders to not follow "the world's" standards. Comparing the strict standards set for them while being regularly reminded of the permissiveness afforded many others can create tension. Allowing some leeway in these largely harmless activities youth engage in with their peer groups can function as a release of that tension. It allowed Molly Mormons and Peter Priesthoods to participate in activities usually reserved for the notorious pranking culture of college fraternities. That may also be a draw for youth to mimic the rites of the relatively grown-up world of college. Ultimately, these releases help keep Mormon youth within more important bounds. Bascom argues that these socially acceptable forms of release... tend to preserve the institutions from direct attack and change," by providing these sorts of measured releases.³⁶

³⁶ William R. Bascom, "The Four Functions of Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 67 (1954): 349.

Marilyn Jorgensen, in writing about phone pranks, discusses the importance of ambiguity for both pranks and adolescents. Jorgensen argues that without face to face communication there is ambiguity in the message as well as the identity of prankster. When people are toilet papered, how are they to interpret it? As a sign of affection or a sign of ritual polluting of someone in the family or the family as a whole? Or do they assume that it was just some bored kids out for kicks? All of these interpretations could be correct. Only sometimes do the prankers include clues as to how the act should be interpreted as when inside jokes are alluded to or a rival team is named although there does appear to be widespread reliance on good humor and being able to take a joke. Still, these messages are rarely sure and can be misinterpreted—which can be exploited for greater effect. Jorgensen goes on to argue that adolescence itself is an ambiguous period with adolescents “being neither child nor adult,” and that the phone pranks are a way for youth to play with speech, “demonstrate communicative competence, and gain a sense of personal power, especially within a peer group.” This interpretation matches in many ways the conclusions I made in my last chapter about the benefits of exposing oneself to certain amounts of fear and danger to demonstrate mastery over them. Further the peer groups involved in toilet papering were not merely prankster and victim: toilet papering occurs, as I have mentioned, mainly in homosocial peer groups. Among those groups, being willing to toilet paper; being skilled at it when you do, even daring in the manner in which you do it; being willing to help a friend woo a love interest, or a team member, classmate, or ward member bring an authority figure down a peg or two can all help establish a positive identity within and strengthen relationships among the prankster’s peer group.³⁷

The other main part of toilet papering’s durability and prevalence was its versatility. As we have seen, toilet papering has been a way to express affection and belonging, but also anger

³⁷ Marilyn Jorgensen, “A Social-Interactional Analysis of Phone Pranks,” *Western Folklore* 43 (1984): 115-116.

and hurt. It could both solidify important relationships and help redefine strained or broken relationships. It could be played on those in power in an asymmetrical way, or played on peers in symmetrical and reciprocal joking and/or combative relationships. This plasticity of toilet papering among Mormons in the MCR again allowed it to address a wide variety of needs and purposes. However, this elasticity of intention was countered, and softened even, by the assumption that it was a benevolent prank rather than a malicious one. It allowed even those who were truly acting out to do the equivalent of writing a nasty letter and mailing it without the receiver really knowing it was mailed.

Ultimately, toilet papering by Mormon adolescents showed an awareness of the cultural symbols being used and a careful, even cautious, crossing of widely agreed upon boundaries in order to rebel without really rebelling. Mormon youth have appropriated toilet papering as an act of ritual pollution for its connotations, but their practice of it is quite tame by comparison, and the wide social acceptance it enjoys makes the danger and adventure experienced largely a mental construct rather than based on actual danger as seen in the many youth caught who suffer little to no consequences, and even, at times, gain something by the “close call” that simply helps shore up the illusion of danger that helps keep it fun and exciting. Targeting not just their peers, but parents and authority figures, engaging in soft and transitory vandalism of public spaces, using toilet paper, doing the activity after dark and often while breaking curfew, and even engaging in petty theft from their families, Mormon youth engage in toilet papering because of the many cues it offers that they are, in fact, rebelling, when, in fact, they are “just playing.”

Chapter 5

Creative, Not Procreative, Dating among Mormon Youth and Singles

Halloween night the doorbell rings followed by running feet. Could it be young hooligans playing a prank? Coming to the door someone finds a cake decorated to look like a graveyard complete with tiny shovel, flowers, green frosting for grass, and a wooden headstone with the family's teenage boy's name impressed into the wood. The cake, an odd object straddling the line between threat and gift, is in fact a puzzle and an invitation to the Halloween dance at the local High School. The boy has now been officially asked to attend this event and must now decipher who has just asked him. Cutting into the cake reveals four small plastic coffins with more playfully ominous messages about the boy's "date with destiny," and other puns keeping with the holiday theme and the activity. Upon reading all four strips of paper, he puts the four strips together and can finally decipher the name of the girl who has just asked him to the dance. The boy is now expected to respond in kind with a similarly pun-filled and elaborate scenario or gift to express his agreement to attend the dance.

This scenario illustrates one aspect of creative dating in the Mormon cultural region which extends through Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and parts of California. Asking people out to planned high school and college dances with elaborate and pun-filled activities is only part of the unwritten rules which have developed in Mormon culture. Arising as a folk practice, it is difficult to pinpoint the emergence of creative dating, but "William A. Wilson theorized that in the late 1970s the opportunities for girls to ask guys on dates was increasing and that creative dating and especially creative invitations provided girls a comfortable way to function in what was traditionally seen as a male role." The creative asking seems to be more tied to official school

dances in high school and perhaps someone's freshman year at BYU or BYU-Idaho with largely LDS students. Unless someone was already asked, the custom is to respond in the affirmative and in a similarly creative way. Thus if someone wrote "Honey, comb yer hair, we're going to the slide" on a Honeycomb box, secreted their name within the box somehow and left it on their potential dates doorstep after ringing the doorbell, an appropriate response would be to write on a Kix box "It would be "Kix" and Giggles to go to Sophomore Slide with you." Some youth involve their intended date's friends and family to engineer bedroom doors surrounded by wax paper and filled with popcorn or packing peanuts for dramatic and inconvenient asking and responding that resemble pranks. These pranks, however, are the customary way to ask and answer on dates to official school dances, and not engaging in these pranks would be very disappointing to one's date.¹

What is Creative Dating?

While most Mormons, both old and young, in the MCR are familiar with and recognize the practice of creative dating, apropos of folklore there is no official definition or even term. I use the term "creative dating," but most informants would not recognize the term immediately despite recognizing the practice immediately. Most practitioners recognize creative dating as referring to both the elaborate and non-face-to-face invitations to dates usually associated with school dances and to creative dates which "play" with traditional date parameters usually with either unconventional activities or conventional activities given new or unusual twists. Ultimately what constitutes a creative date is subjective and depends on the people doing

¹ Meagan Brady, "Creative Dating: A Liminal Experience between Childhood and Adulthood." William A. Wilson Folklore Archives. BYU. 2005.; Kristi Bell Young, "Now That I've Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations," *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds., Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 114-122, 115.

the dating. Some practitioners may see an outdoor movie projected on the side of a building as still simply watching a movie while most would agree that running around Walmart shooting marshmallows at each other is radically different than traditional “dinner and a movie” dates. Because creative dating is about being innovative and novel in dating practices, there really are no standard creative dates although creative invitations do have a loose agreement that the response echo in some way the asking, but more important is that it employs a pun and involves some material object that can be found by the person or given to them by a third party. Still, none of these are set in stone as some get creative even with the conventions of creative dating and might use non-material performances in asking such as having their bishop call some boys in for a mock-serious interview only to ask them on behalf of the girls in the ward or staging an elaborate, surprise serenade to ask their date.

Creative dating is a variation of dating which itself is the practice of spending time with someone in whom one has romantic or sexual interest in. It is a way to have more casual relationships without the goal of marriage because the planning involves one’s friends and even family more than the date and are nearly always done in groups. There are few gender-based rules of creative dating and girls can ask boys just as readily as boys can ask girls. As youth age and return from missionary service, they begin to pair off and date more seriously. This causes creative invitations to all but disappear and creative dates to occur less frequently and certainly less notably. A seriously-dating couple may still engage in traditional dates in non-traditional settings such as a watching a movie after a campfire cookout, but the focus is less on the date and its conventions than it is about the date and courtship, thus it viewed less as a special way of dating and more part of the courtship process as they progress towards marriage.

I planned and went on many creative dates myself, but most of the examples I use come from student collections at BYU’s William A. Wilson Folklore Archive as well as from some personal interviews of current and past creative daters. While creative dating is a prevalent and

well-known activity throughout the MCR, few scholars have explored its cultural significance. The most notable exception is Kristi Bell Young's "Now That I've Kissed the Ground you Walk On," which argues that creative dating and invitations are a way for youth to establish one's identity as they participate in dating culture in a way that maintains their religious standards and which "keep[s] their dating relationships casual, fun, and on a teen rather than an adult level." Young's analysis stresses the importance of self-expression and how it functions as a release valve as well as a way to prepare youth with the confidence and creative habits they can carry into more serious relationships. I hope to add to Young's analysis by discussing the historical forces that caused creative dating to come about as well as go into more details about just how creative dating functions as a safety valve by displacing the focus from the date to family and friends.²

Young also includes a story about a girl who gets a friend to throw a pie in the face of her prospective date as part of her elaborate pumpkin-themed invitation. This and other examples should highlight how playful creative dating can be and how much it shares with pranking in the MCR. It shares other characteristics as well such as relying on and including family members, a high tolerance of (and even reliance on) embarrassing or uncomfortable situations that suggest group solidarity, and (quite ironically) its focus on gender segregation since most stories and effort is expended among friends and family rather than with the actual date. While the previous chapter on pranking dealt tangentially with Mormons and sex, creative dating takes the ambiguous and conflicting messages Mormon youth receive about how to relate to the opposite sex, and expresses them in ways that highlight the predicament and paradox of dating for Mormon youth. While Mormon youth are encouraged to date and the importance of family and

² Kristi Bell Young, "Now That I've Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations," *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds. Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 121.

marriage are often stressed, they are discouraged from many practices that dating leads to or from progressing too fast towards that goal of marriage and fully sexual relationships. A well-known cliché is that before a date a mother will remind her child to “remember who you are.” This indirect reminder for youth to not go too far in expressing affection is often mockingly mimicked by peers. It also shows how the message for youth can be have fun, but not too much, and only “the right kind.” Furthermore, despite how unusual and oddball it can look, creative dating is a way for Mormon youth to synthesize American and Mormon values.

Creative dating refers to creative, zany, purposefully awkward or uncomfortable dates that Mormon youth engage in as well as the zany and elaborate invitations given mainly for established dances in High School and College. While the term creative dating is not necessarily an emic term, most Mormon youth in Idaho, Utah, and Nevada are familiar with the efforts to go on preplanned, fun, inexpensive group dates that attempt something out of the ordinary in terms of setting, experience, or tradition. These are not young couples going out to dinner and a movie—unless the dinner is on a highway median or the movie is in a corn field or abandoned building. The creativity involved in planning and executing these elaborate dates runs the gamut from standard dates in odd locations such as watching “Children of the Corn” in the middle of a corn field to planning a pirate journey to find hidden treasure with a pre-planned ninja attack. The rules are not written down anywhere on what is or is not creative, and no one tells these youth to begin these dating practices or when to stop; however, youth from the ages of 16 to 20 or 21 are those usually involved in this tradition. After about the freshman or sophomore year of college, engaging in food fights or running around Walmart with marshmallow guns is either too childish, finally, or the majority of young men who went on missions from 18-20 return thinking more seriously of matrimony than the fun, zany but unserious dates they used to go on.³

³ Lara Beckstead, “Creative Dating,” William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, BYU, 2000.; Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture,” William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, BYU, 2003.

College-aged adults playing pirate with mock ninja attacks as a form of romantic interaction may appear just as bizarre outside the Mormon culture as within. And yet, to the participants it seems natural, fun, and, like many aspects of culture, just how things are done. That dating, getting to know someone, and finding a spouse, should involve such childish antics may seem far-fetched. How does such bizarre behavior come to be, and how does a culture which values family and marriage so highly produce such a peculiar form of interacting with members of the opposite sex? Before delving into the peculiarities of Mormon dating practices, I will situate dating in its cultural and historical context in America.

From Courtship to Hooking Up: Dating in America

Dating in the early twenty-first century fulfills many cultural functions for American youth: providing companionship, entertainment, and recreation, as a mode of self-discovery and learning one's own strengths and weaknesses, a way to teach the importance of sharing, as a way to experience love and sexual activity in "mutually acceptable limits." Among all the functions dating serves in America, Jeffrey Scott Turner lists dating as a process of finding a marriage partner last of all. This certainly reflects the consensus of modern dating which, as an activity distinct from courtship, involves "hanging out," and "hooking up," and recognizes many benefits to engaging in romantic relationships beyond the search for a spouse.⁴

Dating, the practices surrounding the formation of romantic relationships, has transformed dramatically in America during the twentieth century. In *From the Front Porch to the Back Seat*, Beth Bailey outlines this transformation from the private, household act of courtship, common in America until the 1920s, through the more public setting of dating, which

⁴Jeffrey S. Turner, *Dating and Sexuality in America: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2003).

prevailed until around 1965, to the current culture of “hooking up,” or noncommittal sexual encounters. For Bailey these differing systems reveal different values and conventions, or “presumptions about how the world works, and in ideas about the proper relations between men and women.” While hook up culture is typified by noncommittal sexual activity, it also includes “hanging out” or non-sexual group socializing between the sexes which is also prevalent in Mormon culture and bemoaned by church leaders.⁵

Just as there are fundamentally different ideas about the proper relation between men and women, there are some fundamental differences between courtship and dating. Courtship was a non-economic activity conducted within the privacy of the home and family, with only limited alone time, and with the intent to find a marriage partner. Men called at young women’s houses to talk, meet her parents and family members, enjoy some refreshments and possibly listen to her play piano. This system emphasized conventions, formality, and the importance of acceptance by the entire family. However, by 1920 changes in transportation, communication, and the economy moved dating from the home to the marketplace. Cars and subway systems, together with some disposable income, allowed singles to escape their family’s scrutiny to more public, and more anonymous, scenes where they could engage in unsupervised dating. One such place for popularizing of this new “dating” culture was Coney Island.⁶

Dating was also influenced by the economy and pioneered by poor urban singles who could not afford a place to “call” or be “called on” in the cramped living arrangements of the city anymore than they could afford a piano or the other traditional trappings of courtship culture.

⁵ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).; for an example of church leaders speaking against hanging out see Dallin H. Oaks, “Dating versus Hanging Out,” *Ensign* (2006), <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2006/06/dating-versus-hanging-out?lang=eng>.

⁶ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); The role Coney Island played as a public place away from families young people could escape to on “dates” is discussed in John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Millions* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

This led to “going out,” meaning into the marketplace. Bailey sees dating as operating primarily in economic terms. So while money was important with courtship, “in the dating system money entered directly into the relationship between a man and a woman as the symbolic currency of exchange in even casual dating.” With this change came a change in the reasons and purposes for dating. While the purpose of courtship was to find a marriage partner, dating could be a much less farsighted event focused on fun, excitement, and self-exploration. Dating, in other words, could be an end in itself without an inherent view towards matrimony.

Bailey is of course writing about these changes as someone who lived in a coed dorm—common in American universities now—during her college experience. Indicative of changing sexual mores, the money-based dating system is a thing of the past and has been replaced, in Bailey’s analysis, with sex as the new currency of exchange in American relationships since the 1970s. Also since the 1970s, marriage rates have gone down, and co-habitation has become increasingly common. In 2000 “nearly half of all couples who got married for the first time had lived together first.” While Beth Baily and others remind us that pre-marital sex has not risen as dramatically as many may fear, she and other scholars argue that the context has changed. Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker argue that one of those big changes is that pre-marital sex happens increasingly between couples who will not eventually marry. While I have already noted the rise of cohabitation, so too is pre-marital sex including hook ups, one night-stands, sex in longer term but non-marital relationships occur more and more frequently. While marriage is still connected with procreation, sex is no longer tied to either marriage or procreation most sexual relations between two consenting adults, is widely accepted.⁷

⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History* (New York: Viking, 2005), 263-280.; Alexis Mandell, “Marriage” *Encyclopedia of American Studies* ed., Simon J. Bronner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 77.; Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-3.

For Bailey these changes have fostered greater freedom and uncertainty. The rules and conventions of dating, hooking up, and hanging out are less clear. Who calls who in this new relationship? The man-as-provider model has been outdated. Who pays now that the cultural assumption is no longer he works and she doesn't, but may in many instances be reversed, or, more likely, a situation where both parties are working and have access to disposable income? How should this new relationship be defined? Bailey's assumption that these romantic relationships are based on sex may give us a new model but one that becomes problematic for dating practices among some conservative religious groups in America. Some modern evangelical courtship practices eschew physical contact of any kind before marriage while Mormons allow kissing and hand holding but counsel their youth against "any sexual relations before marriage."⁸

In a pamphlet spread to Mormon youth titled "For the Strength of Youth," church leaders counsel unmarried Mormons to not "do anything to arouse the powerful emotions that must be expressed only in marriage. Do not participate in passionate kissing, lie on top of another person, or touch the private, sacred parts of another person's body, with or without clothing. Do not allow anyone to do that with you. Do not arouse those emotions within your own body." An earlier version, circulated in the 1990s was more explicit in naming the activities to be avoided "including all sexual relations before marriage, petting, sex perversion (such as homosexuality, rape, and incest), masturbation, or preoccupation with sex in thought, speech, or action." Clearly Mormon youth interested in maintaining their religious standards have had to break with mainstream American dating practices which (aside from rape and incest) are the very modes of currency in romantic relationships. The fact that Utah, with the highest concentration of Mormons

⁸ Tracy A. Lambert, Arnold S. Kahn, and Kevin J. Apple, "Pluralistic Ignorance and Hooking Up," *The Journal of Sex Research* 40 (2003): 129-133.; For the conventions of evangelical courtship see Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Oregon: Multnomah, 2003); and <http://www.beforethekiss.com/>; "Sexual Purity," *For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God*, (2001), 26, December 6, 2010, <https://lds.org/manual/for-the-strength-of-youth-fulfilling-our-duty-to-god/sexual-purity?lang=eng>.

in the United States, had the highest fertility rate and lowest unwed mother and teen mother rates indicates that many Mormon youth have chosen to live by the church's guidelines regarding sex.⁹

Deciding to live by certain guidelines is one thing, the consequences of that decision played out in a complex cultural environment is another. Mormons living in America in many ways share a dual citizenship comparable by some scholars to that of the children of immigrants. Their two cultures clash and Mormon doctrine is in many ways ambivalent in directing believers how to respond to those differences. A common saying among leaders and laypeople alike is "to be in the world but not of the world." This epitomizes both the felt and preached need of members to be examples to non-Mormons, similar to the city set on a hill mentioned in the beatitudes, and their felt and preached need to stand apart and be separate for basically the same reason.¹⁰

This paradoxical stance of election requires and implies both exile and integration. In that as well Mormons have been compared with our Puritan forebears. However, the Mormon scholar Terryl L. Givens sees some distinct differences between the Mormons and the Puritans. While both "gathered to a place of physical refuge, initiated a communal society," initiated utopian and millennialist beliefs, "declared themselves chosen people," and marked that chosen-ness with unique beliefs and practices, the Mormon experience was conducted within the context of hostile fellow citizens rather than an isolated wilderness refuge. These hostilities erupted into bloodshed

⁹ See previous note for the sexual purity standards given Mormon youth today, and "For the Strength of Youth." Light Planet, December 6, 2010, http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/youth/strength_youth.html.; Deborah Bulkeley, "Utah's Birthrate is Tops," *Deseret News*, 2005, last accessed December 6, 2010, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/635152902/Utahs-birthrate-is-tops.html>.

¹⁰ For a discussion of a teacher using the Mormon experience with second generation immigrant children to teach tolerance see, Kevin Kolkmeier, "Teaching *Under the Banner of Heaven*: Testing the Limits of Tolerance in America," *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds., (Logan Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010), 62-86.; For an example see L. Tom Perry, "In the World," *April 1988 General Conference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), last accessed December 6, 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1988/04/in-the-world?lang=eng>.

and threatened extermination. These threats helped transform an embattled self-conception within the founding prophet Joseph Smith to permeate the entire Mormon population.¹¹

The competing urges to resist and assimilate into wider American culture are not new dynamics for Mormons. In the late 1800s Mormons reacted against the “things of this world” brought by the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. This spurred a consumerist rejection of Eastern and European goods by setting up cooperatives and counseling people to buy locally produced goods. Consumerism prevailed, but the tensions brought out by the influx of consumer goods continue on.¹²

Perhaps the most flammable issue dealing with resistance and assimilation is polygamy. The Republican Party platform in 1856 railed against the twin barbarisms of polygamy and slavery, and was successful in 1862 in gaining passage of the Morill Anti-Bigamy Act which outlawed polygamy. By 1890 the President of the Church, Wilford Woodruff, published an “Official Declaration” which stated that “we are not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice.” Since then no active member of the LDS church has engaged in polygamy although numerous splinter groups throughout the United States and Canada continue the practice. Despite the years that separate contemporary Mormons with the practice, it is still often the only thing known about Mormons and has influenced their desire to appear more mainstream and leave their perceived strangeness and connection to polygamy in the past.¹³

¹¹Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 53-54; Givens also cites Jonathan Edwards’ “I am born to be a man of strife,” and Martin Luther’s embattled self-conception.

¹²For this episode of Mormon resistance and assimilation to outside goods see Kari M. Main “Pursuing the ‘Things of this World:’ Mormon Resistance and Assimilation as Seen in the Furniture of the Brigham City Cooperative, 1874-88.” *Winterthur Portfolio*. 36 (2001). 191-212.

¹³For Republican Party platforms see “GOP Convention of 1864 in Philadelphia,” History.org, December 6, 2010, http://www.ushistory.org/gop/convention_1856.htm.; For the Morill Act and a more in-depth discussion of the Mormons and anti-polygamy laws see Stephen C. Taysom, “‘There is Always a Way of Escape:’ Continuity and Reconstitution in Nineteenth-Century Mormon Boundary Maintenance Strategies,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (2006): 183-206.; For the Official Declaration and a follow-up discourse at the Salt Lake Temple Dedication in 1893 see “Official Declaration—1,” The

The Mormon practice of creative dating needs to be seen in light of this history of hostile, competing cultural forces between their nation and religion. Complicating matters, not only are sexual relations, the currency of the wider culture's relationships taboo for Mormon youth, but youth are given even stricter dating guidelines. Leaders counsel youth to abstain from dating until 16, to begin dating in groups, to avoid going on dates with the same person frequently until after their mission, and to make sure their parents meet their date. Their counsel does not rely solely on what a date must not be, but counsels what dating should be: planned, positive, inexpensive activities. With these guidelines and the wider cultural practice of sexual currency and hooking up culture in mind, we can see how the resulting practice of creative dating among Mormon youth can be seen as mediating these conflicting forces, by resisting and assimilating to both their national and religious cultural heritage.

Creative Dating as Cultural Arbitrage

Creative dating is a way for Mormon youth to preserve aspects of America's dating culture of the mid 1900s as well as a way to evolve with the current hook-up culture of today in the hopes that they can find an American way to date that allows them to keep their religious standards. This needs to be stated because many of the examples that will follow will seem anything but mainstream although creative dating has achieved some national recognition since it has spread to California and been picked up by some media. Creative dating does more than just preserve and renovate a relic of American mainstream culture; however, it doubles as a ritual which reduces the anxiety endemic to dating as well as providing a coping mechanism for

Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 291-293.; For Polygamy and the church today see chapters 1 and 2 in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, eds. (Logan Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010), 1-61.

delayed sexuality where procreative energy is rechanneled into creative pursuits. Finally, it is also a way to take something that already sets Mormons apart, adherence to archaic dating, moral, and gender-role norms, and uses those very things to negotiate their place between their religion and their nation.

Certainly creative dating conforms to the suggestions from Mormon leaders that youth dating consist of planned, positive, and inexpensive activities that will help youth get to know each other. And the reasons participants in creative dating give about why they like it echo these same themes with only slight variation. The planned aspect of many of these dates is a given. A date where some friends bought old pins and bowling balls in order to bowl in frozen parking lots required planning not just the who and where, but involved finding and gathering the necessary equipment. Many interviewees added “cheap” to their list of date virtues when talking about creative dates. Along with that, DI, Deseret Industries, the local thrift shop, scavenger hunts, and borrowed items frequently feature prominently in these stories as youth seem to rely on the largess of their community. One interviewee saw creative dating and group dating as a way to meet a lot of new people because they often happened in groups. Another respondent gushed that “It’s so fun to do different things!” Almost all respondents stated that doing dates creatively was a fun experience. What cultural forces and counter currents are evident in these guidelines of a planned, positive, inexpensive, and getting-to-know-someone-type date?

Planned

The planned aspect of these dates echo Mormon values of planning for the future. While planning morally for the future is important, many kinds of planning are prevalent in Mormon culture. Mormons are encouraged to be temporally, financially, and physically prepared for calamity. Leaders encourage a one-year supply of food, and there are many stories of families

living off that food when a breadwinner has been laid off or injured. With creative dating, the planning stage is often either implied or the main feature of the story because it is when some of the most exciting events happen. The pirate-themed canoe trip for instance where seven couples and a tag-along dressed up and acted like pirates as they canoed down the local river. Matt Nielsen recounts how he was called beforehand with this “crazy idea” but was convinced by their enthusiasm. The planners told him and his date to dress up like a pirate the best they could, and then meet at a certain apartment. Before heading out on canoes they talked like pirates, listened to pirate-themed music, made paper pirate hats and tied on bandannas. Heading down the river with a map marked with an X, they were in search of a hidden treasure, their lunch; however, before that a surprise ninja battle ensued and they only reached their destination after being capsized by their mock assailants. They were then free to enjoy their lunch as they regaled each other with aspects of the date they just went on.¹⁴

Intricate planning like this date creates a shift in anticipation from after the date to before the date, one way creative dating eases anxiety. This shifts the anxiety from procreativity to creativity. Instead of the pressure of “will we have sex afterwards” it is the pressure of “how can I make this a memorable, interesting experience?” Shifting the focus to before the date even happens, also shifts the moment of anxiety from after the event to before the event. The narratives in turn focus on the before and during and rarely on the afterwards since by then the “climax” of anticipation has already been achieved, the successful unfolding of activities to which all the planning was building up has already played out. The planner of the pirate date, Dave Hulbert, explained in detail the aspects of planning the date which, he admits, was more enjoyable than the date itself.¹⁵

¹⁴Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2003.

¹⁵ Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2003.

The genesis of the date idea began as Hulbert was looking at his starving student card, a card students can buy with 2-for-1 and other offers at various local businesses. He noticed a 2-for-1 canoe deal. Thinking it would be fun to canoe down the river, he consulted a pirate-obsessed friend who chose the theme. He looked up pirate jokes online such as “There must be an X on yer pants because there be some fine booty underneath!” which he recognized as cheesy but felt it added to the fun. He and his friends also liked some website stating that pirates hated ninjas, so the ninja attack came out of that. They sent out invitations on burnt cardboard paper with sayings like “Arr, wench, come to the pirate date.” Again, cheesy and childish, but fun in their eyes. Hulbert also prepared ninja masks and gathered friends to come and capsize their boats before they reached their lunch. He even planned some cameras to capture the event and save for posterity.¹⁶

I leave the presence of the cameras for now and focus just on Hulbert’s preparation narrative. Although this is ostensibly about a date, the actors in the narrative are his male friends and him. This is another way creative dating eases the tensions of dating. The shift from procreativity to creativity is not only a temporal shift but a gendered one as well. No longer is the focus of the date, the date. Rather, it is the planning and execution of the date which involves friends of the same gender much more than objects of romance. If she can properly be said to be an object of romance anymore. With this level of intricate planning, the date becomes more of an accessory to make the creatively planned scenario a date rather than what? Childish play?

Not that planned dates are devoid of any romance. Take David Beckstead of BYU. He recounts a creative date where he drove his date to a park where they were just going for a walk. Along the path they come across a candle lit dinner ready to eat. After eating they continue their walk and come across music playing. They slow danced. Next they come across a dozen long-

¹⁶ Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2003.

stemmed roses. Finally they come across another table with dessert ready. Surely the meticulous planning of the evening created a romance-filled fantasy-land narrative for both them.¹⁷

Another interviewee, Adrian, talked about the “romance of roses and surprises and written messages” which conjures a kind of classic tale of romance the participants are able to write themselves into. If we jump back to the early Puritans and their use of typology, we find an analog being enacted by Mormon creative daters in a secularized way. Rather than understanding the world through scripture, they are writing themselves into popular conceptions of ideal romances. The wining and dining they may have seen in classic media can be reenacted through their elaborate creation of ideal moments or stories. In this way the activity looks back at idealized golden-age ideas of classic romance which is also, like Mormon dating, often sexless as it terminates once the lovers are united. Whether this is influenced by Disney, Hollywood, or the Brother’s Grimm, there is a sense of making real a fairytale fantasy in some of these dates.¹⁸

But this conjuring of romance does more than just write their story to fit into a past fairytale narrative, there’s also a proleptic aspect to the creation of these intricate narratives. Recall the cameras present at the pirate vs. ninja battle and consider the experience of Laura Howe from Salt Lake City. She and her friends would call dates for each other then make large signs proclaiming “Bertha, will you marry me?” After procuring flowers, balloons the dates would go to the airport and one of the boys would hold the sign. As passengers got off, they would wait around for the inevitable proposal while the guy’s date would sneak around back, come off the plane and either slap the guy and walk off, run up and shout “YES!” The crowd would “ooh!” in shock or clap their hands in congratulations. Those not involved in the fake wedding would be filming, so afterwards they could go home and watch the movies and laugh over an inexpensive meal. Although these scenes are certainly not the fairytale story seen with

¹⁷Laura Beckstead, “Creative Dating.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2000.

¹⁸Adrian Thayne. Interview. November 30, 2010.

Beckstead, they are crafted scenes which are then recorded for future benefit. In this example there are obvious suggestions of marriage and engagement and indeed, in the story-making these youth are engaged in there is something of a dry run for when they propose or are proposed to. One youth even made a fake ring out of tinfoil and marble and said “I propose that you go to Cabaret with me.” The surprise aspect of these dates, the creative unexpectedness also prepares Mormon youth for many expectations regarding the proposal. Stories where the woman is surprised and delighted, the same response often sought for when asking out and going on creative dates, are common in the marriage-friendly Mormon culture. Knowing that “how did he ask?” is a big question, Mormon youth are in many ways not only acclimating to romantic interactions with members of the opposite sex but learning how to create memorable moments for the big moments of engagement and marriage. In 2015, speaking to the young men of the church, current church President Thomas S. Monson said that “dating is a preparation for marriage” repeating a common adage heard by Mormon youth.¹⁹

Planning these memorable moments connects to Mormon culture in yet another way. Mormon youth, of all ages really, are encouraged to write in their journal. The third President of the Church, Wilford Woodruff, is often cited as an exemplary journal writer who wrote in his journal everyday from the time he joined the church. Hundreds of conference addresses and church magazine articles stress the importance of journal writing both for oneself and for posterity. This emphasis on keeping records has imbued Mormons with a sense of historicity. As they tell and retell the stories of their ancestors, it begins to dawn on them that their progenitors will tell stories about them as well. This gives Mormon youth a sense of historicity even in their

¹⁹Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2003.; Jessica Lewis, “The Rituals of Creative Dating.” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2001.; Thomas S. Monson, “Preparation Brings Blessings.” *Ensign*. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 2010), <http://lds.org/general-conference/2010/04/preparation-brings-blessings?lang=eng>.

present as they seek to create good stories to tell in the future. Not that these stories are entirely future oriented. The Mormon version of regaling friends about ones latest sexual conquest is seen in regaling friends with tales of their creative prowess.²⁰

Positive

While the church guideline of planning “positive” dates may be fairly vague, Mormon youth have enthusiastically clarified that point by offering their own synonyms: fun, zany, crazy, interesting, and out of the ordinary. Clever sassiness or playfulness also seems to be a prominent feature in the asking. They can be scatological like “I’d pee my pants if you’d go with me to the Christmas dance,” attached to a pair of Levis with a long story about a girl written on a roll of toilet paper with the final word “yes” to respond in the affirmative. They can be inconvenient like the girl who hid an alarm clock in her date’s room set for 3 a.m. with a note attached that read “sorry to alarm you, but I’ll go to prom with you.” They can be annoying like the girl who plastered her dates car with blank post-it notes only to have the real post-it on his pillow saying, “Of course I’ll stick with you for prom.” While these creative but time-consuming projects may not seem positive, somehow the hassle becomes bizarre, fun, unique, and interesting, they are all characteristics considered positive by modern Mormon youth in America.²¹

²⁰ For articles and talks on the importance of journal writing see Brad Wilcox, “Why Write It?” *Ensign* (September 1999), <http://lds.org/ensign/1999/09/why-write-it?lang=eng>; “Lesson 16: Journals,” *Young Women Manual 2*, 1993, <http://lds.org/manual/young-women-manual-2/lesson-16-journals?lang=eng&query=journal>; “Lesson 19: Family and Personal Histories,” *The Latter-day Saint Woman: Basic Manual for Women, Part B*, (2000), 152, <http://lds.org/manual/the-latter-day-saint-woman-basic-manual-for-women-part-b/lesson-19-family-and-personal-histories?lang=eng&query=we+journal+writing+people>; Salli Hollenzer, “My Journal, My Testimony,” *Ensign*, (April 2008): 51–53, <http://lds.org/ensign/2008/04/my-journal-my-testimony?lang=eng>; Jeffrey S. McClellan, “A Journal for Today and Tomorrow,” *Liahona* (August 1996): 30, <http://lds.org/liahona/1996/08/a-journal-for-today-and-tomorrow?lang=eng>.

²¹ Jessica Barker, “The Rules of Creative Dating at Timpview High,” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2000.

This adoption of bizarre, scatological, even infantile behavior as some of the most praised characteristics in creative dating can be seen as rebellion against religious restraint and piety preached by their parents and leaders. On some level they are indeed adhering to the standards of the church, but on another level there's a sense of anti-maturity, "if I'm not allowed to participate in adult activities, I'll glory in childish, infantile behavior." Similar to the crude, loud, obnoxious, in-your-face "mook" seen in reality MTV shows like *Jackass* and more recently *The Jersey Shore*, this zaniness walks the line between fun and public menace. Mormon youth riding municipal garbage cans down hills in the park could easily be swapped out for MTV's *Jackass* crew doing the same thing on television. The youth having marshmallow gun wars at Walmart are not the ones cleaning up marshmallows in the isles, nor the ones trying to find a replacement blender. Teenagers are not only expressing affection like grade schoolers, like children who only want attention but don't know how to gain it, but engage in activities which involve dress-ups and "playing" house in various ways. A group who put garbage bags over their clothes and ate a spaghetti dinner without using their hands or utensils is a good example. Girls blindfolding guys and leading them around, like infants, through a park they tell them is a "scary" place only to end with spraying their dates with whip cream. These "positive" activities may not always be seen as positive by church leaders but conform to ideas of "positive" more influenced by the wider American media culture.²²

Rather than viewing the behavior from the outside, however, we may see the immaturity as acting within a frame created, or used, by Mormon adolescents. Simon Bronner argues that many college hijinks are ways for youth to deal with normally taboo or anxiety-inducing subjects such as sex and sexual feelings, or, alternately, as a way to express "emotional abundance" which, for whatever reason, does not have other outlets. In Bronner's analysis, the immaturity is

²² "The Mook," *The Merchants of Cool*, Frontline.; For examples cited see Jessica Lewis, "The Rituals of Creative Dating," William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2001.

less about rebellion and more about dealing with the anxieties of growing up by reverting to childish behavior. Recalling their childhood, a time when they were given greater leeway with appropriate behavior, can release in both their religious and cultural contexts. Religiously, Mormon youth are experience anxiety by being both encouraged to prepare for marriage and taught the importance of family, but vigorously warned against, as youth anyway, the sexual behavior required for such unions. Culturally, Mormon youth are aware that this injunction against sex marks them as different from other youth in America, their peers. Further, as David Elkind argues, because of the egocentrism endemic to adolescence, adolescents are “continually constructing, or reacting to, *an imaginary audience*” who are “as critical of him as he is of himself.” The frame then that makes zaniness and immaturity such a notable feature of creative dating comments on both contexts in a way that reframes the frames given them by their religious and national cultures. For the former, it replaces the feared sins of premarital sex with the lesser infraction of immaturity. For the latter, it replaces the perceived naiveté of continued virginity with the cultural positive of rambunctious, spirited youth.²³

Inexpensive

The reasons for cheap dates are various. As one informant pointed out, creative dating may fade with age because of an increase in disposable income. Not only is cheapness a necessity, creative daters enshrine it as a virtue similar to how they view zaniness not only as positive characteristics, but also the best characteristics. This zaniness may be how Mormon youth imitate the “highs” achieved by non-Mormons with drugs, alcohol, and sex. As such, it is also a do-it-yourself “high” kids can get on a budget. Rather than seeing this as an obstacle, cheap

²³ Simon J. Bronner, *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), xv.; David Elkind, “Egocentrism in Adolescence,” *Child Development* 38, 4 (1967): 1030.

and inexpensive becomes the goal, theme, and activity of the date. In fact, one creative dater talked about the idea game. Dates would write down 20 possible things to do that night then put them in a pile and everyone would vote on which one to do. That, however, was the entire activity. It did lead to a similar activity in which random driving directions were placed in a hat and then they would go driving. At every intersection, they would draw a direction out of the hat and follow it. After 10 directions, their rules stated, they had to get out and do something. Cheap and spontaneous fun. Another group went to Deseret Industries with \$10 to buy outfits which they then had to wear the rest of the night as they ate out and went bowling, displaying their odd clothes to the whole town. While going out to eat and bowling is a fairly standard dating activity, the odd clothes help transform the traditional date into a creative one. Another group went on a fake scavenger hunt acting like the only thing they still needed was a 1974 quarter. They saw who got the most quarters and then used the money to go out to eat.²⁴

Inexpensive dates keep dating relevant for Mormon youth as well as keeping it casual which then helps prevent too much intimacy. Just as Beth Bailey describes the revolution from courtship to dating that was fueled by the poor without enough money to buy the trappings required for courtship calls, dating made less and less sense economically. Rather than abandon the model and move on to sexual exchange, Mormon youth flipped the value on its head and replaced scarcity of funds as a virtue rather than presence of funds. Still rooted in cash exchange, creative dating does modify the old, broken model of dating by turning it on its head and making scarcity of funds the goal. Enshrining scarcity in this way has, and perhaps will, fueled a longevity to this practice by making it more universally attainable by members of any class although some creative dates can get expensive.

²⁴Amber Herzog Nielsen, "Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture," William A. Wilson Folklore Archive BYU. 2003; Laura Beckstead, "Creative Dating," William A. Wilson Folklore Archive BYU. 2000.

There are, however, external costs. Some ostensibly cheap dates like watching a movie in a cornfield or at a prison, driving a suburban full of daters to the middle of nowhere, sneaking on the top of a building or into a hayloft, or getting your dates pulled over by a cop all cost resources like generators, a dual gas-tank suburban, building maintenance, and taxpayer dollars the youth are not paying but which enable them to keep their dates “cheap.” Rather than seeing this as more teen rebellion, cheap dates connects more to a sense of community and family which is prevalent in Mormon culture. Oftentimes, in fact, the mothers of the youth planning the date would be the ones to cook and cater the meal. Just as large groups of pioneers helped each other cross the plains and then survive in the Utah valley and just as a perpetual emigration fund which helped new converts from Europe get to Utah in the late nineteenth century and a perpetual education fund was established by then President Gordon B. Hinckley to help church members in developing countries gain education which would allow them financial independence, these youth are responding to a culture that helps one another. This expectation could be seen as entitlement or merely as a cultural reality they barely consider. Regardless, the intense communal aspect of these dates could also indicate a jumping back to courtship values where the courtship was much more family-oriented. Gaining access to bedrooms, cars, and houses often involves contacting the family and gaining their tacit approval to take their son or daughter on a date.²⁵

Get To Know Someone

While Mormon culture’s focus on marriage may be seen as similar to courtship, and while Mormon leaders maintain that “dating is preparation for marriage,” there is still recognition

²⁵ For the perpetual emigration and education funds see Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Perpetual Education Fund,” *General Conference* (April 2001), last accessed December 6, 2010, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2001/04/the-perpetual-education-fund?lang=eng>.; and the Perpetual Education Fund homepage at, <http://pef.lds.org/?locale=eng>.

of the inherent value in the activity itself. In getting to know someone else and even oneself better. On the other hand, creative dating is also similar to hook up culture in that it stresses avoiding commitment. In fact, with the formality of the rituals involved in asking people on dates, the vastly greater amount of time spent with friends in planning and executing the date, avoiding commitment with the date can be a natural result of the system of rules and rituals surrounding their interaction. Nevertheless, the date remains a key aspect of the creative date as the component which can make or break the fun hoped for. Laura Howe talks about how the most basic ingredient is “a whole bunch of fun guys.” The dates involving getting soaked, dressing outrageously and making fools of themselves in public also require a date to be game for such activity, so the very bizarreness of the activities select for the kind of person you would get to know and how you might get to know them.²⁶

While acting in bizarre ways, role-playing, and engaging in childish behavior may not seem like the best way to get to know someone, the logic of creative dating works on getting to know someone by getting them in unusual situations. A common story told by Mormons is to take a potential mate on a camping trip with the family before marriage. Supposedly everything goes wrong and you get to see how they act in difficult situations. The dressing up in D.I. clothes and doing regular date activities is a good example of this. David Hulbert tells of a stand-up comedy night date. They alerted their dates a week in advance with the assignment to prepare a three minute comedy skit or routine. They then made dinner and set up their apartment like a comedy club with curtains and microphone. Hulbert notes that doing a comedy routine was scary and often the acts defied expectations, so people they expected to be funny fell flat and those they expected to bomb were hilarious. While the preparation, low cost, and play-acting elements of creative dating are all here, there is also this assumption that people reveal their true self under

²⁶Amber Herzog Nielsen, “Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture,” William A. Wilson Folklore Archive. BYU. 2003.

unusual or stressful situations. Creative dating then is a way to create situations with moderate exposure to stress for supposedly fun and exciting revelations about identity.²⁷

Creative dating has been a useful way to redress some of the problems of America's dating culture of the mid-twentieth century such as rising costs, the stress of being alone and out with a member of the opposite sex, and, for Mormon youth, the more normative sexual currency which they are taught to avoid. It also perpetuates some of those problems because creativity will often trump inexpensiveness and an elaborate date will end up costing as much if not more than a standard date. In other ways, creative dating is uniquely adapted to Mormons living in America and forced to live at odds with the national culture and yet still affected by that culture, its media, and desiring to be seen as mainstream. Again, creative dating offers ambiguous but workable solutions for youth who want to be both Mormon and American. The fetishization of infantile behavior does not work as well outside the Mormon cultural group and can be seen as off-putting by non-member friends and acquaintances. However, for a culture that values endogamy, this is an acceptable price for the psychological benefits of displaced anxieties over sex and romantic relations with members of the opposite sex. And while there are and have likely always been those who will roll their eyes at the cheesy antics and behavior, creative dating does seem to be the best answer Mormon youth have found to negotiate the ongoing culture wars between their religion and their nation.

²⁷Amber Herzog Nielsen, "Creative Dating in a Mormon Culture," William A. Wilson Folklore Archive BYU. 2003.

Chapter 6

A Sure Knowledge: Folk Archaeology among Members and Missionaries in Japan

I teach writing courses, and one day a student of mine from India asked me what I did. Upon hearing that I researched myths and folklore, she told me how she had lost her faith in the stories about gods and heroes that she had been raised to believe. As she grew older, however, she found hard evidence for some of these stories and come to believe them again. She mentioned multiple examples of these, but the one I remember best involved Rama building a bridge from India to Sri Lanka with the help of his ape army. The physical availability of the bridge was conclusive evidence for her. Her eyes widened and she nodded with conviction when she stated that while the bridge is now submerged, it can now be seen via satellite. Her look seemed to argue that if the result of the story were physically available, particularly via space-age technology, then the story itself must be true. While some may surely doubt the validity of her explanation, the urge to connect one's cosmology with tangible proof or scientific evidence is common among believers of many religions.

I call this general practice of using scientific evidence or appealing to science to support matters of faith, folk archeology. Folk archeology is when lay people use physical artifacts as proof or evidence to support their belief system. It can also include folk explanations or interpretations of archeological artifacts as evidence supporting their beliefs. It is not that the physical artifacts are fabrications, though some are, it is that their use by the folk is to reinforce faith and the interpretations used to do that are not based in archeology, but in the faith of the tellers and listeners of these tales. As such, they are a close cousin to both faith-promoting stories or rumors and scientific evidence. The genre is distinctive in that it mimics the language and form

of scientific evidence to describe or allude to a narrative while largely avoiding narrative in the individual items. So, while most faith promoting stories are stories, folk archeology simply alludes to a story by presenting concrete, ostensibly objective evidence.¹

As the topics of these chapters have progressed through the life cycle, we come to the missionary experience which, for many, is the penultimate experience of adolescence—with marriage being the most accepted final step into full adulthood. While not officially a coming of age ritual, missions are seen as a coming of age experience, and those who have served one are treated and seen differently in LDS communities. Many girls will put “Returned Missionary,” or “RM” as they are known, on their list of qualities they want in a spouse. While I hesitate to treat missions as actual coming of age experiences since they are not designated as such by the LDS church, the fact remains that culturally Mormons talk about and treat missions as coming of age experiences. A New York Times article exploring the implications of the recent lowered age for missionaries saw missions as “a crucial coming-of-age ritual,” and most Latter-day Saints would agree. Latter-day Saints speak of the children who leave, and the men and women who return from their missions. And, indeed, it is a time when youth leave their parents, their families, their childhood communities, and enter a peer group where they gain experiences that lead to maturity. Successful completion of a mission transforms youth into young adults, and ushers most adolescents into adulthood although full adulthood in LDS communities still often hinges on marriage. Many returned missionaries see themselves and are treated as on the cusp of adulthood. Appropriately then, the archeological and scientific appeals and evidence of this chapter can be

¹ For examples of evidence in Testimony Meeting see Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 24-25

found in both the young and the old, youth, adolescent, and adult. My main focus in this chapter is on the many kinds of evidence shared by missionaries and members in Japan.²

Let us follow the boys and girls then as they leave the Mormon Cultural Region where most of the examples and informants have been centered, and fly with some few of them to their missions in a foreign land, Japan. While most if not all missions will have various kinds of folk archeology, the majority of which connects the Book of Mormon to Mesoamerica and which I will summarize later in the chapter, I hope to use the folk archeology found in Japan as a distinctive, if less common, form of folk archeology that illustrates how it creates and reinforces community between members. Additionally, in looking at folk archeology, or any folklore in a foreign land, it should be noted that the missionaries' demographics do not change simply because they are in another country. While these stories are also important to and shared among Japanese Latter-day Saints, my analysis, in keeping with the theme of this dissertation, focuses on the purposes they serve for the missionaries rather than the members. Finally, folk archeology, as shared by these missionaries in Japan, is a great example of how folklore is used to help youth make that transition that so many Latter-day Saints associate with missions, growing up and coming of age. As such, I hope the reader will join me in this slight journey away from the MCR, into the mission field.

Missions are rich with folklore of all kinds, much of it focused on initiation. William A. Wilson documented the initiatory pranks played on new missionaries, or "greenies;" the unique folk speech of missionaries; as well as their legends and the cautionary tales of wayward missionaries breaking mission rules and getting their just desserts. While Wilson's "On Being Human," provided a good introduction of missionary folklore, there has been little follow-up

² Jodi Kantor and Laurie Goodstein, "Missions Signal a Growing Role for Mormon Women" *The New York Times* March 1, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/us/a-growing-role-for-mormon-women.html?_r=0>

scholarship examining the many games, memorates, legends, foodways, and practices the many young men and women on missions share to create community and a sense of belonging amid their sometimes hostile host community. Due to the missionaries' relative distance from their homes, their near constant interaction with each other, and being engaged in common work, missions are an ideal setting for folklore of all kinds.³

In his "On Being Human," Mormon folklorist William A. Wilson argues that "though regional differences will obviously occur," the common role and work of missionaries, whether they be in "Japan, Finland, Argentina and Los Angeles" will be comparable. I will try to approach both the commonalities with not just all missionaries but with a wide variety of Mormons while focusing, towards the end of the chapter, on the particular version of folk archaeology found among Mormon missionaries who have served in Japan. While my conclusions are specific to folk archeology in Japan, I originally conceived of this research to piggy back on work I assumed other folklorists had done on folk archaeology which focused on evidence for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon found in Mesoamerica. After finding that such a study by a folklorist had not been done, I have tried to show the prevalence of this activity throughout the MCR although a more dedicated study could and should be done to determine the prevalence and function of such folklore among adolescents, college students, adults, and missionaries throughout Latin America. In the absence of such a study, I have included some broad outlines of the practice to help give context to the more specialized version found in Japan. Because of this, the examples from returned missionaries who served in Japan will come fairly late in the chapter.⁴

Wilson continues to explain the context in which missionary folklore rises and the problems to which it responds. The context is typified by the monotonous drudgery of door to

³ See William A. Wilson, *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, ed., Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 201-220.

⁴ William A. Wilson, *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, ed., Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 205.

door “tracting,” and the common experience of facing hostile or ambivalent responses to their messages. Wilson argues that missionary folklore “gives(s) them a sense of control in a world not always friendly,” and helps them “maintain a sense of stability in an unstable world.” Despite being organized into pairs as a companionship, into groups as districts and so on, missionaries are part of a very small group within a much larger group with whom it can be difficult to identify. Ultimately, folklore helps missionaries gain a sense of control and stability by “creat[ing] an esprit do corps, a sense of solidarity among themselves.” Missionary folklore also allows missionaries to “let off steam” and deal with the pressures of a highly regimented and structured life. Further, it almost always “attempts to persuade the audience, and sometimes him- or herself,” to align their behavior with those same regimented standards, and finally, as Wilson argues, missionaries share folklore that confirms their hope that they will be victorious, that “God is on their side and will help them,” and a way to enjoy some vicarious victories if actual ones are not ready at hand. Folk archaeology meets most of these community-building and hope-strengthening functions for both missionaries and members in Japan. They do this in a tangible way that, despite many of my informants caveats that this stuff is “just interesting,” it is shared because it serves a very real purpose regardless of how convincing the evidence may be. Further, because the genre, which I will address shortly, favors high-context communication, the form follows the function of the content in reinforcing the reality and strength of a community which can feel overwhelmed by the world around them.⁵

In looking at how and why Latter-day Saints share this evidence, I will address its use historically and include some examples that will be more familiar to Latter-day Saints in North America. The use of scientific, what some will call pseudo-scientific, evidence is certainly an appeal to the most highly regarded evidence in developed countries. This, however, is only part of

⁵ William A. Wilson, *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essays on Folklore*, ed., Jill Terry Rudy (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 206, 208, 210-213, 216, 218.

the story and one which focuses too much on how Mormons try to appeal to outsiders. A more fundamental reason, I argue, is that these pieces of evidence are high-context communication strategies that help make the cosmological world of Latter-day Saints more concrete and immediate to those who feel, for various reasons, on the fringes of that narrative.

In discussing these explanations for belief that appeal to science rather than faith, I will include a wide range of evidence, some of which has been well-researched and some of which has not. My interest is not in the scientific merits of any of these pieces of evidence, nor do I wish to discredit the actual research and archeology being performed, some of which I include. My concern here is not whether the evidence is reliable or not, but with how they act and why they are shared among the folk. Thus, while there may be very compelling research behind a particular theory, when these theories leave academia and the journals where they are debated and enter the world where the folk share and pass them between each other, they often become folk archeology even if they were actual archeology before that point. Thus, even a well-argued and well-supported argument can become folk archeology when it leaves academic discourse and is shared among non-archeologists for the purpose of bolstering faith rather than for the purpose of scientific discovery. Further, my argument is not whether the evidence or its explanation are true, but the role it plays when it enter vernacular expressions rather than academic conversation.

Two Ways of Knowing: Sophic and Mantic, Science and Revelation

Mormonism's preeminent scholar, Hugh Nibley, outlined two ways of knowing in competition with each other: the *mantic* and the *sophic*. The mantic indicates all prophecy, soothsaying, divination, and other ways of knowing inspired from beyond this world. The core of

the mantic is that it does *not* originate from the human mind or body, but comes from beyond, and is open to “infinite possibilities.” The sophic, as Nibley describes it, is the rational, the studious, the analytical. Those who study the religions of the past and present without feeling or experiencing the passion and belief of those who practiced those religions, are sophic in their approach, as opposed to those who believe in those religions, seek knowledge from the other world mantically, as through revelation or ritual.⁶

The perpetual conflict between the mantic and the sophic are alive and well today. In online forums, radio and television shows, religion and science are often thrown at each other to prove and disprove various points or entire cosmologies. While the cosmologies of many scientists and believers include science and religion peacefully, there is still a popular sense that they are competitors. And for good reason perhaps. Scientific findings have been known to challenge beliefs. One classic example is perhaps the Catholic Church’s suppression of Galileo’s discovery of a helio- rather than a geo-centric solar system because it challenged assumptions in Catholic cosmology—that since man was God’s greatest creation and lived on the earth, the earth must be the center of the universe, the most important place. Since then, however, most people, even the religious, have been able to adjust to a universe in which they are not the center.

Still, as science progresses, skirmishes with belief and believers continue. For the LDS Church, one of the more recent clashes between science and belief occurred in the early twenty-first century when geneticists challenged the idea that the Native Americans were descendants of the Lamanites. Thomas W. Murphy and Simon G. Southerton both found evidence of Asiatic DNA in Native Americans and concluded that the long-held claims from Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and other leaders that the Native Americans were Lamanites to be verifiably false. Prophets from Joseph Smith to at least Spencer W. Kimball have referred to Native

⁶ Hugh Nibley, “Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic,” *The Ancient State* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books/FARMS, 1981), <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1115&index=11>.

Americans as Lamanites. Apologists have, and had since at least the 1980s, argued against this interpretation of the facts mainly with a “limited geography” model, and subsequent studies have found West Eurasian markers in Native American DNA, but the claims were enough for the church to initiate excommunication proceedings and for many members, calling Murphy the Galileo of Mormonism, to leave the church. Still, the debate continues as new light seems to challenge or support these and other religious views.⁷

Mormon scholar Melvin Alonzo Cook argues, “Religionists generally hope for support in their beliefs from science, the foremost field of endeavor from the viewpoint of popularity and visible achievement.” Most people today defer to the scientific method and empirical knowledge and numerous articles carry headlines which end with “...backed by science!” to bolster their claims. And certainly, as Alonzo argues, science has had the most dramatic effects on improving the material conditions of our daily lives. So, to seek its support is understandable for anyone living in a culture that values the sophic and scientific. For Mormons caught between science and their religion most assume that “while theories of science may conflict with Mormon doctrine, the facts of science will not do so, at least not when they become fully known and understood.” This caveat of full knowledge is a fundamental one for Mormons. With a belief in continuing revelation, Mormons keep their canon of scripture open. Just as they believe the Book of Mormon is “Another Testament of Christ,” so too do they believe that still more testaments are out there and God will reveal more in time. The 9th Article of Faith states, in part, that “we believe that

⁷ See William Lobdell, “Bedrock of a Faith is Jolted,” *LATimes* (Feb 16, 2006), accessed April 23, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/feb/16/local/me-mormon16/2>.; Brian Handwerk, “‘Great Surprise’—Native Americans Have West Eurasian Origins,” *National Geographic* (November 22, 2013), accessed April 23, 2015, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/11/131120-science-native-american-people-migration-siberia-genetics/>.; For the Church’s official statement on the controversy see “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies,” accessed April 23, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-and-dna-studies?lang=eng>.; For more on the history of Mormon use of Lamanite and its connection with Native American and Polynesian populations see John-Charles Duffy, “The Use of ‘Lamanite’ in Official LDS Discourse,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34 (2008): 118-167; and Paul C. Gutjahr, “Chapter 6: Scholars and the Book,” in *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 137-152.

[God] will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

Mormon scholar Terryl Givens describes this as part of the Mormon paradoxical beliefs in perfect knowledge through revelation and an endless quest for further knowledge. This paradoxical approach has contributed to the “historical schizophrenia” regarding Mormonism’s proper relation with science, but overall, these beliefs predispose Mormons, especially those happy in their beliefs, to wait when such challenges come to their beliefs since just as the canon is open, science and scientific theories are open to new knowledge.⁸

While some factions, particularly the New Atheists and adamant creationists, fuel tensions between science and religion today by trying to actively discredit religion or asserting religious dogma, there are others who argue that there is plenty of room for both views. Philosopher Mary Midgely uses the metaphors of a “vast, rather ill-lit aquarium” with numerous windows through which different groups peer inside. Using one window, i.e. just science or just religion, would be insufficient to see all that is inside. Midgely argues that mapping humanity’s place in the universe does not require conflict between scientists and believers. Many others agree that science and religion help us to know different things. While biology and chemistry may tell us how our bodies grow from a fertilized egg and how that body continues to metabolize food into energy and how perception functions, it is religion that helps many know what the meaning of that life might be. This “live and let live” approach sees some questions best answered by science, and others best answered by religion. While many Mormons follow this approach, many Latter-day Saints also favor a third approach which uses science to better understand religious truths.⁹

⁸ Melvin Alonzo Cook, *Science and Mormonism: Correlations, Conflicts, and Conciliations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1973), vii-viii.

⁹ Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 178.

While Midgley argues for having the various ways of knowing communicate with each other, she would not approve of searching for religious truths through scientific means as it would lead to the domination of one way of knowing over another. Prominent Mormon scholar and apologist Hugh Nibley; however, was a prime example of using both science and religion in his quest for understanding and truth. Mormon scriptures support such an approach. The open scriptural canon is expressed in Doctrine & Covenants 109: 7 which advises Latter-day Saints to, “seek learning even by study and also by faith.” This combining of science and faith as coequal ways of knowing is elsewhere encouraged in LDS teachings. Book of Mormon prophet Alma teaches that gaining faith and knowledge, including knowledge about matters of faith, is not only possible but accomplished through a form of scientific experimentation. Alma invites his listeners to “awake and arouse [their] faculties, even to an experiment upon [his] words.” He then outlines the experiment of learning holy truths through experimentation which includes acting on the word or doctrine and noting its effects in one’s life. If it “begin to swell within your breast,... enlarge [your] soul,... enlighten [your] understanding,” then you can move from faith in the thing, to a knowledge that it is good and true (Alma 32: 27-30). Mormon scholar Terryl L. Givens argues that Joseph Smith “viewed himself as both revelator and synthesis, pulling truths not only from heaven but also from his culture, his background, and his contemporaries.” Joseph Smith inculcated a religion that embraced all truths and sought to add to them. Following Joseph’s example, Brigham Young stated “‘Mormonism’ includes all truth. There is no truth but what belongs to the gospel.... If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.” He includes all religious, philosophical, moral, and civil truths as well as scientific truths as falling under the purview of the Mormon faith. Thus, fusing

belief and science is highly encouraged for Latter-day Saints although it hasn't always been smooth-going in practice as I will show later.¹⁰

Terryl Givens has argued Mormon theology is distinguished by a “radical paradigm shift” that “collapse(s) the sacred distance, . . . the concretization of the abstract,” a “culture that sacralizes and exalts the mundane even as it naturalizes and domesticates the sacred.” Part of Joseph’s first theophany was the revelation of God and Christ’s physical, tangible, although glorious, bodies. Indeed Mormon theology favors literal readings of the scriptures and emphasizes the materiality of spiritual things. Joseph Smith declared that “all spirit is matter,” in D&C 131: 7. Joseph’s experiences with the supernatural were distinguished by their physical reality. Even the physical effects of his visions are recorded. After being visited by Book of Mormon prophet Moroni three times one night, Joseph records that as he went about “the necessary labors of the day,” he was completely exhausted to the point that his father noticed and sent him back home. This physical weariness from revelation is recorded elsewhere in scriptures and church history. Book of Mormon Prophet Nephi, after having a vision, records that “I have workings in the spirit, which doth weary me even that all my joints are weak.” Moses, as recorded in Moses 1: 9-10, collapses in exhaustion after seeing the Lord. After receiving what is now chapter 76 in the Doctrine and Covenants, Sidney Rigdon, who was with Joseph Smith when he received the vision, is so exhausted he must lie down to which Joseph says, “Well, Brother Sidney is not as used to it as I am.” The gold plates from which Joseph translated the Book of Mormon were heavy, were described in physical detail, were stored in a wooden box, transported in a barrel of beans, were physically given to him, were seen by eight witnesses and again by another three witnesses who were shown them by an angel. These testimonies speak of being

¹⁰ Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 38.; “Chapter 2: The Gospel Defined.” *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 14-20.

shown the plates, “which have the appearance of gold,” and the leaves of which they “handle(d) with [their] hands,” and “saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work,” and conclude that they “ha(d) seen and hefted” them. Throughout the accounts the plates are described as physical and tangible.¹¹

Not just the three witnesses, but the scholarly, and oft-repeated, ideal of consulting multiple sources is a part of Mormon thought. D&C 6: 28 reads, “in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.” This example refers to the need for both Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to testify of the truth of the Book of Mormon which they were then working on translating. This, or similar phrasing, is used elsewhere in LDS scriptures. It is used in Deuteronomy to establish the guilt of someone worshipping idols; in Matthew to instruct people on how to reconcile with someone who has wronged them; in 2 Corinthians by Paul to support the truth of his message; in the Book of Ether where it describes the need for the aforementioned three witnesses of the truth of the Book of Mormon; and in the D&C when Joseph Smith gives direction on how to record temple ordinances done on behalf of the dead. Finally in 2 Nephi 11: 3, Book of Mormon Prophet Nephi writes that, “God sendeth more witnesses, and he proveth all his words.”¹²

The Book of Mormon’s importance is even based on this need for replicability. In 1982 it gained the subtitle of “Another Testament of Christ.” In 2 Nephi 29: 8, Jesus, in rebuking the gentiles for holding tenaciously to the Bible and rejecting the Book of Mormon asks, “Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one

¹¹ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xv, 42.; See also “The Testimony of the Eight Witnesses” in *The Book of Mormon*.; For account of the physical effects of Joseph’s vision see *Joseph Smith History* 47-48.; For Joseph and Sidney Rigdon’s experience see Jerry C. Roundy, “The Greatness of Joseph Smith and his Remarkable Visions,” *New Era* December 1973, <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1973/12/the-greatness-of-joseph-smith-and-his-remarkable-visions?lang=eng>.

¹² See D&C 6: 28; Deut. 17: 6; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; Ether 5:4; and D&C 128: 3.

nation like unto another?” Other examples and practices spring from this “Law of witnesses,” as it is called, has many examples. Joseph Smith had Oliver Cowdery, Moses had Aaron, Elijah had Elisha, Alma taught with Amulek, the Sons of Mosiah had each other, and today missionaries are sent out in pairs.¹³

The Confluence of the Abstract/Spiritual and the Concrete/Physical

Beyond these practices and beliefs that reflect certain aspects of scientific inquiry, the most potent connection between the sophic and the mantic for Mormons, and the reason why they tend, for better and worse, to integrate the two, is in collapsing the sacred distance between God and man, heaven and earth. In centering the sacred not in another, but in this world, Parley P. Pratt wrote that “God, angels, and men are all of one species.” Along with this idea, and another example of the physicality endemic to Mormonism, is a lesser-known part of the Doctrine and Covenants where Joseph Smith gives instructions on how to tell whether an angel comes from God or not. Joseph begins by outlining the “two kinds of beings in heaven, . . . Angels, who are resurrected personages, having bodies of flesh and bones,” and “the spirits of just men made perfect, they who are not resurrected.” So, “when a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you.” An angel will shake hands which you will feel, a spirit will refuse to shake hands because “it is contrary to the order of heaven for a just man to deceive,” and if it is a devil, then they will shake hands, but you will feel nothing, because they do not have bodies of flesh. Indeed, this fact reminds us that, for Mormons, one of the central purposes of this life is to receive a body. Mormon theology and

¹³ “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” *Newsroom: The Official Resource for News Media, Opinion of Leaders and the Public* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/book-of-mormon>.

thought, then, is closely knit with the physical world. The Book of Mormon prophet Alma, in an oft-quoted scripture, asserts that “all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator.”¹⁴

Mormon doctrine and belief has primed Latter-day Saints to connect the earth and heaven as well as their intangible beliefs with tangible evidence, but how does this manifest itself in the lives of Latter-day Saints? As I have said before “Experimenting on the word” is seen as a very accepted, even promoted, way of combining science and belief. In fact, the first of every month, Mormons have a fast and testimony meeting where they relate experiences that have proven to them the truth or validity of certain beliefs. These are, generally, tales told of people experimenting on the word and finding positive results. Folk archeology is another way Mormons use their cosmology to connect the tangible and the intangible.

The focus on the physical, the immediate, the tangible and the available as well as its nod to scientific evidence and even fact makes folk archaeology compelling for people living in a society that favors, perhaps too much as Mary Midgley would argue, the scientific, but whose practices are rooted in the religious. The physical object as evidence is not always available nor necessary, and pictures or descriptions are easy substitutes that help establish the physical reality of the object and thus belief. Tangible objects contrast with esoteric beliefs in which Mormons believe. Certainly the Book of Mormon is a tangible product that must have come from somewhere, and that somehow must be accounted for, but its source, as many tenets of the Mormon faith, are not available to the physical senses. What is it that assures one that Jesus Christ was the Son of God? That God exists? That Joseph Smith was a prophet, that men and women can achieve a life like God’s? These must be taken on faith, but Americans are taught to

¹⁴ Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 40.; See also D&C 129: 1-9, and Alma 30: 44.

prefer empirical evidence. And while there is growing skepticism of folk archeological evidence, it is still passed between Latter-day Saints either sincerely or with caveats that range from serious skepticism to hopeful trust in the validity of the explanation.

Science and Mormonism

I do not know where we found it, but my family owns a large, 1962 copy of the Book of Mormon. Textually there is little difference between it and the Book of Mormon I can access on my smartphone or the small, blue, mass-produced Books of Mormon passed out by missionaries every day. However, in terms of images, it is very different from the Books of Mormon that most Latter-day Saints are familiar with today. While it includes the well-known pictures of Lehi finding the Liahona, the Lehitites coming to the coast of the Promised Land in their boat, Abinadi preaching in chains before King Noah, Samuel the Lamanite preaching from the city walls and many others, it also includes many pictures of archeological sites in Mesoamerica which have not been included in future editions. These pictures include the “Astronomical Observatory” at Chichen Itza with an accompanying explanation of the Maya’s advanced calendar and dating system; the “Pyramid of the Niches” at El Tajin; a temple from Tikal; another from Palenque; Stelae at Copan; pre-Columbian carvings of horses and wheeled toys; a Mammoth skeleton from the Denver Museum of Natural History; Mayan murals depicting “white and dark” people; two images of people standing in stone brick depressions with the caption “Claimed by certain people to be a baptismal font,” in both Chichen Itza, Mexico and Pachacamac, Peru; Izapa Stela 5 with what some have interpreted as depicting Lehi’s vision of the tree of life and more. Many of the captions simply describe the scenes, allowing for the connection to the historic reality of the Book of Mormon to be interpreted by the viewers, others are more explicit in making that connection. The caption for Izapa Stela 5 includes the quoted phrase ‘the resemblance of this sculpture to the

Book of Mormon account cannot be accidental.... It practically establishes... an historical connection... between the ancient Central American priests responsible for the sculpture and the Lehi people of the Book of Mormon!" This quote is then cited as having been published in the Bulletin of the University Archaeological Society by M. Wells Jakeman, the founder of Brigham Young University's Archeology department. All the other images and explanations are similarly cited although their connection as evidence is either left unexplained or the connection is not explicit. Take for example the explanation of a royal tomb at Palenque. Most of the explanation is taken up with the dating of the tomb to either 633 A.D. or 373 A.D. with the conclusion that despite most favoring the later date, "recent carbon 14 readings lends support to" the earlier date. The significance of those dates rests with the reader knowing that the events of the Book of Mormon end shortly after 400 A.D.¹⁵

The fact that these were included in 1962 but have since been removed speaks to how the church has changed its stance on using archeological evidence to support or prove the truth of the Book of Mormon. Certainly archeology has less official support because of spotty track record although as recently as recently as 2002, Brigham Young University's Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) published a book, *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* which followed up with much of the speculative archeology that was so popular in the mid-nineteenth century but which has since fallen out of favor. Throughout the many chapters, most authors argued that evidence had been strengthened rather than weakened in the intervening years, and yet, this same evidence has come to enjoy less official notice and been relegated to dispersion through folkloric rather than official channels, and certainly none of the authors go so far as to claim that it "practically establishes" the Book of Mormon's historicity.¹⁶

¹⁵ The Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Book Company, 1962).

¹⁶ See Donald W. Parry, John W. Welch, and Daniel C. Peterson, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: FARMS, 2002).

The other notable aspect of these pictures and evidence being included in the Book of Mormon itself is the often minimal or absent explanations. For example, the page with the images of the horses does explain that the “wheeled toy” proves that there was knowledge of wheels in the Americas before Columbus, but a reader must understand that the images of horses refer to a still common critique that the Book of Mormon mentions horses despite horses being a European import, and thus is evidence the book is a fabrication. The murals depicting white and black figures include descriptions proving that they depicted everyday life, thus implying that there were both white and black races in ancient America which the reader knows implicates the fair-skinned Nephites of the Book of Mormon. These explanations just like the evidence shared by and among Mormon folk relies on high-context communication. In other words, the context, which Mormons are very conversant with, is left to carry most of the meaning and communicate most of the information. The evidence is simply there to be placed into a narrative both are already familiar with. The words and connections made explicit in the printed language itself are minimal while the amount of information actually communicated is quite extensive. And just as the images and descriptions in our old Book of Mormon were examples of high-context communication, so too does most of the evidence shared among the folk today rely on high-context. Removing these appeals to archaeological evidence from the Book of Mormon may also indicate an attempt to appeal to outsiders more by removing high-context communication which require previous familiarity with the Book of Mormon.¹⁷

One final explanation for the removal of the archeological information is a historical trend within the LDS Church through the mid-twentieth century when Mormons “retreated” from science as Historian Gene A. Sessions and Microbiologist Craig J. Oberg argue. He credits Joseph Fielding Smith as the founding father of anti-science in Mormonism and credit his *Man,*

¹⁷ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976), 75, 79.

His Origin and Destiny with establishing the anti-science view in the church. Smith published the book while a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and argued against “organic evolution and the scientific method,” calling them “bad guesses,” and concluded that the popularity of such views was due to Satan’s deception. Another member of the twelve, Bruce R. McConkie, called evolution “one of the ‘seven deadly heresies’” of the modern age.” The prophet at the time, David O. McKay, refused to take an official position and, in a later published letter to William L. Stokes, said that the views of those speaking against evolution were their own and not church doctrine. Indeed, Brigham Young accepted both spiritual and scientific truths and once said of the creation that it didn’t matter whether it took six days or six thousand years, and even accepted that Moses may have gotten his history from the Lord or from his forebears. While Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie were firm creationists, other noted apostles, James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe both made room for science and belief. Presidents Spencer W. Kimball and Ezra Taft Benson both spoke in favor of accepting truth “whether discovered in the laboratory... or whether revealed from heaven through prophets of God.” Sessions and Olberg refer to this as a “historical schizophrenia” with regards to science and the church, some are unafraid and welcoming, and others are manning the ramparts.¹⁸

The Scientific and the Supernatural among the LDS

With their belief, even expectation, that God will hear and answer individual prayers, Mormons have long been associated with supernatural folklore. Tales of the three Nephites, visions of unborn babies or long-dead relatives, and accounts of miracles are common throughout

¹⁸ Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg, eds., *The Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), vi-xi, 291-293.

Mormon folklore. Some scholars debate whether “contemporary Mormons continue to believe in regular encounters with the divine.” While many believe, for good reason, that it is alive and well, there are certainly rising levels of skepticism for many supernatural genres of folklore, especially as they relate to matters of faith.¹⁹

Seeking scientific support for matters of faith, while far less studied, is no less central to Mormon history. Evidence is both cloudy and early sought with varying results. The plates themselves—prime evidence surely—Joseph claimed were forbidden to be shown to anyone. There are stories of his wife Emma dusting in the room with just a towel or cloth covering the plates which even she had been forbidden to see. Joseph’s scribes who wrote as he translated the Book of Mormon would sit on the other side of a blanket from him, listening to him dictate, so that they would not see the plates. Despite this, the front matter of the Book of Mormon includes the testimonies of three witnesses who saw both an Angel and the plates, and eight other witnesses who saw just the plates and confirmed that they “had the appearance of gold,” and were “of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.” Their accounts stress the physical reality of the plates as evidence to its authenticity.²⁰

In 1828 Martin Harris, an early supporter of Joseph Smith, took a slip of paper containing “characters which [Joseph Smith] had drawn off the plates “to Professor Charles Anthon,” in Columbia University. These characters are, according to the Book of Mormon, reformed Egyptian. Upon examining them Anthon identified them as “Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic.” He even provided a certificate that “they were true characters” and had been translated correctly. However, upon finding out that the plates containing the writing were found by

¹⁹ Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, eds., *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 2013). 177.; J. Michael Hunter, “The Kinderhook Plates, the Tucson Artifacts, and Mormon Archeological Zeal.” *Journal of Mormon History* 31 (Spring 2005), 31-70.

²⁰ “Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” last modified Feb 21, 2012, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/bofm/eight?lang=eng>.

following an angel of God, Professor Anthon asks to see the certificate and “tore it to pieces.”

The account then goes on to fulfill a prophecy mentioned in the Book of Mormon about a learned man being unable to read a sealed book but an unlearned one being able to (see 2 Nephi 27).

Finally, Harris leaves but asks a Dr. Mitchell who confirms what Professor Anthon said about the script. For his part, Professor Anthon denies this version and affirms that he saw it as a hoax.²¹

Despite its existence in many religions, attempts to find ways that science supports religion is a rocky path, one that the church and its members have slowly distanced themselves from as, time after time, the promise of bolstered faith turns into a trial of faith. Such was the case with one Thomas Stuart Ferguson who spent decades in Central America intent on proving the veracity of the Book of Mormon. It was, he said, “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 of history. To find the city of Zarahemla is to... confirm, through tangible evidence, divine revelations to the modern world through Joseph Smith, Moroni, and the Urim and Thummim.” He concludes that “Book of Mormon history is revelation that can be tested by archeology.” And yet, after years without finding any material evidence, he “became disillusioned” and concluded that the Book of Mormon was false.²²

Thomas Stuart’s failure to find the lands and his subsequent loss of faith has not deterred many other Mormons from seeking and finding evidence for the geographic sites of the Book of Mormon. There are numerous tour companies which offer to take people to tour the land of the Book of Mormon mainly in Central America where tourists can visit “candidate sites” for Nephite cities like Zarahemla, Manti, or the City of Nephi. Another tour offers grand tours which feature “the leading candidate of the hill Cumorah,” and where “over 90% of the history in the Book of

²¹ “Joseph Smith—History,” last modified Feb 21, 2012, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/js-h/1?lang=eng>.

²² J. Michael Hunter, “The Kinderhook Plates, the Tucson Artifacts, and Mormon Archeological Zeal” *Journal of Mormon History* 31 (Spring 2005), 66-67.

Mormon has been proposed as having taken place in the areas.” While these tours are certainly not taken by all Mormons or even most Mormons, their continued existence does argue for continued interest and belief in these kinds of evidence among Latter-day Saints.²³

In fact, the more recognizable form of folk archaeology for most North American Mormons is associated with evidence in Mesoamerica for the Book of Mormon. For instance, many have sought to identify the narrow neck of land spoken of throughout the Book of Mormon (see Alma 22: 32, 50: 34, and 52: 9; Helaman 4: 7; Mormon 3: 5; and Ether 10: 20) which connects the land southward and the land northward. This narrow neck has been identified as the Isthmus of Panama, the Yucatan peninsula, in modern day Guatemala with some theories positing the Great Lakes and Malaysia, but most seem to look towards a Central American setting, and find and interpret evidence for belief in the artifacts of the area.²⁴

One of the most famous artifacts is the previously mentioned Izapa Stela 5. Discovered in 1941 in southern Mexico, the stone stele depicts what looks like Book of Mormon Prophet Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. The vision is recorded in Nephi 8 and includes discussion of a tree, a river, a path, a rod of iron that follows that path as well as Lehi, his wife Sariah, and his four sons. Stela 5 includes what may be interpreted as all of these features including even a “bared Jawbone” glyph connected to the figure that corresponds with Lehi whose name in Hebrew means “jawbone” or “cheek.” While the archeologist investigating these things insists that “we must remain cautious and tentative” in interpreting it, but at the same time, he offers many

²³ For two examples of such tour groups see “Geography of the Book of Mormon Tours,” *Lehi Tours*, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.lehitours.com/geography-of-the-book-of-mormon-tours/>; “Epic Book of Mormon Tour,” *Book of Mormon Tours (Allens)*, accessed April 17, 2015, http://www.bookofmormontours.com/cumorah_to_bountiful_tour_77.html.

²⁴ James Lee Warr, *A New Model for Book of Mormon Geography*, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.mormongeography.com/index.html>.

supporting interpretations of the stela and its connection to and possible proof of the Book of Mormon.²⁵

There is other archeological- and science-based evidence that seek to support the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and thus the faith of believers. Examples include golden plates discovered in Mesoamerica, Hebrew language and culture found in pre-Columbian sites, as well as the level of civilization which existed in Mesoamerica and the general dates. All of these examples are used to argue that Joseph Smith knew things of which he should have been ignorant and even unlikely to consider given his cultural context except through revelation. Evidence has been sought even in the words of the Book of Mormon itself. Despite common critiques that it tries to sound too much like the King James Bible, John Welch identified the use of Chiasmus, a rhetorical device of inverse parallels common in Hebraic writing and the Bible, in the Book of Mormon. This connection, while not strictly archeological, does use science to connect belief in the Book of Mormon to more concrete evidence by connecting its structure with the Bible. Others have applied stylometry, the statistical analysis of texts to determine authorship, to prove that the Book of Mormon had many authors rather than one, and thus could not have been written by Joseph Smith.²⁶

Attempts to wed science and faith are not always so existential but are often associated with the benefits of living various commandments, especially the word of wisdom, but also

²⁵ V. Garth Norman, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* June (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), accessed April 17, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1985/06/i-have-a-question?lang=eng>.

²⁶ Daniel Johnson, "Plates of Gold," *Book of Mormon Archeological Forum*, accessed April 17, 2015, http://www.bmaf.org/articles/plates_of_gold__johnson.; Rod L. Meldrum, "Hebrew Language/Culture in N. America at 8 Sites!" *The Firm Foundation: Foundation for Indigenous Research and Mormonism*, accessed on April 17, 2015, <http://www.firmlds.org/feature.php?id=23.>; John L. Sorenson, "How Could Joseph Smith Write So Accurately about Ancient American Civilization," *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* eds., Donald W. Parry, John W. Welch, and Daniel C. Peterson (Provo: FARMS, 2002), <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/book/echoes-and-evidences-of-the-book-of-mormon/>; Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and G. Bruce Schaalje, "Stylometric Analyses of the Book of Mormon: A Short History," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21 (2012): 28-45.

connected with beliefs in the importance of the family. These, like those previously mentioned are sought to explain and bolster faith, but can also challenge beliefs. One example also connected with Japanese culture might be attributing long term green tea consumption with osteoporosis later in life balanced against other studies that say green tea contributes to longevity.

Much of the church's and lay member's response to the periodic promise and dissolution of such archeological sites is increased skepticism. Writing about the Kinderhook plates and the Tucson artifacts, J. Michael Hunter concludes that "This need for justification and validation causes otherwise rational individuals to leap to conclusions about archeological finds that are based on slender evidence." This leads to some accusing zealous Mormons as being gullible even in the face of "preposterous" stories. As I have previously stated, Mormon belief in continued revelation and endless progression may be partly to blame. Still, there are more and more who, like Hugh Nibley, refuse to "take... zeal as an adequate substitute for knowledge." And yet, even those who are skeptical continue to persist in what may be a fool's errand of wedding spiritual and scientific knowledge.²⁷

The conflicting desires to know and yet rely on faith have been institutionalized in the form of FARMS, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies established at Brigham Young University, the main campus of the university owned by the church. FARMS has since been swallowed by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship which publishes periodicals on both *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* as well as *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* as a way to combine the sacred and scholarly in their approach to present more research on the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Each issue of *The FARMS Review* includes an introductory caveat that explain the balance many Mormon scholars and lay members seek to find:

²⁷ J. Michael Hunter, "The Kinderhook Plates, the Tucson Artifacts, and Mormon Archeological Zeal," *Journal of Mormon History* 31 (Spring 2005): 64.

Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.²⁸

In other words, those doctrines relating to how Mormons should live are the primary evidence for the truthfulness or lack thereof of LDS doctrines, archeological evidence while “interesting” is secondary. It is significant that many of my informants, when asked how or why they came across their knowledge or the websites or books they pointed me towards usually described the topic as “interesting.” These caveats coupled with the persistence of these stories and pieces of evidence indicate an unsettled ambivalence between growing skepticism that science of any kind might bolster one’s belief and a continued desire for such confirmation. Despite belief being a matter of faith and despite science sometimes outright challenging belief, believers of all kinds have and continue to search for scientific support for their belief.

Understanding Folk Archeology in Japan

The building blocks of folk archeology are not stories but evidence. Folk evidence is used to create a narrative, but it does not use the language or form of narrative. It more closely resembles, because it tries to mimic it, the language of science. Thus, most of the examples I have found are not told in narrative form, but can be picked out of their context within a conversation because they are simply there to prove a point, mainly that the Japanese people are more connected to the gospel as understood by Latter-day Saints than they appear to be. The absence of narrative form as presented in the evidence (i.e. without the story) leaves the hearers to understand the implied connections and narrative and makes that connection seem more self-

²⁸ For example see *The Farms Review*, ed., Daniel C. Peterson. 21 (2009): v.

evident since it is not, and thus does not need to be, stated. So while this evidence is used to create a story, the story relies on it being shared among Mormons and thus acts, whether it actually strengthens faith or not, as a way to strengthen community.

Folk archeology does not focus on narrative but on isolated evidence without much explanation, leaving the interpretation and significance of the evidence to be understood by the hearer. As I have stated before, the evidence that is shared constitute examples of high context communication. The examples I have noted in North American folklore and the examples I will cite from members and missionaries in Japan contain many implicit connections and echoes to LDS beliefs which are best understood within the context of LDS views of the apostasy, the restoration, and the gathering of Israel. Latter-day Saints believe that after the death of Jesus's apostles, "priesthood authority was taken from the earth, revelation ceased, and essential doctrines were lost or corrupted." Central to Joseph Smith's message was that he was restoring those truths that had been lost or corrupted. This belief is embedded in many of the Articles of Faith. Article 6 states that "we believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church." Article 8 states that "we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly," referring to the loss or corruption of truths the Bible once contained. While it is not the standard version used by Mormons today, the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) is a retranslation of the bible by Joseph Smith to restore it to its original condition. In 1 Nephi 13: 28, 29, Book of Mormon Prophet, Nephi sees a vision where "many plain and precious things" were removed from the Bible. Because of this belief in the ability, even prevalence, of people to fall away from the truth, Latter-day Saints are primed to see similarities in other religious or cultural traditions as remnants or survivals of when their ancient ancestors had the truth taught to them. The gospel is a

kind of “Ur” text from which all other truths and traditions have diverged, so similarities can be seen as evidence of and support of that fact.²⁹

The restoration of the gospel is also connected to the gathering of the house of Israel. As Deuteronomy 28: 64 warns and much of the Bible describes, “the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other.” As the tenth Article of Faith says, “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel.” The literal gathering involves both a spiritual gathering through missionary work and a physical gathering which was once practiced when Latter-day Saints gathered to Ohio, then Missouri, and eventually the Salt Lake Valley. The physical gathering has since been put on hold until the final gathering when Israel will be “gathered home to the lands of their inheritance.” This then is the lens through which many Latter-day Saints view foreign cultures, as scattered Israel who once knew and lived the gospel as Mormons understand it but who have since fallen away and changed those practices. Any similarity between their own beliefs and local practices can help reinforce these beliefs. Seen negatively this tendency can be parochial and reductive, but viewed positively it encourages Mormons to accept and look for truth everywhere. In Brigham Young’s words, “If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine.... Whether a truth be found with professed infidels, or with the Universalists, or the Church of Rome, or the Methodists, the Church of England, the Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Quakers, the Shakers,... it is the business of the Elders of this Church... to gather up all the truths in the world pertaining to life and salvation.”³⁰

²⁹ “Why Was a Restoration Necessary?” accessed April 23, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/youth/learn/ap/apostasy-restoration/necessary?lang=eng>.

³⁰ “Chapter 42: The Gathering of the House of Israel,” *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 245-50.; 2 Nephi 9: 2; “Chapter 2: The Gospel Defined,” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 14-20.

Terryl L. Givens discusses the effects that a belief in restoration, or “fulfillment theology” has had in general and on Latter-day Saints. First it is useful in accounting for “prevalent archetypes,” found in other religions “that could otherwise impugn the uniqueness and hence the validity of Christian doctrines.” A church newspaper, *The Evening and Morning Star* published an editorial that stated “we cannot believe, that the ancients in all ages were so ignorant of the system of heaven as many suppose.” In fact, Givens goes on to argue that the presence of truths in other places and religions were seen as building blocks as Smith tried to reassemble the fallen structure of true religion which he collected and assimilated from ancient and contemporary sources. Smith’s syncretic approach to truth can still be seen in Mormonism and Mormon’s willingness to see traces of their own truths wherever they go. Givens puts it well with “for those with eyes to see, however, the world was replete with these scattered “fragments of Mormonism,””³¹

Religious scholar Stephen Prothero argues that Americans and Mormons are predisposed to view America as a sacred place. Prothero reminds us that “many scholars have documented the tendency of Americans to make their nation sacred—to view its citizens as God’s chosen people and their country, as the Book of Mormon puts it, as ‘a land which is choice above all other lands.’” He argues that Joseph Smith took this tendency towards typology a step further by locating sacred space in America. Not only did Joseph Smith translate the Book of Mormon which brought Christ and his narrative to the new world, but he identified Jackson County, Missouri as both the location of the Garden of Eden as well as “where Christ would reign in his New Jerusalem.” This tendency to make the divine narrative local and immediate is the same tendency we see in Japanese members and missionaries seeking to feel more connected to a

³¹ Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32, 33.

religious tradition that not only sets them apart in their homeland, but is centered far away in the Middle East and America.³²

Folk Archeology in Japan

Japan has little tradition in Christianity, and even less in Mormonism. Japan is also often characterized as a collectivist society where people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, and belonging is, as it is for most people everywhere, an important thing made difficult by being “other.” Being Christian is rare in Japan, but being a Christian sect that is not even accepted by most Christians is a new order of foreign altogether. Add to that the fact that Mormon belief proscribes many fundamental aspects of Japanese culture. While the Word of Wisdom’s injunctions are certainly a marker of difference for Mormons in America, it is much more the case in Japan. Green tea, or *ocha*, for example is so ingrained in Japanese culture that not drinking it can create dissonance between Japanese Mormons and their non-member neighbors. Beer, *sake*, coffee, and smoking are also prevalent throughout Japan and abstaining from them marks Japanese Mormons as outsiders.³³

Only .1 percent of Japanese are Mormon. Feeling estranged from your nation can be uncomfortable, so members seek belonging. Missionaries, most from the United States but many from Japan as well, also feel this estrangement and also pursue not only belonging but also hope. Missionary work is notoriously difficult in Japan. The numbers of baptisms—a discouraged but persistent sign of success for missionaries—are comparatively low. Searching for and sharing

³² Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 166.

³³ Fred Rothman, Martha Pott, Hiroshi Azuma, Kazuo Miyake, and John Weisz, “The Development of Close Relationships in Japan and the United States: Paths of Symbiotic Harmony and Generative Tension,” *Child Development* 71 (2000): 1122.

these pieces of folk-scientific evidence is one way members and missionaries in Japan can achieve this belonging, and bolster faith and hope for success while laboring without many outward signs of success in a generally hostile environment.³⁴

The primary way achieve this feeling of belonging is to find evidence in Japanese culture, language, and history which connects the Japanese people with the Bible. This connection with the Bible ultimately connects the Japanese people with the house of Israel and all of the millennialist Jeremiads of hope that that entails for Mormon missionaries who see themselves as participating in “the literal gathering of Israel.” Evidence that the Japanese really are of the house of Israel despite the setbacks and lack of success missionaries experience can bolster their beliefs that they are engaged in a meaningful work.³⁵

As one of my informants, on May 27, 2014, stated, “Ancient Jewish and Japanese shrines, temples, manners, and customs, etc, are connected.” Many of these center around the similarities between Shinto Shrines or *jinjas* and ancient Israel’s tabernacle. The gates or *torii*’s of the *jinja*’s have a post and lintel structure and are often a bright red which many see as a long-forgotten reference to the blood of the Paschal lamb on the posts and lintels during Passover as recorded in Exodus 12: 7. There are also places to burn incense and to wash one’s hands just as there was an altar to burn sacrifices and a laver used for washing in the tabernacle. Finally, many returned missionaries remember hearing of a holiest room in Shinto *jinjas* which the head priest entered only once a year to commune with “the god” and which held only a mirror. Some concluded that it “sounds kinda like the Holy of Holies to me...” Finally, the prevalence and use

³⁴ “Facts and Statistics: Japan,” *Newsroom: The Official Resource for News Media, Opinion Leaders and the Public* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/japan/>.

³⁵ The Articles of Faith 1: 10, accessed April 22, 2015, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/a-of-f/1.6?lang=eng#5>.

of mochi, or pounded rice cakes, as offerings in shrines of all kinds and prevalent during festivals echoes the use of unleavened bread in the ancient tabernacle.

I found four different versions of the stories about the “holy of holies.” A Hawaiian female who served in Japan remembered that only the head priest could enter while another had heard that it was only the emperor who could enter and see the mirror. However, she added that it had ancient characters written around it that said “something about light and yaweh in Hebrew.” Another female informant did not hear that each *jinja* had a mirror in its “holy of holies,” but reported just one instance of a mirror in “an ancient Shinto temple” that had something written in Hebrew on the back side of it when they removed it. The details are different, but they all connect to the tabernacle and a connection between ancient Israel and ancient Japan.

There are other examples of Hebrew writing hidden in well-known Japanese landmarks as well. One missionary told me that an ancient *torii* (a gate to a *jinja*) was dug up to be replaced and along the bottom of one of the posts in a part that had long been buried, there was Hebrew writing. There was no mention of what it said, but that fact that it was there was enough to connect the Japanese people with ancient Israel. Some of the evidence surrounds particular shrines as well.

Two informants, both returned missionaries (one a Japanese female and the other a half-Japanese male from America) independent of each other, mentioned the “Ise Jingu” shrine which features stars of David and Hebrew writing. Another feature of the Ise and Izumo Taisha *jintas* is that they are taken down and rebuilt “every 50 years or so.” The Japanese female connected this regular rebuilding to the tabernacle being portable and thus able to be taken down and put back up. She also sent me a link to an article on the history of the Ise shrine that connects Ise to Isaiah and Yeshua or Jesus Christ. Another informant, a male missionary from Japan, spoke of a connection between the Japanese emperors and the tribe of Gad and remembered hearing that an

ancient emperor's name, or even his secret name, was "gado," a Japanese pronunciation of Gad, one of the lost 10 tribes.³⁶

The other most popular connection is the similarity between Japanese *mikoshi*, a kind of portable shrine carried on two or four poles during festivals, and the Ark of the Covenant. The Bible, in Exodus 25: 10-20, describes the ark as made of wood, overlaid with gold, and topped with winged cherubim. While the *mikoshi* are not topped with cherubim, they are often covered in gold and ornate decorations with poles for them to be carried and can be of a similar size. One informant even mentioned that when carrying the *mikoshi* around it is traditional to call out "Essa! Essa!" which, she added, doesn't mean anything in Japanese but means "to carry" in Hebrew. Another informant had heard that the *mikoshi* were not analogs of the Ark of the Covenant but of Noah's Ark and that during some festivals they are carried up into the mountains just as Noah's ark ended up on the top of a mountain.

Many members and missionaries point to clues in Japanese writing as well. One common one is the kanji for boat, 船, which has the kanji's for eight (八) and mouth (口) which many interpret as a reference to Noah's Ark since Noah, his three sons, and all their wives add up to eight mouths or people on the ark. Another informant noted the similarity between Japanese's katakana *su* (ス) and Hebrew's *gimmel* (ג) although she did admit that the sounds were different between them. Another informant, an American male, was skeptical of making anything of the similarity between the letters but was aware that others saw significance in them.

While most of the folk evidence shared among members and missionaries in Japan emphasized a connection between the Japanese people and ancient Israel, some evidence was also used to connect the Japanese to modern Mormonism. The evidence used to connect the Japanese to ancient Israel are most often connect to the tabernacle rather than Solomon's, Zerubabbel's, or

³⁶ "I Approach the Mystery of Ise Shrine!" *Japan and the Jewish Harmony*, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.historyjp.com/article.asp?kiji=58>.

Herod's temples. The tabernacle is likely used as the most ancient of the temple structures and thus the most ancient connection to Israel and its biblical narrative. Another explanation may be that the tabernacle is simply verbal shorthand for the temples of ancient Israel. Most informants also discussed connections with modern Mormon temples. Given the sacred nature of modern temples for Latter-day Saints, it may be that informants wanted to err on the side of discretion in referencing them, but some still connected the names written on papers and hung on trees or wooden frames in *jinja* courtyards as resembling the prayer rolls in modern LDS temples upon which patrons will write the names of people they feel are in special need of blessings. The aforementioned washing basin in *jintas* which some connect to the laver of the tabernacle, others connect to the symbolic washing and anointing ordinances performed in temples today. The Hawaiian female referred circumspectly to some of the clothing in Japanese *kanreiki*, a celebration for men when they turn 60, and a set of monkey statues at a *jinja* who were doing signs and symbols which any Latter-day Saint familiar with the endowment ceremony would be familiar with but the specifics of which they would avoid discussing in detail. A male returned missionary from Utah remembered being told on his mission that the *Komainu*, or guardian dogs at *jintas*, are symbolic of Christ. One of them has an open mouth as if to say “あ” or “a” and the other has its mouth closed as if to say “ん” or “n.” These are the first and last sounds in Hiragana, and Katakana, the Japanese syllabary alphabets, and thus similar to Alpha and Omega in the Greek, which references Christ in the New Testament, the Book of Mormon and The Doctrine & Covenants.³⁷

One Japanese woman spoke of an institute teacher who gave a tour in Kyoto for a religion professor who wanted to see a baptismal font “hidden” somewhere in Kyoto. This refers more specifically to modern Mormonism where baptism is often conducted in fonts rather than

³⁷ For references of Christ as Alpha and Omega see 3 Nephi 9: 18; Doctrine and Covenants 81: 7, 19: 1, 63: 60, 38: 1; Revelation 22: 13.

rivers as many were before chapels became commonplace. This is not without precedent in Mormon folk archeology since there are pictures and accounts of Baptismal fonts in Mesoamerican ruins used as evidence of their knowledge of the gospel and practicing of baptism by immersion. Another informant, a Caucasian male, spoke of a version of the Mormon practice of baptism for the dead performed in ancient Japan. Most Japanese cemeteries contain *sotoba*, narrow, flat wooden boards which stand behind the grave stones and which have the deceased's name written on them. As this informant said, early foreigners saw Japanese people taking this boards out into the water and immersing them in the water, a connection, he said, to the Mormon practice of baptism for the dead. Another informant, an American male returned missionary, recalled seeing the lanterns the Japanese would float down rivers during certain festivals in honor of their ancestors and felt that "through generations the ordinances for the dead were lost but that distant memory still captures the importance of family."

Some informants even cited genetic similarities between the Japanese and various members of the house of Israel. One female returned missionary who was Japanese told me that her parents were from Okinawa and that her ancestors looked similar to Native Americans. She added that a university near her home had a gallery of pictures of Native Americans, and every time she passed them, she was reminded of her ancestors. While this may not sound significant to an outsider, to any Latter-day Saint, the perceived similarity between Okinawans and Native Americans connects the Japanese with whom many Mormons believe are the descendants of the Lamanites, one of the groups spoken of in the Book of Mormon, and another lost member of the house of Israel as they were descendants of Joseph. Another informant, a male returned missionary from Hawaii, spoke of a Māori member who lived in Japan who felt that the natives of Hokkaido, the Ainu, had similar facial tattoos to the Māori and felt there must be some lost connection there. A male returned missionary also from Hawaii connected the Ainu and their cultural practices with Polynesians. Connecting the Ainu, who are not ethnically Japanese, with

Polynesians is another piece of evidence that depends on the listener knowing that many Latter-day Saints consider Polynesians to be descendants of Hagoth, a ship builder mentioned in the Book of Mormon in Alma 63: 5. Hagoth builds many ships and sets sail northward never to be heard from again. Many Latter-day Saints and especially Polynesian Latter-day Saints consider Hagoth and those who went with him as the progenitors of the Polynesians who inhabit the isles of the sea. The Book of Mormon speaks of people being gathered “from their long dispersion, from the isles of the sea” in 2 Nephi 10: 8, and the Lord says in 2 Nephi 29: 7 that he remembers “those who are upon the isles of the sea.” Finally, some verses indicate that it is not Hagoth but other tribes of Israel who now inhabit the isles of the sea such as 1 Nephi 22: 4 which states, “Yea, the more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea; and whither they are none of us knoweth, save that we know that they have been led away.” So connecting the Japanese to other Pacific Islanders connects them to the house of Israel, but it is also significant that they are connected to two Pacific Island groups where missionaries have been very successful.

Early missionaries gained many converts in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century when they first started preaching despite coming after a war against Caucasians and the fact that many religions had been preaching and converting the Māori for decades. There are many stories told of their miraculous conversions, but the best known perhaps is a story of a chief who, when many Māori were having an experience similar to Joseph Smith’s asking, which church should we join? The Māori also identified with the children of Israel and “often laid literal claim to Israelite ancestry” with one Māori prophet, Te Whiti, claiming that “we come from the land of Canaan.” One of the chiefs told everyone to wait and that the true church was coming, and they could recognize them because they will travel in pairs (a reference to missionary companionships), and they will learn their language and “raise their right hands” or carry “the sign of the square” as one New Zealander told it to me. He also mentioned, speaking more

practically, that the Māori and Mormons share an emphasis on the importance of families and felt that despite the miraculous prophecy from one of their own, the Māori would have been drawn to the church anyway. Regardless, the connection of the Japanese to the Polynesians by Polynesians themselves supports the idea that folk archaeology is used to foster hope and a sense of belonging in a setting that can be discouraging and alienating for missionaries.³⁸

Seventh President of the church Heber J. Grant also speculated on the connection between the Japanese and Polynesians. As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Grant was sent to open Japan to missionary work. In his prayer he spoke of “the blood of Lehi and Nephi [and of Israel] had been transmitted to the people of [Japan], many of whom have the features and manners of the American Indians, [and he] asked the Lord that if this were true that He would not forget the integrity of His servants Lehi and Nephi.” The added “if,” certainly implies uncertainty as to the true ancestry of the Japanese people, but even then there was the tendency to see a connection between the Japanese and Israel. Given his object in being in Japan, the connection is a natural one.³⁹

This tendency to connect the Japanese to other lost tribes of Israel and other religious traditions is not new to Mormons nor is it unique to Japanese Mormons. The authors of *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* claim that other scholars have been interested in this connection although the connections do seem more legendary than factual. Ben-Ami Shillony notes that these legends are based on the lost tribes of Israel who were conquered and dispersed when Assyria conquered Israel’s northern Kingdom, Ephraim. Ben-Ami sees many similarities between the Japanese and Jewish nations as well as their religions, Shinto and Judaism. Both

³⁸ R. Lanier Britsch, “Maori Traditions and the Mormon Church,” *New Era* June (1981), [https://www.lds.org/new-era/1981/06/maori-traditions-and-the-mormon-church?lang=eng.](https://www.lds.org/new-era/1981/06/maori-traditions-and-the-mormon-church?lang=eng;); Grant Underwood, “Mormonism, Maori, and Cultural Authenticity,” *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, eds., Eric A. Eliason & Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), 473.

³⁹ Spencer J. Palmer and Roger R. Keller, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1990), 91.

religions, Shillony argues, differ from other major world religions by focusing on this life rather than the next, and eschewing monasticism and celibacy in a celebration of life. Shillony also compares the meanings of Jerusalem, city of peace, with the early Japanese capitals of Heijo-kyo (citadel of peace), Heian-kyo (capitol of peace), and Hani-yasu (clay peace). Elsewhere Shillony records how Joao Rodriques, a Portuguese interpreter living in Japan wrote in 1608 that the Chinese were one of the lost tribes, and while other nations made other claims, it was not until 1879 that Norman McLeod, a Scottish businessman living in Japan published a book asserting the Japanese as descendants of the lost tribes. To support his theory, McLeod noted “many Jewish faces similar to those I saw on the continent,” going so far as to see a resemblance between Emperor Meiji and a Jewish banking family of Eastern Europe, the von Epsteins. He noted the similarity between the layouts of Shinto shrines and ancient Jewish Temples and their preference for cedar as a building material. Japanese, so he said, dance before their *mikoshi* as David danced before the ark. So many of these connections have been seen by other Westerners.⁴⁰

In 1908, a Christian, Japanese University Professor, Saeki Yoshiro, published a book outlining how the Hata clan came to Japan from Korea in the third century. The chieftain’s family names were Uzumasa which was to derive from “Yesu Messiah.” The Uzumasa shrine in Kyoto was previously called the “Daiheki Shrine” which was written with the same characters used to spell “David, indicating that the Uzumasa shrine was built to enshrine King David.” Nearby is a well called “Isaryo,” which Yoshiro thought could refer to “Israel.”⁴¹

In November of 2000, PBS’s NOVA speculated on many possibilities of the lost tribes and cited evidence for Japan. They note that there are “thousands of words and names of places

⁴⁰ Spencer J. Palmer and Roger R. Keller, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1990), 91; Ben-Ami Shillony, *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1991), 26-27, 31-32.; Ben-Ami Shillony, *Collected Writings of Ben Ami Shillony* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 309.

⁴¹ Ben-Ami Shillony, *The Jews and the Japanese*, 309.

with no real etymological meaning in Japanese. And they all correspond with Hebrew words. Even the Kings have similar names.” Among the cognates they include the word for foreigner, *Goi* in Hebrew, *Gaijin* in Japanese; cold in Hebrew is *kor*, and *koru* is “to freeze” in Japanese. The site claims, as did McLeod, that the first known king of Japan was named Osee, a connection with the last King of Israel, Hoshea. It notes the connections between Shinto and Israelite temples, the gates surrounding them and their “holy of holies.” They also mention a well in “Koryugi” inscribed with the words “well of Israel.” They suggest a correlation between “Samurai” and “Samaria,” and finally note that the “Mikado” or emperor, descends from the tribe of Gad for mikado’s similarity with the Hebrew word for “his majesty the King, Malchuto.”⁴²

Conclusion

William A. Wilson believes that the “dominant genre of Mormon folklore” is “narratives which both tellers and listeners generally believe to be true accounts of actual events,” and that these stories run the gamut from “third-person legends” to “first-person memorates—that is, accounts of personal experiences interpreted according to Mormon beliefs.” What these Japanese LDS members and missionaries are doing can only be called memorate if we take into account overlapping identities of Japanese, Mormon, and Israelite, which enables sharers of the evidence and anecdotes to connect the Japanese people and the Shinto religion to ancient Israel and a particularly Mormon narrative of apostasy and restoration.⁴³

The greater skepticism towards such evidence is exemplified in the way that many members express an interest in the evidence as “interesting” rather than expressing full belief in

⁴² “Where Are the Ten Lost Tribes?: Part 3,” Nova Online. 2000, last accessed June 2, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/israel/losttribes3.html>.

⁴³ William A. Wilson, “The Lore of Faith,” *Western Folklore* 54 (October 1995): 306.

them. This proclivity towards belief while resisting buying too fully into the evidence that is, in the end, not supported by science reflects the historical schizophrenia that attends Mormon's relationship with wedding science and religion. This balance between a hopeful belief and skepticism can also be seen in the way that evidence is very often cited which, if checked, could be easily disproved, but which, left unchecked because they are not a central matter of belief, continue happily to support these "interesting" connections. Despite this skepticism, this folk archeological evidence can be used to help justify their faith to themselves or even used as evidence to convince others or defend their peculiar behavior to outsiders. For instance, I heard many members cite scientific studies that warned against drinking too much Green Tea although there were other studies that found some health benefits to it as well.

So why does folk archeology persist? While the most obvious explanation may be to attribute this sharing of evidence as faith promoting rumors, I argue that they are not primarily about belief, but about forming vital connections between communities. They do this in two primary ways. First, they use the language and mimic the genre of scientific evidence, the most respected way of knowing in advanced societies. This allows the sharers to feel more connected with their broader society despite being estranged from it through their religious affiliation—particularly for the Japanese members and missionaries. While it helps them *feel* connected, it does not in fact connect them to that wider society even if they would like it to. Rather it separates them from that wider society and strengthens relationships between them and other members because it relies on high context communication.

Secondly, in sharp contrast to most objects of faith, evidence is physical and immediate, tangible and available to the senses. And while the connection between different types of evidence and their meaning is presented as immediate, and even necessary, it is not. Certainly it can be suggestive, but certain it is not. And this possible or potential connection seems to be enough for folk archaeologists to ground their faith in. However, it is not primarily about creating

an empirical foundation for faith, a rocky endeavor in any case, but about using the tangible and concrete evidence to create a stronger connection to a religion that is deeply rooted not in Japan but in the Americas and the Middle East. The distance of those places and those traditions can increase the ephemeral connection to world of belief, but concrete evidence helps bridge that divide. This distance is bridged as Japanese members and missionaries see evidence of the Japanese's connection to Israel and the Mormon narrative of the gospel in their every-day life. Indeed, the evidence is in the *jinjas* they pass every day, in the words they write and speak, in the festivals they participate in, and sometimes even in the faces they see in the street. This connection then converts their estrangement into an intense, if esoteric, sense of belonging. They belong to a Japanese identity that most other Japanese cannot appreciate. These two effects, the high context use of evidence to indicate rather than relate a narrative, and the immediacy of the pieces of evidence work together to create a participatory narrative that can strengthen those communal bonds even more because the creation of the narrative is a reciprocal process.

Baptized members are, by right of adoption if nothing else, literally considered of the house of Israel, usually one of the lost tribes (ie, not Judah or Benjamin). The literal reality of this identity is strengthened in a Mormon rite called a Patriarchal blessing where certain priesthood leaders known as Patriarchs give blessings often referred to as personal scripture to members. This, like many other rites requires a worthiness interview with an ecclesiastical leader and happens sometime in the later teens or early twenties. Patriarchal blessings are considered very private and members are encouraged to be careful in sharing them with others. Because of this, the connection with ancient Israel is in some ways superfluous as it is already a central tenet of their faith. But whereas the connection is a matter of belief, folk evidence make reinforcing that belief a daily experience for members and missionaries in Japan.

Finally, the use of evidence and appeals to science fit well into LDS belief and cosmology. The emphasis on the tangible and concrete align with the material reality of spiritual

beings. The belief in continued revelation and its correlative of incomplete knowledge throughout mortality creates a condition where many things can be true. When evidence is presented which supports LDS beliefs, they can be readily accepted, and when evidence challenges those beliefs, it can be just as readily held at arm's length with a "we'll wait and see" attitude. These attitudes allow such evidence, whether plausible or not, to move freely through the folk.

Ultimately the evidence is more about belonging than belief. It allows members who can feel like outsiders in their own country with their foreign religion—or even their religiosity—with its un-Japanese customs such as injunctions against that most Japanese of institutions, tea, recreate a sense of belonging with their estranged culture. It also allows Japanese missionaries to create a sense of community and shared heritage with the Japanese despite negative reactions connected to some of their prime identifiers: Mormon, foreign faith, cult members, and proselytizers. These identifiers create a divide between missionaries and those they proselyte, but which can, in some measure, be repaired narratively through these ubiquitous evidence encountered throughout their daily lives.

Chapter 7

In but Not Of

In chapter 1, I described the difficulties of growing up in America in the twenty-first century. In chapter 2, I mentioned the Mormon emphasis on “the protected child,” the belief that children need to be nurtured and shaped. In exploring Mormon adolescence, I hope at the very least I have challenged the idea of the protected child by showing how active and inventive LDS youth are in responding to the particular stresses of growing up as Mormons in America. While many see the church and its members as under the control of a hierarchical ecclesiastical authority, Jan Shipps argues that diversity has always been more prevalent in the church than often recognized. Chapter 2-6 should provide ample evidence that LDS youth respond to the demands of their nation and church proactively and in inventive ways.¹

This is not necessarily news. In 2005, one author of a study on the religiosity of adolescents in America concluded that “The LDS church asks a lot of its teenagers, and it would appear that, more often than not, they get it.” Mormon youth stood out in belief and “social outcomes” in the survey and were more successful at “traversing the choppy waters of adolescence,” according to the study. While some scholars attribute Mormon practices of seminary and scripture study among others to these outcomes, my research suggests that not just

¹ Jan Shipps, “Beyond the Stereotypes: Mormon and Non-Mormon Communities in Twentieth-Century Mormondom,” *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed., Eric A. Eliason (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 147, 150-151.; For an example of scholarship which does see the church as monolithic and conformist see Reed Johnson, “The Mormon Church as a Central Command System,” *Review of Social Economy* 37 (1979), 79-94.

the structure of the church, but Mormon youth's own folklore may be another source of, or at least the vehicle of, their resiliency.²

Latter-day Saints of all ages, but particularly youth are counselled to “be in but not of the world.” The phrase, while not strictly scriptural, is common in other Christian denominations, and seems to mean the same thing, that while Christians must live in the world, they should not adopt the standards of that world. In his address to the priesthood during April General Conference in 2011, Thomas S. Monson said, “Where once the standards of the Church and the standards of society were mostly compatible, now there is a wide chasm between us, and it's growing ever wider.” Similar to Elder Hales's comments I quoted in Chapter 1, this sentiment emphasizes a zero-sum game between following the world or the church. As Matthew 6: 24 puts it, “Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.”³

But of course lived experience is rarely as clear-cut as that. Even Christ counselled his followers in Matthew 22: 21 to “render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.” Apart from the clearly expressed standards that are in obvious conflict between the church and the world (consumption of tea, alcohol, and tobacco; and sexual mores) there are many values within both the church and the world that are less clear standards and among which youth are active in negotiating their relative positions to each. Larry J. Nelson found that Mormon emerging adults did indeed avoid many of the risky behaviors of adolescence. Nelson also found that Mormon youth's concept of adulthood was influenced by both their American and Mormon culture. The youth polled valued both individualism and self-reliance similar to other American youth, but also valued “being other oriented and conducting

² Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 47.; For more see Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30-71.

³ Thomas S. Monson, “Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*. May (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011).

oneself properly” much higher than their American counterparts. Family and family-related milestones also rated much higher among Mormon youth than their non-Mormon counterparts.⁴

All in all, Mormon youth have found very world-friendly ways to “live in but not of the world” while not sacrificing their core standards by appealing to and incorporating different Mormon and American values in their search to create durable and fulfilling communities. Despite this, there is still much ambiguity in the transition between adolescence and adulthood, especially with growing awareness of another preliminary stage of “emerging adulthood,” where 66% of LDS youth, when asked if they have reached adulthood answered “in some ways yes, in some ways no.” And currently that is as concrete a way to leave adolescence and enter emerging adulthood or adulthood as there seems to be.⁵

As one LDS woman noted, “it isn’t easy being 26 and single in Happy Valley” (referring to the Utah Valley where Provo and Orem are located). I remember my BYU French teacher once speaking of her anger at being placed at the children’s table for a family Thanksgiving dinner. Among large Mormon families, family get-togethers can involve multiple families and dividing children from adults is common and sometimes difficult due to the large numbers of people and limited seating. My teacher’s anger was understandable since she was in her late 20s, a full grown woman with a job and her own home. By all accounts, she was an adult. But she was also single. Recognized inside and outside the church, it is not easy being single and approaching 30 in such a family-oriented religion. Much more visible and controversial is the difficult position of homosexuals in the church. In fact, the current disaffection with the church’s stance on such matters echoes the end of perhaps the last high-water mark of Mormon esteem in America in the

⁴ Larry J. Nelson, “Rites of Passage in Emerging Adulthood: Perspectives of Young Mormons,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 100 (2003): 37, 45-46

⁵ Larry J. Nelson, “Rites of Passage in Emerging Adulthood: Perspectives of Young Mormons,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 100 (2003): 40.

1950s when, in 1960s and again in the 70s, LDS stances on race alienated many Americans and even members.⁶

Mormon beliefs in family lie at the heart of many of the current debates within and about Mormonism. Armand Mauss would argue that this is a natural consequences of Mormon retrenchment, or seeking to appear distinctive despite wide-spread assimilation with American culture. A renewed focus on the family is one aspect of that retrenchment as seen in the establishment of Family Home Evening in 1964. More recently “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” released in 1995, emphasized the family as the central unit of society, reiterated the importance and eternal nature of gender, and advocated traditional homes and gender roles where the father provides and the mother nurtures.⁷

While the importance of the family is well known and argued, I argue that the Mormon conception of the life cycle, as I outlined in Chapter 1, also lies at the heart of these debates today. And while the various sides of the debate on Gay Marriage, marriage itself, and families seem entrenched and immobile. Rather than continuing to argue one side or the other, it could be useful to take a step back and look at how the folklore of people in different life stages is framing and processing these debates and questions already. While some folklorists have looked at folklore within different life stages among Mormons, few sources yet center their work on various stages in Mormon’s unique life cycle. While this dissertation has broached a crucial moment in that cycle, more work can certainly be done on the folklore of emerging adults, newlyweds, young single adults, single adults, homosexual Mormons both within and without the church and others.

⁶ Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport: Prager, 2006), 37.; Chiung Hwang Chena and Ethan Yorgason, “The Media’s Construction of Latter-day Saints as a Model Minority,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32 (1999): 109.

⁷ Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 93.; See Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport: Prager, 2006), 39-41.

Lay Mormons and leaders alike often remark that they learn something new every time they reread the Book of Mormon or every time they participate in the temple endowment ceremony. The most common explanation for discovering new information or insights in both of these familiar and foundational practices (reading the Book of Mormon and attending the temple), is because, despite the fact that they do not change, is that they are conduits of revelation. They are a living document or ritual, respectively, which can respond to “where you are in life.” The reverse can be equally true and another useful avenue especially for folklorists, is that where we are in life, our life stage, affects our outlook and how we live our lived religion.

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