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Reconciling Identities in HBO's Room 104: LGBTQ2S Mormons and Shifting Mainstream Perceptions

Chris Miller

Abstract

A 2017 episode of the HBO series *Room 104* (2017–2020) revolves around two Mormon missionaries spending a night in the titular motel room. Throughout the evening, the pair progressively push the envelope of rebellion through booze and pornography, with the episode culminating in a suggested sexual encounter between them. *Room 104* departs from typical depictions by complicating what audiences 'know' about Mormons and expanding the possibilities for Mormon sexual relationships beyond heterosexual polygamy. Using Lynn Spigel's concept of 'popular memory' and David Feltmate's 'ignorant familiarity,' this article examines how media shapes what audiences know about communities. The episode also importantly juxtaposes LGBTQ2S and Mormon identities. This article places the episode in conversation with real-world organizations that offer competing visions for how these two seemingly conflicting identities can be reconciled.

Keywords: Mormons, LGBTQ2S, Popular Culture, Identity, *Room 104*

The HBO anthology series *Room 104* (2017–2020) centres on a motel room that has new occupants each episode. In a 2017 episode, two Mormon¹ missionaries (Noah and Joseph) take up lodging for the night.² The episode starts with their venting frustration over the lack of success in their mission. They soon turn to broader irritations with the Church, like feeling excluded from 'normal' activities and difficulty ignoring certain urges. Curiosity eventually takes over as the pair drink beer, masturbate, and party through the night. The final scene ambiguously suggests the pair will also explore a sexual relationship.

This episode departs from past programs depicting Mormons and complicates what audiences 'know' about Mormons. It is rare to find any program depicting Mormons. Shows that *do* feature Mormons, like *Big Love* (2006-2011) or *Sister Wives* (2010-), often fixate on polygamy. The missionaries' battle between faith and sexuality expands mainstream depictions to include LGBTQ2S Mormons. This article examines how this episode potentially expands and re-shapes mainstream knowledge about Mormonism; it also places the show's ambiguous ending in conversation with real-world possibilities that exist for LGBTQ2S Mormons.

Official Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) orthodoxy states, “While same-sex attraction is not a sin, it can be a challenge,” which encapsulates the Church’s outlook on LGBTQ2S identities.³ Although official literature occasionally employs more specific (and less stigmatized) terms like gay and lesbian, the Church often defaults to the term same-sex attraction (SSA). Church policies assert that the Lord’s ‘law of chastity’ forbids “sexual relations outside of a marriage between a man and a woman,” reinforcing heteronormativity, in which heterosexuality is the presumed default sexual orientation.⁴ Describing non-heterosexuality as a ‘challenge’ reinforces that the Church considers gay identities to deviate from idealized norms.⁵ Organizations like ‘Mormon and Gay’ and ‘North Star’ encourage LGBTQ2S Mormons to adhere to Church principles. They offer information and support to help ‘integrate’ LGBTQ2S Mormons into the mainstream Church but condemn physical expressions of non-heterosexuality as sin. In contrast, groups like ‘Affirmation’ support LGBTQ2S Mormons who seek to reconcile these identities.

Matthew J. Grow calls for more scholarship analyzing modern Mormon developments.⁶ Many scholars examine Mormonism’s earliest years (1820–1850),⁷ transformations at the turn of the twentieth century (1880–1920),⁸ or assimilation in the mid-twentieth century (1930–1990),⁹ leaving modern issues comparatively underrepresented. Studies of contemporary issues are not wholly missing, but Mormon Studies has historically emphasized these earlier periods.

Twenty-first century developments are underrepresented, and LGBTQ2S Mormon experiences are especially lacking.¹⁰ Studies of LGBTQ2S Mormons are not entirely missing, and there is important research about this community.¹¹ However, scholars often examine LGBTQ2S Mormons as a subculture presumed to be wholly distinct. Largely missing is research in which sexual orientation represents another facet of identity, akin to gender or race. While this article is similarly guilty of an exclusive focus on LGBTQ2S Mormons, one reason why *Room 104* is a significant mainstream Mormon depiction is that these missionaries are not sensational like other typical depictions of Mormons. They are not law-breaking polygamists (à la *Big Love*), nor do they break into song to express their faith (à la *The Book of Mormon*). As part of an anthology series, they are simply one vignette within a wider tapestry of the people that stay in this motel room. These characters also importantly resist clear labels. The episode’s ambiguous ending leaves us unsure whether they are gay, bisexual, queer, or straight. Ambiguity complicates what viewers know about Mormons and strengthens these characters’ potential to complexify Mormons in mainstream reception.

Guillermo Avila-Saavedra argues that analyses of LGBTQ2S media representations must consider gender, class, and race, but ignores religion’s role in identity construction.¹² Discussing *Will & Grace* (1998-2006; 2017-2020), Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow argue, “viewers are congratulated for their acceptance of gays and lesbians, but without any real consideration of the compromised lives of gays and lesbians within our heteronormative culture.”¹³ *Room 104* highlights the stakes should these missionaries pursue queer relationships.

Recognizing the need for intersectional analyses of media depictions, this article highlights the dual importance of the characters' sexual and religious identities.¹⁴ These characters occupy Mormon and LGBTQ2S spaces but do so ambiguously. Is this a coming out story? Will they leave their faith? The episode brings multidimensionality to character tropes often defined in single dimensions.

Episode Summary

Early in the episode, the frustrated missionaries pray for a sign they are on the “true path.”¹⁵ At first, Noah appears rebellious while Joseph represents commitment to Mormon values. Noah confesses that he recently tried coffee. Joseph freaks out and demands they pray for forgiveness. As they consult their scripture, Joseph unknowingly sits on a remote and miraculously turns the TV to a channel showing pornography. Horrified, Joseph rushes to unplug the TV. Noah asks what this ‘sign’ could mean, says he wants to explore these possibilities, and *questions* God, asking, “why would He create those urges in the first place?”

Partway through, their roles flip, and Joseph seems discomforted by ‘urges.’ When Noah inadvertently puts his hand on Joseph’s thigh, Joseph quickly pulls away. Later, when Noah exits the shower, Joseph catches himself peeking at his naked companion. After they go to bed, Joseph sneaks out and buys beer. Joseph persuades Noah to indulge by arguing that St. Augustine’s faith was made stronger *because* he committed sins.¹⁶ He suggests that by ‘letting go’ for one night they can resolve their incessant doubts and deepen their commitment. This begins a montage of laughing, drinking, dancing, and masturbating.

The next morning, Joseph suggests they charge into deeper exploration by blowing off their duties and seeing a movie instead. When Noah admits his regrets about last night, Joseph responds, “I definitely wanna go further before I even consider going back.” Joseph tries to initiate a kiss, but Noah pulls away. Whenever he inches closer, Noah shoves him back. Eventually, Joseph is thrown to the ground, hits his head, and falls unconscious. Noah tries to revive Joseph, but eventually gives up and sits dejectedly on the ground. He asks God in prayer if these events have been a sign or a punishment. In the middle of Noah’s monologue, Joseph emits a loud gasp and is conscious again.¹⁷ The pair declare Joseph’s revival a miracle, hug each other, then pray. Seemingly back to their senses, they prepare to resume their proselytizing. Noah says, “48 more days to go.” Joseph responds, “We’ll get one, Elder.” Before they are fully dressed however, they pause and look at each other. Noah says, “you thinking about...” Joseph proposes, “shall we offer it up to St. Augustine?” and the boys jump across their beds towards each other.

Mormons in Popular Culture

Media shapes our knowledge about subcultures. Books, TV shows, movies, and other media present basic presumptions about diverse communities to mainstream audiences. Lynn Spigel defines popular memory as “a form of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture.”¹⁸ Popular memory shapes in-group identities *and* what groups assume to know about others. However, such impressions are rarely accurate. Popular memory (unlike ‘official history’) is less concerned with ‘accuracy’ than memory’s uses for the present.¹⁹

By constructing realities that may not be accurate but are *useful*, popular memory shapes what we know about others. David Feltmate defines “ignorant familiarity” as “widespread superficial—and often erroneous—knowledge about groups” that people “use to facilitate social interaction.”²⁰ Audiences may not know much about any particular group but assemble stereotypical identifiers to navigate encounters with diverse others. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin suggest, “most people simply don’t have the time to think deeply about” Mormons, allowing stereotypes (reinforced through media) to fill these gaps.²¹ Mormonism in popular culture is defined by three persistent themes: deviant sexuality (usually framed as polygamy); suspicion of institutions; and the model minority.²² “Codes” assigned to Mormons in popular media, (multiple wives, missionary uniforms, oddly devout) reinforce assumptions that Mormons are distinctly different.²³

HBO’s *Big Love* and TLC’s *Sister Wives* both feature polygamist families living in the Intermountain West. Many crime procedurals similarly feature episodes in which polygamists (often Mormon, though sometimes unstated) represent that week’s ‘villain.’²⁴ Tanya D. Zuk suggests *Big Love* is part of a broader discourse in which Mormons are rejected by mainstream culture and “relegated to running jokes.”²⁵ Michelle Mueller takes this further, classifying Lifetime’s *Escaping Polygamy* (2014 -) as a “Reality TV Atrocity Tale.”²⁶ Fitting the mold of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon atrocity tales,²⁷ Mueller argues that *Escaping Polygamy* homogenizes all Mormons and highlights “the most culturally shocking aspects . . . to provoke moral outrage in the audience.”²⁸ Shows rarely depict members of the LDS Church (the largest body of Mormons), but characters’ denominations are immaterial since mainstream viewers are often unaware that any diversity within Mormonism exists.²⁹ While *Escaping Polygamy* is more strongly anti-polygamy than shows like *Sister Wives*,³⁰ I conceptualize all programs in which Mormons are defined by polygamy as TV atrocity tales, since Mormonism is reduced to a single stereotype.

Zuk compares how *Big Love* accepts ‘suburban’ polygamy and rejects ‘compound’ polygamy.³¹ Mormons are still coded as weird (they have multiple wives), but *partly* resemble ‘us’ (unlike compound polygamists, they are not abusive). Although normalizing ‘suburban’ polygamists, *Big Love* also distorts the percentage of polygamists in the Mormon subculture.³² Additionally, ‘compound’ polygamists reinforce associations of Mormonism and authoritarian

institutions. Such shows therefore only *partially* redeem Mormons. Viewers walk away seeing Mormons as family-oriented, but also get the impression that they are all polygamists.

Mormon sexuality still pervades *Room 104*, but the missionaries' sexuality is not polygamous, nor is it coded as deviant. Discussing connotations surrounding 'Mormon' sexuality, Brenda R. Weber writes, "In some cases, 'Mormon' means sexually chaste; in other contexts, it denotes sexual lasciviousness; in other uses still, the term means sexually bizarre."³³ Mormon sexuality rarely translates to 'normal.' *Room 104* breaks this mold in that the missionaries' sexuality is, frankly, rather ordinary and unexciting. One glances at the other exiting the shower, they masturbate (separately and clothed) on their respective beds, and they *perhaps* kiss. *Room 104*'s depiction of Mormon sexuality is quite plain compared to the religion's traditional associations.

Another Mormon-centric production was the Broadway sensation *The Book of Mormon*, which uses songs and jokes to parody Mormon beliefs. Mormons are only redeemed after extensive mockery. Referencing this play to summarize Mormonism's position in mainstream culture, Grow explains, "Mormons are mainstream enough to be mocked by the wider culture . . . but remain outsiders."³⁴ A similar evaluation of Mormonism shapes the *South Park* (1997 -) episode "All About Mormons." Mormons are admired as *people*, but their *beliefs* are mocked.³⁵ Deriding Mormon beliefs highlights the 'suspicion of institutions' code. *Room 104* (largely unconcerned with Mormon theology) also avoids this trope. We see that the missionaries *have* a religion, and that it may cause them to act certain ways (polite) or to abstain from certain things (beer, sex). However, the episode does not *mock* their theology.

Room 104 still employs stereotypes, with missionaries representing ignorant familiarity about Mormons.³⁶ We note their shirts, ties, and black nametags immediately, which foregrounds their religious identity. The show also plays into what audiences expect from such characters. Discussing Mormons on reality TV, Karen D. Austin suggests, "Mormons are generally perceived as strait-laced, friendly, repressed, and naïve," which aptly describes *Room 104*'s depiction.³⁷ The missionaries avoid swearing and say 'identification' (instead of ID) to hyperbolize their politeness. Even their night of rebellion is relatively tame. One of Joseph's grand boasts of rebellion is raising his hands at the top of a rollercoaster. This exaggerated civility represents the model minority stereotype. However, the pair breaking rules over the course of the episode—and perhaps even leave the Church behind—subverts this stereotype and emphasizes Mormons' 'normalcy.'

Chase Burns adds that Mormon missionaries in a gay love story is another cliché, citing this stereotype's popularity in pornography.³⁸ Queer missionaries offer the creators "an easy and readily available idea."³⁹ While this trope may be popular in pornography, by adapting it to television, *Room 104* shifts what mainstream audiences may expect from Mormon characters, diversifying the possibilities of Mormon identities.

Media codes are socially constructed and change over time.⁴⁰ The show initially uses ignorant familiarity but expands how viewers may think about Mormons by shifting to new themes. The missionary experience is a stressful journey that thousands of Mormons have endured.⁴¹ Young Mormons leave home for two years, have limited contact with family, and are paired with a companion around the clock. Loneliness, failure to gain converts, or frustration with one's companion exposes viewers to different 'Mormon issues.' The on-screen pair's venting also gives viewers a different glimpse into Mormon lives. They are devout, but not unquestioning. While the musical *The Book of Mormon* offered a glimpse at similar issues, *Room 104* differs in *how* Mormons confront issues. The missionaries simply talk through their concerns, and are far less sensational in this universe, which helps normalize Mormons.

Room 104 also stands in contrast to Mormon-made productions. Shows and movies produced (or broadcast) by official Mormon networks (e.g., Latter-day Saints Channel or BYUtv) offer programming that is explicitly devotional or implicitly promotes Mormon beliefs. Other 'Mormon-made productions' include media that feature Mormon writers, actors, or directors, often distributed by companies that promote Mormon/Christian values. Programs like *The Mormon Bachelor* cater to Mormon audiences and offer more realistic representations, but do not generally attract wide audiences.⁴² Some programs produced by insiders give more accurate depictions of Mormon life, but use references deeply rooted in the Mormon subculture that "may be lost on non-Mormon audiences."⁴³ Movies like *Heaven is Waiting* (2011),⁴⁴ *Minor Details* (2009),⁴⁵ or *Forever Strong* (2008),⁴⁶ which promote Mormon writers, actors, and themes, lack wide distribution, hindering their ability to affect *mainstream* perceptions of Mormonism.⁴⁷ Shows promoted by the Church are also unlikely to show queer Mormon characters, which reinforces Church orthodoxy and heteronormativity as the way all Mormons are presumed to behave. *Room 104* broadcasts its more balanced, diverse depiction to a wider audience.⁴⁸

Other examples of mainstream Mormon-made productions include the *Twilight* saga, written by Mormon author Stephenie Meyer. These books are the source material for the popular movies, and by extension, promote the Church's heteronormative ideals.⁴⁹ However, characters are not *coded* as Mormon, meaning this connection might elude viewers. *Room 104*, despite having little formal input from Mormons,⁵⁰ has protagonists that explicitly represent this religion.

Room 104's construction of Mormon sexuality makes these characters more likely to evoke positive responses from audiences. Richard Allen argues that viewers require a set of traits they can admire for identification with characters to resonate.⁵¹ Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke et al. asked participants to identify a gay character they recalled from media, then measured their overall outlook towards 'homosexuality,' finding that media can greatly influence overall outlooks.⁵² Combining Mormon and LGBTQ2S identities, this episode constructs Mormons as more mainstream. LGBTQ2S-identified viewers can empathize with the characters' 'coming out story.'⁵³ Straight viewers may also empathize with Mormon characters who only desire one

sexual partner (unlike other shows where protagonists desire several). *Room 104* rejects Mormonism's restrictive rules and celebrates the characters following their desires. Recognizing media's role in shaping mainstream perceptions, *Room 104* has the potential to alter what audiences know about Mormonism and how audiences feel about the community.

In addition to subverting traditional depictions of Mormons, *Room 104* also subverts traditional depictions of LGBTQ2S characters. Battles and Hilton-Morrow argue that shows like *Will & Grace* reinforce heteronormativity by defining gay characters as the humorous absence of heterosexual masculinity.⁵⁴ Further, while *Will & Grace* prominently features gay characters, the titular characters' relationship allows creators to avoid discussing gay relationships.⁵⁵ Ana-Isabel Nölke suggests that advertisements featuring LGBTQ2S persons are similarly biased and reductionist, ultimately reinforcing heteronormativity.⁵⁶ Robert Alan Brookey argues that traditional depictions of LGBTQ2S characters diminish the sexual nature of same-sex relationships "to avoid the alienating aspects of deviant sexuality."⁵⁷ Characters are often coded as gay, and this identity is referenced, but such characters' sexual attraction is rarely explored in-depth. In contrast, the 'urges' Noah and Joseph describe and experience (towards men *and* women) are prominent throughout the episode. We may not see their implied kiss, but the show foregrounds them navigating their sexuality.

The show doubly subverts expectations through the juxtaposition these missionaries represent. Mormons onscreen are often defined by polygamy and are always straight and devout. LGBTQ2S characters are often defined by flamboyancy.⁵⁸ *Room 104* presents non-polygamous Mormons who question their faith and sexuality. Their sexual orientation is explored, but neither labelled nor confirmed. This episode complexifies characters traditionally relegated to stereotypes.

Mormon Approaches to LGBTQ2S Identity

At the end of the episode, it is unclear what Noah and Joseph do immediately, and what happens *afterwards*. Will they try to hide (or forget) this relationship and remain active Mormons, or have they abandoned their faith? This ambiguity parallels the dynamics of real-life LGBTQ2S Mormons. Summarizing the Church's complex outlook, Lauren J. Joseph and Stephen Cranney note that distinguishing between "LGB as a sexual orientation *identity* and LGB-related sexual *behaviour* . . . allow[s] members to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual yet remain religiously orthodox."⁵⁹ The Church forbids any sex outside of straight marriages (constituting grounds for excommunication), but the Church does not officially condemn anyone based on orientation.⁶⁰

Condemning certain sexual activities, while accepting gay members, creates many challenges. McKay S. Mattingly et al. find that family responses to children coming out are marked by such myths as attraction being a "phase, choice, or rebellious act," or that orientation can be "changed through reparative therapy."⁶¹ LGBTQ2S individuals "raised in religiously

conservative environments” often report internalized homophobia, resulting in “guilt, shame, self-injury, [or] aggressive denial.”⁶² The Church’s view towards (and treatment of) gay Mormons is constantly evolving, which further complicates gay members’ position in the Church, and how they must navigate relationships. As recently as January 2020, the BYU Honor Code⁶³ asserted that “Homosexual Behavior” was a violation, although “same-gender attraction” was not.⁶⁴ Condemning ‘homosexual behavior’ was removed in February, but a letter from Church officials re-asserted that “same-sex romantic behavior” is “not compatible” with Church principles.⁶⁵ Officials suggest gay Mormons can remain in the Church, but expressions of sexuality are severely restricted.

Diversity in Mormonism and evolving policies creates different approaches to LGBTQ2S identities. Mark Kim Malan notes that while “doctrine remains unchanged,” definitions of sin are tempered by new interpretations from Church officials.⁶⁶ This applies to sexuality and other aspects of Mormon life. For example, although the Church’s Word of Wisdom encourages abstention from alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine (another well-known media stereotype about Mormons), 60% of ‘active Mormons’ drink caffeinated soda.⁶⁷ Some Mormons who are ‘somewhat’ or ‘not too active’ even drink alcohol and use tobacco.⁶⁸ Mormons have diverse beliefs, levels of commitment, or adherence to orthodoxy, and therefore approach sexuality in ways that may not conform to official doctrines. Mormon belief in ongoing revelation also means orthodoxy itself is constantly redefined. This was most notably seen in renouncing polygamy (1890) or opening the priesthood to Black Mormons (1978), but also shapes outlooks on sexuality.⁶⁹ Further, the importance Mormonism places on personal revelation means official pronouncements intertwine with personal experience, producing diverse understandings of sexuality.⁷⁰

Elijah Nielson suggests ‘inclusivity’ is socially constructed among Mormons.⁷¹ LGBTQ2S Mormons reframe their understandings of the seemingly condemnatory LDS Church. The Church also attempts to convince such members that it *does* welcome them. Referencing Mormonism’s reversal of other exclusionary policies, Weber adds, “this very capacity for not only fluidity but downright reversal . . . allows outlying Mormons to be ever hopeful that divine revelation might allow for their legitimate inclusion in what they perceive to be the One True Church,” suggesting why some LGBTQ2S Mormons belong despite current condemnatory policies.⁷²

Through discourse analysis of three organizations dedicated to LGBTQ2S Mormons—Mormon and Gay, Affirmation, and North Star—this section analyzes diversity across Mormon outlooks. Each organization offers various resources, like FAQs, discussion groups, and stories from members sharing how they reconciled their faith and sexuality. These narratives outline possible futures for Noah and Joseph.

Mormon and Gay

The website “Mormon and Gay,”⁷³ (officially sponsored by the Church), offered support for those who were committed to upholding Church principles, but “struggle[d] with same-gender attraction.”⁷⁴ The following section explores stories offered by ‘Jessyca’ and ‘Laurie’ to outline how some members reconcile their sexuality with commitment to orthodoxy.

Growing up, ‘Jessyca’ became ‘close’ to female friends, but never considered these romantic/sexual attractions.⁷⁵ Realizing the sexual nature of her feelings was devastating. “I knew we were going down a road that I didn’t want . . . a road that would keep me from serving a mission,” something she had dreamed of since childhood.⁷⁶ This realization brought feelings of guilt and the challenge of coming out to friends and family. Jessyca looks forward to her future, but this is ultimately uncertain as the Church’s only ‘prescriptions’ are celibacy or straight marriages.⁷⁷

‘Laurie’ was attracted to women since her teen years. She was drawn to sports because this allowed her to spend time with friends “who were lesbians.”⁷⁸ By second year of college, she had stopped attending church, started drinking, doing drugs, and dating women. After several years, she finally returned to the Church. She briefly entertained the prospect of celibacy but felt she should “work on” dating men.⁷⁹ While initial dates convinced her she “could never be with a man,” she eventually met and married her husband.⁸⁰

Laurie’s sexual orientation is never pinned down. Although married to a man, it is unclear if she identifies as straight, queer, or lesbian. Her lack of identification parallels Church patterns in discussing LGBTQ2S issues. Elder Dallin H. Oaks writes, “*homosexual, lesbian, and gay* are adjectives to describe particular thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. We should refrain from using these words as nouns to identify particular conditions or specific persons.”⁸¹ Laurie uses lesbian as a noun when referring to friends, and *speculatively* about her own identity, but her attraction is mostly treated adjectivally. Since Laurie’s story appears on the official LDS website, it unsurprisingly lacks explicit details about her sex life (only that she has three children). She omits potentially significant information, like whether she is attracted to her husband or enjoys sex with men.

The website’s updated format now also includes testimonials from spouses, friends, and Bishops. A story shared by Laurie’s husband ‘Dallas’ reflects on a phrase from Laurie’s autobiography that reveals the worldview some LGBTQ2S Mormons attempt to reconcile: “It doesn’t matter how comfortable, how convenient, or how contented your lifestyle is; if it doesn’t bring you closer to the Savior, it doesn’t matter where else it is taking you.”⁸² Although Laurie acknowledges being happy in lesbian relationships, being closer to Christ is more important.

Including her husband’s story also performs important boundary work for the Church. Mattingly et al. explain that families with gay children “often worried more about the child leaving the church than about their child being nonheterosexual.”⁸³ Discussing the connection

between family support and self-esteem, Joseph and Cranney suggest, “if someone perceives their family as accepting, they may project this positive expectation to the rest of the Mormon community.”⁸⁴ LGBTQ2S members may be more likely to *remain* Mormon if their community is supportive. Sharing narratives from accepting Mormons may shape how those questioning their place in the Church view the broader religious community.

Jessyca’s celibacy or Laurie’s straight marriage may strike outsiders as denying one’s true identity, but both consider commitment to “His sacred plan” more important.⁸⁵ Mattingly et al. note that straight marriages among “SSA individuals” have very high divorce rates and remaining celibate may lead to “low scores on measures of quality of life.”⁸⁶ One could therefore dismiss LGBTQ2S LDS Mormons as being oppressed by a homophobic institution. However, Lori Beaman finds that stay-at-home Mormon mothers—seemingly subject to institutionalized patriarchy—consider themselves fulfilled through other facets of their lives.⁸⁷ In their study of ‘LGB and SSA’ Mormons, Joseph and Cranney find that “active- and ex-Mormons reported the same self-esteem.”⁸⁸ Although this likely reflects the emotional toll experienced upon leaving one’s social support network (rather than highlighting the support that active LGBTQ2S Mormons receive), this finding suggests that some LGBTQ2S Mormons find ways to negotiate self-esteem despite these seemingly conflicting identities. The narratives the Church shares aim to emphasize other ways in which LGBTQ2S members find fulfillment.

These stories offer one possibility for what may happen to Noah and Joseph. They ‘succumbed’ to their attraction momentarily, but it is possible they never mention it again. Noah saying ‘48 more days to go’ could refer to the remaining time they must battle their sexual tension before going home and finding wives. *If* they tell family and friends what happened, these stories demonstrate that *some* queer Mormons are accepted by the Church (provided they repent). Laurie demonstrates that even if they pursue gay relationships for years, they might be welcomed back.

Affirmation

Another possibility is that Noah and Joseph continue their relationship, but still seek to identify as Mormon. Both clearly value their faith, interpreting pornography on TV as a sign from God (rather than a random coincidence) and their partying as following in ‘St. Augustine’s footsteps’ (rather than just a night of fun). They interpret life through a Mormon lens, and simply find some restrictions too harsh. The term ‘jack Mormon’ represents a spectrum, including non-Mormons living among Mormons, Mormons who are not strictly observant, and excommunicates.⁸⁹ ‘Jack Mormons’ can also apply to those who enter gay relationships but still consider themselves Mormon.

Excommunication removes one from the LDS Church, but not from Mormonism. The largest organization asserting that Mormon and LGBTQ2S identities can co-exist is Affirmation,

which provides “face-to-face community for LGBT Mormons” and “foster[s] . . . positive engagement with LDS Church leadership that enables/enhances LGBT participation” in the Church.⁹⁰ Affirmation offers advocacy for the future and a formal community in the present.

‘Lauren’ knew she was gay in high school, but adds, “I was terrified of it.”⁹¹ She avoided coming out in university due to BYU’s Honor Code but discovered a supportive community of gay friends. Lauren started dating women after college but did not tell her devout parents until she was thirty. Illustrating the spectrum of beliefs within Affirmation, Lauren does not “really have a ‘faith’ anymore,” but values Affirmation as a way to support others.⁹²

In another personal narrative, ‘José’ describes serving on a mission, during which he met a woman, “with whom [he] thought about having [his] eternal family.”⁹³ Doubts about whether this was ‘right’ surfaced upon returning home. He asked himself, “Will I lie to my wife . . . about who I really am?”⁹⁴ He eventually told his family he is gay and married ‘Carlos,’ but both lost friends and were excommunicated.

‘Blaire’ shares the difficulties reconciling her queer identity in this heteronormative Church.⁹⁵ Growing up hearing family use the word ‘queer’ derogatorily, she reflects, “it was easy to pretend those homophobic remarks weren’t meant for me because I liked men too. Surely, I wasn’t ‘really gay.’”⁹⁶ As a pansexual, Blaire differs from other stories as she could presumably find romantic/sexual fulfillment in a straight marriage. However, a spouse’s gender does not define her sexuality. Blaire writes, “My LDS community says ‘I love you,’ yet their actions, rhetoric, and policies suggest otherwise,” critiquing the Church’s outlook towards her identity.⁹⁷

We do not know if Joseph and Noah are gay, straight, or queer. If they are bisexual, they *could* return home and enter Church-sanctioned marriages. William S. Bradshaw et al. find that based on the available, desirable options, bisexual Mormon men are “more likely to accommodate norms of acceptable religious behavior than exclusively gay men.”⁹⁸ However, straight marriages do *not* resolve the Church’s stance on one’s identity. What are the emotional costs of belonging to a Church that stigmatizes and condemns one’s identity?

Identifying as *Mormon*, but not *LDS*, is the path followed by some in Affirmation. While the LDS Church is most often recognized as Mormonism’s sole face—and often asserts itself as much—it is not the *only* way to claim a Mormon identity.⁹⁹ As a parallel example, the RLDS (a Mormon off-shoot) announced in 1984 that women could be ordained. Over the next six years, “at least 200 dissenting organizations came into existence.”¹⁰⁰ Official orthodoxy regarding gender and sexuality create divisions in Mormonism, yet no changes definitively deny one’s claim to a Mormon identity. Affirmation includes members who have been excommunicated, some who are still officially Church members, and those like Lauren who are not religious. Affirmation shows that regardless of institutional affiliation, Noah and Joseph could maintain their religion without compromising their identity.

Evergreen and North Star

Evergreen International represents a more condemnatory response to LGBTQ2S identities. This now-defunct organization targeted those “who want to diminish their attractions and overcome homosexual behavior.”¹⁰¹ Writing when Evergreen was still active, Jennifer Sinor explains, the organization “puts gay Mormons in touch with trained therapists who use . . . reorientation therapy to ‘diminish’ same-sex attraction.”¹⁰² Describing broader LDS actions, Mattingly et al. add that the Church previously supported “aversion therapy (including electroshock therapy) to treat homosexuality” in BYU students.¹⁰³ Evergreen has since been subsumed by North Star, which offers “positive and balanced alternatives” for LGBTQ2S persons.¹⁰⁴

North Star describes its constituents as “those striving to live gospel standards,” and demonizes the non-LDS world as “a turbulent sea” of “sexual politics.”¹⁰⁵ Gay relationships are described as “paths inconsistent” with Church teachings.¹⁰⁶ This language suggests a careful re-branding to distance North Star from Evergreen, conversion therapy, and outright denunciation.

‘Ben’ discusses the role he thought his mission would play in overcoming his attraction to men: “Surely my mission would cure me . . . God would see my honest efforts . . . and I would be rewarded with a wife to whom I was genuinely attracted.”¹⁰⁷ Bradshaw et al. find this outlook is common among gay Mormon men. Many expected missions to ‘fix’ their attraction, but most participants’ orientation remained unchanged.¹⁰⁸ Discovering blogs from gay BYU students helped Ben feel less alone, but he noticed a dismaying pattern as most bloggers eventually left the Church. Ben’s inspiration for ignoring his attraction comes from the Book of Alma, which helped him recognize that “sacrificing for a time really wouldn’t be a long sacrifice when viewed in the eternities.”¹⁰⁹ Mormonism pathologizes Ben’s orientation but assures him that adhering to Church principles is a worthwhile sacrifice.

‘Deb’ recognized she was gay during her mission. Her biggest fear of “doing anything gay” was realized with her companion.¹¹⁰ She did not immediately confess to Church officials due to fears of losing her status as missionary and BYU student. She was only removed from the uncomfortable situation with her companion after breaking her foot.¹¹¹ While she now sees her injury as allowing much-needed reflection, she initially considered it “punishment from God.”¹¹² After eventually confessing, she was sent home early. This created additional anguish, seeing friends come home with posters announcing they had “returned with honor.”¹¹³ Frustrations with her sexuality were compounded by feeling she failed her Church and family. Deb shares that she has gone on some dates (presumably with men, but it is not specified), and concludes with an ultimately positive outlook: “trusting that God loves me and has a plan for me brings me immeasurable comfort.”¹¹⁴ Like Ben, her faith condemns her sexuality but also offers reassurance.

Advising counsellors how to better serve LGBTQ2S Mormons, R. David Johns and Fred J. Hanna explain the importance of helping clients recognize that “damaging [religious] beliefs”

can cause depression and anxiety.¹¹⁵ They add that counselors should not divorce LGBTQ2S Mormons from their faith, but help clients find understanding in the Church's "deeper teachings."¹¹⁶ North Star demonstrates religion's role in shaping understandings of sexuality. However, whether Deb or Ben have accessed 'deeper understandings' of Church teachings, or if they suffer from anxiety and depression, is unclear.

North Star's testimonials indicate that if Noah or Joseph share details of their night, they will likely be sent home (but not necessarily excommunicated). Upon return, prescribed solutions include celibacy or straight marriages. The other possibility (which North Star disavows, but which the Church previously endorsed) is conversion therapy. Utah state legislature recently banned conversion therapy for minors. This was notably supported by the Church.¹¹⁷ However, Juwan J. Holmes suggests such measures, which only protect *minors*, are incomplete.¹¹⁸ Elena Joy Thurston adds that while leaders claim to no longer support conversion therapy, the Church pays for some members' conversion therapy.¹¹⁹ Evergreen and North Star highlight a stronger aversion to LGBTQ2S identities. Some Mormons see (and treat) queerness as a direct transgression against Church principles, encouraging members to silence this part of their identity.

Re-Evaluating Mormon Approaches to Sexuality

Reflecting the ideological structuring of public debates, all organizations examined select testimonials that best represent their beliefs.¹²⁰ The Church and North Star promote testimonials from people who experienced gay 'attraction,' but did not 'succumb' to it (or, if they pursued gay relationships, they eventually returned to the Church). Kevin Randall, who managed the transition from 'Mormon and Gay' to its new home on the Church's website, was instructed to not include stories from those "not living (according to) doctrine," considerably shrinking his sample of stories.¹²¹

Mormons often try to avoid condemning sexual orientation as a sin, but nonetheless erase such members' lived experiences. Church Elder David A. Bednar was asked at a meeting 'how can homosexual members of the church live (and remain steadfast) in the gospel?' Mormon writer D. Christian Harrison quotes Bednar's response: "I want to change the question. There are no homosexual members of the Church . . . We are not defined by sexual attraction. We are not defined by sexual behavior."¹²² Harrison argues that such responses negate people's feelings, experiences, and identities, adding that the Church would never deny, for example, that there are Black, single, or female members.¹²³ Describing the 'advice' the Church offers LGBTQ2S members, Elijah Nielson writes, "Although the Church condemns all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman, the Church does *not* encourage mixed-orientation marriages nor does it counsel or require Gay Mormons to marry."¹²⁴ However, through the testimonials offered—especially those in which gay Mormons enter straight marriages—the

Church implicitly encourages mixed-orientation marriages. In a document describing ‘The Divine Institution of Marriage,’ the Church explains, its “affirmation of marriage as being between a man and a woman ‘neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility towards gays and lesbians.’”¹²⁵ Although the Church claims to be accepting and non-judgemental, its heteronormative outlook and restrictive definition of marriage create a hostile environment for LGBTQ2S members.

In contrast to the other two organizations, Affirmation promotes testimonials from individuals who believe Mormonism is a valuable institution, and believe Mormonism condones gay relationships.¹²⁶ Some LGBTQ2S advocacy organizations make few references to religion, but Affirmation foregrounds religion as a key aspect of one’s identity. Armand Mauss explains that although some Mormons protest Church stances on gender and sexuality, the more typical response is leaving Mormonism.¹²⁷ However, Affirmation demonstrates that some LGBTQ2S Mormons are actively working towards reform.¹²⁸

Moving to the Mainstream

Room 104’s ambiguous ending highlights the range of Mormon responses to LGBTQ2S identities. Will Noah and Joseph follow the path of North Star, Affirmation, or just leave Mormonism altogether? Only certain options are LDS-sanctioned, but Affirmation asserts there are other ways to be Mormon. Of course, the ambiguity also suggests the possibility that they are neither gay nor bisexual, and would not turn to any of the ‘support’ such groups offer.

Like *Big Love* or *Sister Wives*, *Room 104* is not a wholly accurate resource for understanding Mormonism. It reinforces stereotypes through the trope of polite missionaries. We do not actually learn that much about Mormon beliefs or daily life. Ignorant familiarity shapes what viewers understand about Mormonism, and even Christianity more broadly. The pair begin their night of partying after Joseph persuades Noah that Augustine became “one of the greatest saints of all time” because he sinned. Not only does Joseph misrepresent Augustine’s teachings about sinfulness, but it is unlikely a Mormon would call this Catholic figure ‘one of the greatest saints.’ However, the deeper theology at play is unimportant. *Room 104* simply seeks to convince us that the pair’s outlook is rooted in religion, accomplished by making a saint the motivation for the night’s events (not to mention ‘offering it up’ to said saint before the episode cuts to black). We are unconcerned with what *particular* beliefs Mormons hold, but leave the episode reassured that religion *in general* is important to Mormons.

Ignorant familiarity also shapes the depiction of LGBTQ2S characters. Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch find that in sitcoms, gay characters make significantly more off-hand comments about their sexuality than straight characters.¹²⁹ This reinforces a perception that gay characters are preoccupied with sexuality.¹³⁰ By highlighting these missionaries’ ‘coming out story’—compared to a more mundane day in their lives—*Room 104* perpetuates this damaging

stereotype. However, that a LGBTQ2S Mormon perspective is included at all in this anthology marks an important shift in mainstream representations. The show explores common concerns that many Mormons (and non-Mormons) confront while acknowledging the importance of the characters' religion.

Juxtaposing LGBTQ2S and Mormon identities is significant for Mormon perceptions. Mormon on-screen relationships are no longer restricted to polygamy. Marking a shift from TV atrocity tales, Mormons become a vehicle for more diverse and relatable sexual representations. Including an LGBTQ2S perspective—or simply teens who want to explore rebellion—makes Mormons a community to which wider audiences can relate. Further, while Mormons are often stereotyped as rigidly adhering to orthodoxy, *Room 104* highlights the conscious navigation of faith that members experience.

Finally, the episode's ambiguity highlights the complexity of Mormon sexual politics. Mormon on-screen relationships are no longer exclusively heterosexual. Mormons cannot be labelled as simply 'pro-gay' or 'anti-gay' either.¹³¹ Nielson suggests that a spectrum of inclusivity exists in the Church. Some gay Mormons find the Church intolerable, emotionally violent, and damaging. Others find "satisfaction, belonging, and great peace through their Church membership."¹³² *Room 104* encapsulates this spectrum. By ending ambiguously, it is unclear if these characters are gay, bisexual, queer, or straight. We are also unsure about their relationship with the Church. Do they abandon the Church instantly, gradually drift away, or perhaps work to make the Church more accepting? These myriad possibilities can potentially expand viewers' perceptions of who Mormons are, what they believe, and what they do.

Complex on-screen possibilities mirror what is happening for real-world Mormons. The number of LGBTQ2S Mormons—or rather, those who feel comfortable sharing this identity—is likely to grow. Several organizations promote different outlooks on how LGBTQ2S persons should be integrated into Mormon life. These diverse approaches suggest that scholars who study Mormonism should devote more attention to this demographic. *Room 104*'s sympathetic depiction of two questioning missionaries suggests that awareness of LGBTQ2S Mormons may also start to permeate mainstream awareness.

Notes

¹ A brief note regarding nomenclature. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly shortened to LDS Church) is the largest corporate body of what are traditionally described as Mormons. Mormonism is a diverse faith community, with followers belonging to many different groups. For example, some continue to practice plural marriage as a religious rite and call themselves as Mormons, while the LDS Church officially renounced this

practice in 1890. Throughout this article, the term ‘Mormons’ will be used in a more general sense, while ‘the Church’ refers to members of the LDS Church.

² *Room 104*. “The Missionaries.” Directed by Megan Griffiths. Written by Mark Duplass. HBO, September 8, 2017.

³ “Same-Sex Attraction,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*,

<https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/official-statement/same-gender-attraction>. Using terms like homosexual and same-sex attracted (SSA) or treating these sexual identities as a ‘challenge’ is not my preferred terminology. I use this language throughout the article to highlight how LGBTQ2S identities are discussed by the LDS Church and other organizations. When discussing LGBTQ2S identities in Mormonism, it should also be acknowledged that “the terms ‘same-sex-attracted’ (‘SSA’) is used within the Mormon community and refers broadly to individuals who acknowledge their same-gender attraction but do not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.” See Lauren J. Joseph and Stephen Cranney, “Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20, no. 10 (2017): 1031. This generally stigmatizing term is the preferred terminology for *some* Mormons, since it allows them to maintain their standing in the Church.

⁴ “Chastity and Fidelity, 38.6.5,” *General Handbook: Serving in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number102.

⁵ In some Mormon organizations, queerness is even further pathologized. Describing its history, the now-defunct Evergreen International explains, “support groups were formed for men and women struggling homosexuality.” See “History,” *Evergreen International*, https://web.archive.org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm. Although Evergreen International was not officially affiliated with the LDS Church, its mission stated “we sustain the doctrines and standards of the Church without reservation or exception.” See “About Us,” *Evergreen International*, https://web.archive.org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm.

⁶ Matthew J. Grow, “The Modern Mormon Church,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 55.

⁷ Many books focus on the important scriptures that emerged in this period, or figures that played key roles in this developing religious community. See for example: Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Random House, 2005); and Terryl Givens and Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁸ This period saw substantial transformations in this community, including major building projects, changes in Mormon social life, Utah’s quest for statehood, and significant theological proclamations. Books that examine Mormonism during this period include: Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1890* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958); Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ Due to Mormon Studies’ long preoccupation with history, many books bridge Mormonism’s founding, re-organization, and its history in the twentieth century. See for example: Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985); and, Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Building the Kingdom: A History of Mormons in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Jana Darrington et al.’s study of singlehood and frustration among young Mormons offers one example of how scholarship overlooks LGBTQ2S identities. See Jana Darrington, K.W. Piercy, and Sylvia Niehuis, “The Social and Cultural Construction of Singlehood among Young, Single Mormons,” *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 4 (2005): 639–661. The study’s criteria for participants does not even explicitly mention heterosexuality and only that they must be single LDS members between 20–29 (*Ibid.*, 645). Heteronormativity therefore shapes this study. The study finds that for some, Church pressure “triggered feelings of frustration with their single status,” but fails to probe whether LGBTQ2S identities were a factor compounding participants’ frustration (Considering abstinence is one of

the Church's proscribed 'solutions' for LGBTQ2S members, gay members presumably comprise a percentage of 'single Mormons,' but this consideration is wholly absent in a study of this demographic).

¹¹ See for example David Johns and Fred J. Hannah, "Peculiar and Queer: Spiritual and Emotional Salvation for the LGBTQ Mormon," *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 5, no. 3–4 (2011): 197–219; William S. Bradshaw, Tim B. Heaton Ellen Decoo, John P. Dehlin, Tenev V. Galliher, and Katherine A. Crowell, "Religious Experiences of LGBTQ Mormon Males," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 311–29; and McKay S. Mattingly, Renee V. Galliher, John P. Dehlin, Katherine A. Crowell, and William S. Bradshaw, "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 12, no. 4 (2016): 386–409.

¹² Guillermo Avila-Saavedra "Nothing Queer About Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): 8.

¹³ Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19, no. 1 (2002): 102.

¹⁴ Ahir Gopaldas and Glenna DeRoy, "An Intersectional Approach to Diversity Research," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 333–64. Gopaldas and DeRoy build on the concept of intersectionality first put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw who used it to describe how "race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color." See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244.

¹⁵ All quotations in this section refer to: *Room 104*, "The Missionaries," Season 1, Episode 7 (September 8, 2017), directed by Megan Griffiths, HBO.

¹⁶ As will be discussed, this reference to Saint Augustine is part of the show's wider use of ignorant familiarity. Whether or not Joseph accurately describes St. Augustine's teachings, or whether a Mormon would even reference this Catholic Saint, is irrelevant. This reference assures the viewer that faith informs the decisions that Mormons make.

¹⁷ It is *implied* that Joseph may have been dead for a brief moment. After he regains consciousness, he asks Noah, "did I just..." then adds, "and then I just came back?" to which Noah nods his head. Whether Joseph was actually dead or simply unconscious is never made clear, since all we see is his body lying on the ground. God's intervention in reviving Joseph is also not explored. That Joseph regains consciousness in the midst of Noah's monologue is telling, but it comes in the middle of a sentence, as opposed to during the long, dramatic pause one might expect in such cases.

¹⁸ Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns," in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 363.

¹⁹ Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age," 363.

²⁰ David Feltmate, *Drawn to the Gods: Religion and Humor in The Simpsons, South Park, & Family Guy* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 4–5.

²¹ Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin, "Introduction," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 2.

²² Jana Riess, "Mormon Popular Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 439.

²³ Anne Makus, "Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology: A Frame for Rhetorical Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 4 (1990): 499.

²⁴ Tanya D. Zuk provides a more comprehensive discussion of these shows which feature 'polygamy' episodes, including *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *CSI*, and *Numb3rs*. In Tanya D. Zuk, "'Proud Mormon Polygamist': Assimilation, Popular Memory, and the Mormon Churches in Big Love," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 93–106.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 93.

²⁶ Michelle Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction: A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* as a Reality TV Atrocity Tale," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 22, no. 3 (2019): 60–83.

²⁷ Atrocity Tales circulated widely in America and Britain during the nineteenth century. These novels (often purportedly authored by victims who had managed to narrowly avoid the clutches of the 'Mormon cult') served as anti-Mormon propaganda. The genre cemented such stereotypes as Mormons' depraved sexuality and authoritarian

leadership. For a more detailed examination of such stories' themes, see Tammy Heise, "Marking Mormon Difference: How Western Perceptions of Islam Define the 'Mormon Menace,'" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no. 1 (2013): 82–97.

²⁸ Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction," 62.

²⁹ While the LDS Church does not have sole claim to the title of 'Mormonism,' with over 16 million members, this organization by far represents the majority of Mormons worldwide ("Worldwide Statistics," *Newsroom*, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics>). Although the LDS Church is often recognized as Mormonism's sole face, there are many schisms within this broader tradition. Other denominations include the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now known as The Community of Christ) and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. William D. Russell suggests a "fissive tendency" is built into Mormon theology. That individuals can receive revelation, and the belief that modern Churches occasionally fall into apostasy creates a remarkable number of schismatic divisions in Mormonism. See William D. Russell, "Understanding Multiple Mormonisms," *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³⁰ Mueller, "Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction," 62.

³¹ Zuk, "Proud Mormon Polygamist," 95. Zuk is here drawing on Dick Hebdige's concept of hegemony. See Dick Hebdige, "From Culture to Hegemony; Subculture: The Unnatural Break," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2006).

³² Although some groups such as the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints continue to practice polygamy, the LDS Church discontinued the practice and excommunicates members who enter plural marriages.

³³ Brenda R. Weber, *Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 15–16.

³⁴ Grow, "The Modern Mormon Church," 58.

³⁵ Riess "Mormon Popular Culture," 439. See also Chris Miller, "New Religious Movements in the Town of South Park: Separating the Mainstream from the Marginal," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 32, no. 2 (2020): 99–120. I should note that Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the creators behind both *South Park* and *The Book of Mormon*, explaining why these productions have such similar evaluations of Mormonism.

³⁶ John-Charles Duffy suggests that the stereotype of missionaries makes Mormons instantly recognizable onscreen, comparing them to "black-habited Catholic nuns" or "buggy-riding Amish." See John-Charles Duffy, "Elders on the Big Screen: Film and the Globalized Circulation of Mormon Missionary Images," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 113.

³⁷ Karen D. Austin, "Reality Corrupts; Reality Television Corrupts Absolutely," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage, and Screen*, eds. Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University, 2010), 187.

³⁸ Chase Burns, "Room 104's 'The Missionaries' Is the Best Coming Out Story in Recent TV," *The Stranger*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2017/09/17/25419256/room-104s-the-missionaries-is-the-best-coming-out-story-in-recent-tv>.

³⁹ Chase Burns, "Room 104's 'The Missionaries' Is the Best Coming Out Story in Recent TV." Co-creator Mark Duplass acknowledges that as a straight, Catholic male, he is "twice removed from being an authority" on the subjects explored (Jude Dry, "Room 104: Straight Guy Mark Duplass Wrote the Year's Sweetest Gay Love Story," *IndieWire*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/09/mark-duplass-room-104-lgbt-best-gay-1201876596/>).

⁴⁰ Makus, "Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology," 499.

⁴¹ In 2007, the Church celebrated its one millionth missionary being sent out to evangelize. See Reid L. Neilson, "Mormon Mission Work," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 188. At any given time, there are approximately 70,000 missionaries serving missions worldwide ("Missionary Program," *Newsroom*, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/missionary-program>).

⁴² Riess, "Mormon Popular Culture," 450.

⁴³ Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2007), 273.

⁴⁴ *Heaven is Waiting*, directed by Michael Flynn (Salt Lake City: Cosmic Pictures, 2011), DVD.

⁴⁵ *Minor Details*, directed by John Lyde (Salt Lake City: Mainstay Productions, 2009), DVD.

⁴⁶ *Forever Strong*, directed by Ryan Little (Montreal: Go Films, 2008), DVD.

⁴⁷ In her expansive study of Mormon media depictions, Weber raises a number of Mormon-made productions from BYUtv such as the TV show *Granite Flats*, adding that BYU's TV and radio network "are now staples on most expanded cable or satellite packages" (Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 24). Weber offers further examples of movies and books that centre Mormon experiences, like *The Other Side of Heaven*, *The Book of Mormon Girl*, *Confessions of a Latter-day Virgin*, and *The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance*. However, there is little indication that such media impact mainstream consciousness.

⁴⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of Mormons in the mainstream eye, see JB Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially the chapter "Familiar Faces: Mormons and American Popular Culture in a New Millennium."

⁴⁹ Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 24.

⁵⁰ As mentioned, writer Mark Duplass is Catholic. The episode's director Megan Griffiths does not appear to be Mormon. Duplass shares that one of the show's producers has a Mormon background, and offered insights throughout the episode's development (Ariana Bacle, "Room 104: Behind the HBO Series' Twisty, Wild First Season," *Entertainment Weekly*, September 2, 2017, <https://ew.com/tv/2017/09/02/room-104-behind-scenes/>). Griffiths adds that creators reached out to Mormon friends who could advise on the missionary experience. Although Duplass and Griffiths sought to make an accurate, sensitive, and informed depiction of Mormons, it is clearly not a Mormon-made production.

⁵¹ Richard Allen, "Identification in the Cinema," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no. 2 (2012): 199.

⁵² Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke, Elizabeth T. Cady, Rebecca Schlegel, Richard J. Harris, and Lindsey Firebaugh, "Remembering Gay/Lesbian Media Characters: Can Ellen and Will Improve Attitudes Towards Homosexuals?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 53, no. 3 (2007): 29.

⁵³ Chase Burns, (writing for a *non-Mormon* website), calls it: "the best coming out story in recent television." I should note that *Room 104* as a 'coming out story' is only Burns' personal interpretation.

⁵⁴ Battles and Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces."

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

⁵⁶ Ana-Isabel Nölke, "Making Diversity Conform? An Intersectional, Longitudinal Analysis of LGBT-Specific Mainstream Media Advertisements," *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no. 2 (2018): 224-255.

⁵⁷ Robert Alan Brookey, "A Community Like *Philadelphia*," *Western Journal of Communication* 60, no. 1 (1996): 50.

⁵⁸ The other popular means by which gay characters are coded is what Nölke calls the 'Neil Patrick Harris' type, which represents a composite of the attributes most commonly ascribed to gay men, namely, "stylish and successful, always dressed in a suit or smart trousers and shirt. They are well-groomed, lean, and confident 'metrosexuals'" (Nölke, "Making Diversity Conform," 236-37). In an admittedly more dated analysis of LGBTQ2S media representations, Larry Gross argues that during the AIDS epidemic, gay characters were similarly relegated to two media 'roles' as either victim or villain. See Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," *Journal of Homosexuality* 21, no. 1-2 (1991): 30. Although stereotypes have changed, LGBTQ2S characters being defined solely through stereotypes (rather than fully-developed characters) remains constant.

⁵⁹ Joseph and Cranney, "Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons," 1029.

⁶⁰ A statement from the Church reads: "God expects us to uphold and keep His commandments regardless of divergent opinions or trends in society. His law of chastity is clear: sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife" ("Same Sex Marriage," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, March 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/same-sex-marriage?lang=eng>).

⁶¹ Mattingly et al., "A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints," 400.

⁶² *Ibid*, 388.

⁶³ All BYU students are required to sign the Honor Code. Violations can result in suspension or expulsion ("Church Educational System Honor Code," *BYU University Policies*, <https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=26&s=s1164>). BYU is "founded, supported, and guided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," making the school an official extension of the Church ("About," *Brigham Young University*, <https://www.byu.edu/about>).

⁶⁴ This section banning "Homosexual Behavior" was "quietly removed" in March 2020 (Courtney Tanner, "BYU Students Celebrate as School Removes 'Homosexual Behavior' Section from its Online Honor Code," *The Salt Lake*

Tribune February 19, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2020/02/19/byu-appears-remove/>). Since this section was redacted from BYU's Honor Code, it is no longer available, but a comparison of the original and amended version can be found here: <https://www.diffchecker.com/QqrwFHRz>.

⁶⁵ This response was shared in a letter from Elder Paul V. Johnson, Commissioner of the Church Educational System, sent via the official BYU Twitter Account (BYU (@BYU) "Today this letter from Elder Paul. V. Johnson...", March 2, 2020, Tweet). In 2019 the Church also reversed a 2015 policy barring children of gay couples from being baptized. Although gay marriage is still considered a "serious transgression," it is not "definitively apostasy," meaning children of gay couples can be baptized (Emma Green, "The Mormon Church Tries to Create a Little More Space for LGBTQ Families," *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/04/lgbtq-mormons-latter-day-saints-apostasy-childbaptism/586630/>).

⁶⁶ Mark Kim Malan, "Understanding Methods of Change in Mormon Cultural Attitudes Beyond 'Official' Doctrinal Views and Popular Public Image - A Reply to Christensen," *Sexuality and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2006): 108. Malan's comments are based on Mormon approaches to masturbation, but equally apply to sexual orientation as members navigate the ambiguity created by changing doctrine.

⁶⁷ John E. Ferguson III, Benjamin R. Knoll, and Jana Riess, "The Word of Wisdom in Contemporary American Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 1 (2018): 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Of those Mormons who are 'somewhat active,' 34% drink alcohol; 47% drink coffee; 22% use tobacco; and 11% use marijuana. Of those who are 'not too active,' 42% drink alcohol; 64% drink coffee; 24% use tobacco; and 17% use marijuana.

⁶⁹ Regarding birth control, for example, David Holland outlines that while official doctrine *against* birth control has never been repealed, a letter in the Church's magazine advised that contraception is *sometimes* acceptable. See Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism," 156–7. This outlook went from a letter in the Church magazine, to being printed in an official Church manual on marriage, outlining how doctrines may gradually change.

⁷⁰ A deeper discussion of how Mormonism's 'open canon' shapes the evolution of orthodoxy is found in David Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism," *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷¹ Elijah Nielson, "Inclusivity in the Latter-days: Gay Mormons," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 19, no. 7 (2016): 752–68.

⁷² Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 29.

⁷³ In the last year, the Church slightly revamped how it addresses 'SSA' online. No longer hosted on a separate website (formerly found at <https://mormonandgay.lds.org/?lang=eng>) the main Church website now has a section dedicated to SSA ("Same-Sex Attraction," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/>). This section still provides roughly the same information as 'Mormon and Gay,' such as FAQs, advice for individuals and families, and a 'Member Stories' section.

⁷⁴ The outlook of 'same-gender attraction' being framed as a 'struggle' is encapsulated in a letter from Church Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "Helping Those Who Struggle with Same-Gender Attraction," *Ensign* October, 2007, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/10/helping-those-who-struggle-with-same-gender-attraction?lang=eng>.

⁷⁵ "Jessyca's Story," *Mormon and Gay*, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://mormonandgay.lds.org/articles/jessycas-story?lang=eng>. Since research for this project began, Jessyca's story has been removed, although the other story analyzed from 'Mormon and Gay' did migrate to the Church's new site.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Jessyca's story's sub-headline reads: "She's not sure she will ever find a guy she can be attracted to," which demonstrates the uncertainty created by Church policy which stipulates that SSA individuals should either enter heterosexual marriages (whether or not they are attracted to their partners) or remain celibate (in spite of the depression and anxiety that this 'solution' has been found to cause).

⁷⁸ Laurie, "Laurie's Story," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/videos/lauries-story?lang=eng>. Throughout her narrative, Laurie notes that she has friends who were lesbians, but never applies this term to herself, instead noting that she 'dated women.'

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

- ⁸¹ Emphasis in original. Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, October 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/10/same-gender-attraction?lang=eng>.
- ⁸² Dallas, “Dallas’s Story,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/gay/videos/dallas-story?lang=eng>.
- ⁸³ Mattingly et al., “A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints,” 397.
- ⁸⁴ Joseph and Cranney, “Self-Esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons,” 1032.
- ⁸⁵ “Jessyca’s Story.”
- ⁸⁶ Mattingly et al., “A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints,” 390.
- ⁸⁷ Lori G. Beaman, “Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter Day Saints Church,” *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2001): 68.
- ⁸⁸ Joseph and Cranney, “Self-esteem Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons,” 1038.
- ⁸⁹ For a brief discussion of the evolution (and multiple meanings) of ‘Jack Mormon,’ see Pat Bagley, “‘Jack Mormon’ Once Meant Something Else,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, January 13, 2008, https://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci_7958006.
- ⁹⁰ “Our Vision and Values,” *Affirmation*, <https://affirmation.org/who-we-are/our-vision/>.
- ⁹¹ Lauren Neeves, “Fear of Being Gay Led Me to Be More Devout until I Couldn’t Anymore,” *Affirmation*, May 18 2018, <https://affirmation.org/faces-of-affirmation-lauren-neeves/>.
- ⁹² However, Lauren adds that her name is still on the Church’s official records. (Neeves, “Fear of Being Gay Led Me to Be More Devout Until I Couldn’t Anymore.”)
- ⁹³ “In Search of My Identity: Who Am I Truthfully?” *Affirmation*, October 15, 2018, <https://affirmation.org/in-search-of-my-identity-who-am-i-truthfully/>. Mormon marriages (sealed in a temple) enjoin couples and their offspring to ‘eternal’ families. For a brief overview of eternal families, see Samuel Morris Brown and Kate Holbrook, “Embodiment and Sexuality in Mormon Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terry L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- ⁹⁴ “In Search of My Identity.”
- ⁹⁵ Blaire describes herself as a gender variant, sexually fluid pansexual, but often describes herself as queer. Blaire Ostler, “I’m Not Going to Pretend I’m Anything Other Than What I Am: Mormon and Queer,” September 25, 2018, <https://affirmation.org/blaire-ostler-mormom-queer/>.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ⁹⁸ Bradshaw et al., “Religious Experiences of LGBTQ Mormon Males,” 326.
- ⁹⁹ As mentioned, other prominent organizations include the Reorganized and Fundamentalist LDS Churches. Many other local congregations consider themselves Mormon without any institutional affiliation. To further understand the major historical schisms in Mormonism (and the theological justifications behind these disputes, see Russell, “Understanding Multiple Mormonisms.”
- ¹⁰⁰ Russell, “Understanding Multiple Mormonisms,” 86.
- ¹⁰¹ “About Us” *Evergreen International*, accessed November 9, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20041209130109/http://www.evergreeninternational.org/about_us.htm.
- ¹⁰² Jennifer Sinor, “Out in the West: The Mormon Church Is Going Mainstream - And Leaving Its Gay Members Behind,” *The American Scholar* (2011): 85.
- ¹⁰³ Mattingly et al., “A Mixed Methods Analysis of the Family Support Experiences of GLBQ Latter Day Saints,” 390.
- ¹⁰⁴ “Introduction,” *North Star*, <https://www.northstarlds.org/introduction>.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ben, “Voices of Hope – Ben,” *North Star*, <https://www.northstarlds.org/voh-profile-ben>. Emphasis added. The language Ben uses in coming out – “For as long as I can remember I’ve been attracted to men *instead of women*” – further reveals North Star’s heteronormative outlook.
- ¹⁰⁸ Bradshaw et al., “Religious Experiences of LGBTQ Mormon Males,” 324.

- ¹⁰⁹ “Voices of Hope – Ben.” The Book of Alma is one of the books within the Book of Mormon.
- ¹¹⁰ Deb, “Voices of Hope - Deb,” *North Star*, <https://www.northstarlds.org/voh-profile-deb>.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹¹² Ibid.
- ¹¹³ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁵ R. David Johns and Fred J. Hanna, “Peculiar and Queer: Spiritual and Emotional Salvation for the LGBTQ Mormon,” *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 5, no. 3–4 (2011): 214.
- ¹¹⁶ Johns and Hanna, “Peculiar and Queer,” 215.
- ¹¹⁷ Bethany Rodgers, “‘Conversion Therapy’ Ban OK’d by LDS Church and Advocates, Announces Gov. Herbert,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2019/11/27/gov-herbert-announces/>.
- ¹¹⁸ Juwan J. Holmes, “Conversion Therapy Survivor Says the Mormon Church Pays for its Members to Undergo it,” *LGBTQ Nation*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/12/conversion-therapy-survivor-says-mormon-church-pays-members-undergo/>.
- ¹¹⁹ Holmes, “Conversion Therapy Survivor Says the Mormon Church Pays for its Members to Undergo it.”
- ¹²⁰ Makus, “Stuart Hall’s Theory of Ideology,” 507.
- ¹²¹ Erin Alberty, “LGBTQ2S Mormons: Stories of Personal Raith Should Not Be ‘Trafficked’ to Serve an Agenda,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 28, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2019/09/28/lgbtq-mormons-stories/>.
- ¹²² D. Christian Harrison, “In Our Lovely *Oubliette*: The Un/Intended Consequences of Boundary Making and Keeping From a Gay Mormon Perspective,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 2 (2016): 56.
- ¹²³ Harrison, “In Our Lovely *Oubliette*,” 57.
- ¹²⁴ Nielson, “Inclusivity in the Latter-days,” 759.
- ¹²⁵ “The Divine Institution of Marriage,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, accessed November 13, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/the-divine-institution-of-marriage>.
- ¹²⁶ Alberty adds that the way groups like Affirmation share ‘coming out’ stories often leave individuals feeling trapped by their initial choices, highlighting that pro- and anti-gay groups select stories that strengthen their organization’s overall outlook. See Alberty, “LGBTQ2S Mormons.”
- ¹²⁷ Armand L. Mauss, “Authority and Dissent in Mormonism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terril L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 397.
- ¹²⁸ Mauss adds that the Church has adopted a more tolerant stance towards various dissenting sites (Ibid., 398). Although the Church doctrinally objects to the idea that LGBTQ2S and LDS identities can co-exist, the Church does not attempt to silence Affirmation or related sites.
- ¹²⁹ Gregory Fouts and Rebecca Inch, “Homosexuality in TV Situation Comedies: Characters and Verbal Comments,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 1 (2005): 41.
- ¹³⁰ Ironically, other studies of LGBTQ2S media depictions argue that gay characters are rarely framed as possessing any overtly sexual desires. Although characters are coded as gay (and they may repeatedly state as much), their overtly sexual *desires* are rarely emphasized, thereby rendering homosexuality “stereotypical, comical and therefore harmless.” See Avila-Saavedra, “Nothing Queer About Queer Television,” 13.
- ¹³¹ Reflecting Affirmation’s outlook, I wish to highlight that while the LDS Church can certainly be labelled anti-gay, the Church does not have exclusive domain over ‘Mormonism.’
- ¹³² Nielson, “Inclusivity in the Latter-days,” 761. Although Nielson only examines the perspectives of gay Mormons, this spectrum of inclusivity also applies to the broader Church. Some members promote intolerance and emotional (at times physical) violence against LGBTQ2S persons, while others welcome their belonging.