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Influenced: Performing Gender and Femininity in Mormon and Evangelical Online Spaces

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Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Kathryn Davis as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Women and Gender Studies in Religion.

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Abstract

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The construction of a digital self is fully performative; online identities are simultaneously highly curated, edited, and uniquely personal. These spaces allow users to become producers of identity and religious narrative. In this dissertation I examine the online communities which are a dynamic and developing aspect of religious life in America. I will argue that religious women have created increasingly diverse virtual spaces for themselves, and that these online communities give women a safe space to talk about their faith and create common bonds with other female adherents. I have engaged with these creators directly through oral history interviews and indirectly through their content, with the goal of understanding how women in these two traditions self-conceptualize, creating a project that is specific to the lived experiences of religious women by talking to them rather than simply looking at them.

The online stage has provided a democratic means for women to perform their gender while also shaping and constructing their cultural archetypes. The body of the religious woman is the canvas upon which the cultural and religious expectations are crafted into a solid gender identity. Through these platforms a significant number of Latter-day Saint and Evangelical Christian women co-create, sustain, and perpetuate systemic gendered norms through repetitious acts of performance. However, these platforms reflect the diversity of opinion which has always existed among women in each of these groups.

I conducted twenty-nine oral histories with Mormon and Evangelical content creators over the course of two years. All interviews will be archived with the Honnold Library at the Claremont Colleges in a special collection. Of those twenty-nine I have selected eighteen to feature in the following chapters. Throughout this series of interviews I found that, while most would not use (or be comfortable with) the language of gender theory, they were each making conscious decisions about their gendered identity. As content producers they are engaged in a dual-awareness of themselves as both a private and public image, and many of them spoke about their choices in those terms. The "them" which is present on their public platform is a stylized series of choices which do not always line up with the "them" which is present in private. This conscious curation or "branding" was a common practice for women in all categories.

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of Mr. Dwight Evans, the first teacher who took me seriously, and showed me that my thoughts, opinions, and point of view were valuable.

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This project would not have been possible without the support of my partner, the other Dr. Davis, who was at different times copy editor, cheerleader, and personal chef. Things would have fallen apart without you. I would also like to thank the amazing network of scholars who have become an integral part of my life and my scholarship. Kirsten, Ayat, AJ, Marlene and so many others who inspire me every day with their brilliance, empathy, and vision. And finally, I would like to thank the friends and family who have walked this long path with me. Your support has meant more to me than I can say.

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Introduction

In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Judith Butler states, “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well,.”[1] The act of performing one’s body and one’s gender is a necessarily public act. Religious women in America have been engaged in dueling performances of femininity, utilizing blogs as a public platform for declaring the shape and definition of what it means to be a woman in their religious tradition. If, as Butler claims, gender is “in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed” but is, instead, “an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*”[2] then the repetitious posting of these female bloggers acts as a means of reinforcing and re-creating the hegemonic or subversive feminine identity.

Objectives

In this dissertation I examine the online communities which are a dynamic and developing aspect of religious life in America. I will argue that religious women have created increasingly diverse virtual spaces for themselves, and that these online communities give women a safe space to talk about their faith and create common bonds with other female adherents. I have utilized Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender to argue that female bloggers have been engaged in parallel, and occasionally dueling, performances of public

[1] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.
[2] Ibid.

femininity which have, through performative acts of creation in which the signifiers of gender embody and become the thing itself, shaped public perception of what it means to be a female Evangelical or Mormon. As Michel Foucault notes,[3] each act which supposedly reveals knowledge of sex or gender is also an act of concealment, and I argue these public acts of gender have resulted in the homogenization of Mormon and Evangelical femininity in the public imagination, creating an image which is predominantly white and middle class, even when accounting for political and ideological differences within each group. I have engaged with these creators directly through interviews and oral history and indirectly through their content, with the goal of understanding how women in these two traditions self-conceptualize, creating a project that is specific to the lived experiences of religious women by talking to them rather than simply looking at them.

Why Evangelicalism and Mormonism?

Mormonism and Evangelicalism share several key characteristics that make them ideal subjects for comparison. Both groups, as they exist in the United States, have strong theological ties to American ideals and identities. American religious culture has long been characterized by the blending of civic and religious life held in regular tension with an individualistic and voluntaristic impulse. Put another way, for religious culture in America since the early nineteenth century (what Mark Noll classifies as America's second founding), "the main business has been to establish religious-political guidelines that recognize the political authority of federal power in a nation where religion has flourished and exerted broad social influences as

[3] For more on the revealing/concealing theater of discourses on sex and gender see Michel Foucault, "Part Three: 'Scientia Sexualis,'" in *The History of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), pp. 51-74.

a voluntary force."[4] These two groups share many other characteristics as well. They both embrace a democratization of the priesthood, with an emphasis on lay ministry, with (generally) no requirement for theological training. They share an emphasis on the nuclear family and an adherence to traditional gender roles,[5] and have over time shifted to the right, politically.

There is not a clearly defined singular "Church" within the Evangelical movement, as the denominational differences are so wide-ranging that one cannot refer to a single monolithic "Evangelical Church." I will be referring to female bloggers in this group as either Evangelical Christians or members of the Evangelical movement. British historian David Bebbington cited the key elements of modern Evangelicalism, they are, "conversionism (an emphasis on the 'new birth' as a life-changing religious experience), Biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ's redeeming work on the cross)."[6] This definition, though widely used (it has even been adopted by the National Association of Evangelicals)[7] provides a helpful starting point to understand the basic theological underpinnings of Evangelicalism writ large, but does not necessarily capture the breadth of self-identified Evangelicals in America. Marie Griffith articulated the struggle that one faces when seeking to define what is, in many cases, a moving target of religious identity. As she put it, "Labels such as fundamentalist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and charismatic have both historically specific meanings pertaining to their origins and diverse contemporary uses spanning an array of often disparate groups."[8] These categories

[4] Noll, Mark. "America's two founding's." *First Things* 178 (2007): 33.
[5] Increasingly this is an area of emphasis for maintaining a peculiar status for both groups.
[6] Noll, Mark A. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (New Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994) 8.
[7] "What Is an Evangelical?" National Association of Evangelicals, April 22, 2019, https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/.
[8]Griffith, R. Marie. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 21.

have historical trajectories which of course influence their development, but it is not enough to rely on history or theology alone to understand the elasticity and dynamism of the modern movement; we must also consider the give and take of cultural influence.

While no definition will perfectly encapsulate everyone who claims membership in this group (and because I require something more substantial than the tautological "an Evangelical is anyone who self-identifies as an Evangelical," although that definition has its temptations), for the purposes of this study I have chosen to follow Kate Bowler's lead. In her book *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*, her definition hits upon the middle ground between historical, theological, and cultural factors. She identifies four key components of Evangelicalism: first, that the modern movement in America emerged out of the debates between fundamentalism and modernism in the early part of the twentieth century, second, that adherents generally have a conversion experience and emphasize the authority of scripture, third, a tendency toward revivalism, and fourth, a subculture that defines itself "over and against the wider American culture."[9] It is in this fourth point where we can find common ground between Evangelicalism and Mormonism. Both engage in the push and pull of assimilation and retrenchment, both struggle to define what it means to be in but not of the world, and both have developed unique (and similar) methods to do so.

Evangelicalism's emphasis on so-called "heart religion"[10] allowed for the rise of a priesthood of all believers, with new leaders who were often under-educated formally, but felt drawn to public ministry through a person spiritual call.[11] Despite its tendency toward separatist

[9] Kate Bowler. *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020) xv.
[10] Inward conversion or transformation based on feeling rather than intellect.
[11] Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism*, 243.

theology, or the call to "come out" of the world and be set apart, Evangelicalism has always been an embodied religion, planted firmly in, and responding to, the world, making it subject to the civic sins of American society.

A fundamental part of many new or emerging religious movements is a restructuring of gendered roles and relationships, and this is true for the Latter-day Saint movement as well. From its earliest days women participated in community building efforts, helping to fund the building of Temples in Ohio, Illinois, and Utah. The Women's Relief Society as it was originally organized functioned to provide communal support and structure amid continued upheaval. Latter-day Saint women play an active role in both the terrestrial and celestial kingdoms, and have been fundamental to the survival of the Church throughout its history. Women and men participate in what is known as Celestial or Eternal Marriage, the continuation of familial structures from this world into the next. Celestial marriage sacralizes terrestrial marriage, and includes women in a divine familial order. Thus women had (and have!) a vital role in the celestial kingdom, but it is a role which is firmly complementarian, emphasizing the separate roles ordained for men and women within the family and wider society. Contemporary Mormonism is still largely complementarian, but has slowly eased the emphasis on large nuclear families within the official language of the Church Handbook.[12] The Church has invested in family and youth programs, which in turn serve to further codify members as wholesome and all-American.[13] As Claudia Bushman put it, "In many respects the family, not the individual, is the unit of society in Mormon culture."[14]

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[12] Jana Riess, "Commentary: The Incredible Shrinking Latter-Day Saint Family," The Salt Lake Tribune (The Salt Lake Tribune, June 15, 2019), https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/06/15/commentary-incredible/.
[13] More will be said on this topic in the next sections.
[14] Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in modern America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 38.

Since at least the mid-twentieth century Evangelical Christianity has similarly embraced a complementarian model for idealized familial relationships. Women like Beverly LaHaye, founder of CWA (Concerned Women for America) positioned themselves as representing "real" or "normal" American women, over and against feminists, redefining social conservatism as Christian and pro-family.[15] Within Evangelical Christian discourse there is an emphasis on properly performing femininity. One must strive to construct her body in such a way that it is both pleasing to God and attractive, but not tempting, to man. Overt, sometimes ostentatious femininity of the type displayed to varying degrees by women like Tammy Faye Bakker or Victoria Osteen, expresses an "alternative sexual ethic"[16] as a bulwark against encroaching liberalism and feminism. Evangelical Christian women are thus tasked with creating and performing a unique female presentation, and this focus on proper performance can be seen in the blogs written by and for Evangelical women.

Race, Class, and Religion

According to the Pew Research Center 65% of Americans identify as Christian, and 25% self-categorize themselves specifically as Evangelical Protestant.[17] This is a good place to start but does not present the full picture. As discussed above, the term "Evangelical" can encompass groups with a wide variety of history, experience, and demographics. There are those who self-identify in this category do not adhere to some or all of Bebbington or Bowler's criteria, and it

[15] Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019) 2.
[16] Bowler, 197.
[17] "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, December 31, 2019. https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/

can be difficult to generalize without creating arbitrary cut-off points.[18] For this to be a meaningful category for the purposes of this study we must further nuance our parameters. As Thomas Kidd notes, "Polls and stories about Evangelical political behavior almost always assume the Evangelicals in question are white."[19] When controlling for race, the number of white Evangelicals is closer to 19%.[20] Whiteness is key to understanding both the perception of Evangelicals from the outside and the dynamics shaping the movement from the inside. While Kidd asserts that the current perception of Evangelicalism (as predominantly white and politically conservative) is historically peculiar, I will argue that it is in line with both the history and current trajectory of the movement. In Bowler's definition of Evangelicalism she cites the beginning of the modern movement in the fundamentalist versus modernist debates of the early twentieth century, and Kidd also notes that this period was a time of intra-Protestant struggle.[21] Locating the rise of modern Evangelicalism in this period highlights the identity politics inherent in the movement, particularly in regard to race. The postbellum period saw a rise in independent Black churches breaking off from majority-white denominations, many of whom were not eager to embrace equality or integration. This resulted in the parallel development of majority Black and majority white Protestant denominations. Theologically many Black Christians fit into an Evangelical trajectory, which takes into account the great awakenings and revivals[22] however they are still often culturally excluded from Evangelicalism, and many do not claim that category. In their political activity through the early and mid-twentieth century white

[18] I can acknowledge that, by asserting a definition at all, I have done this to a degree, but I believe that the parameters I claimed here are sufficiently broad in scope to cover most who self-identify in this category.
[19] Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019) 1.
[20] Danielle Kurtzleben, "Are You an Evangelical? Are You Sure?," NPR (NPR, December 19, 2015), https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/458058251/are-you-an-evangelical-are-you-sure.
[21] Kidd, 52.
[22]Tisby, Jemar, "Are Black Christians Evangelicals?," in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* David Bebbington et al. (Grand Rapids, MI, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), pp. 158-163.

Evangelicals had a tendency to focus on defensive issues which were seen as personal, rather than global, such as prayer in school or teaching evolution.[23]

Evangelicalism has long had an issue with white supremacy. In the Jim Crow era "White fundamentalists were more likely to condemn booze or liberal theology than lynching"[24] and Evangelical institutions such as Moody Bible Institute gained mainstream credibility by embracing segregationist policies at rallies and revivals and backing away from integration on campus.[25] The tepid response to lynching by many white Evangelical churches further divided them from Black Evangelical churches. Most white Evangelicals did not participate in the struggle for Civil Rights,[26] even when, like Billy Graham, they exhibited tepid support. By the time of the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s, led by figures such as televangelist Jerry Falwell, who publicly opposed racial integration in the Civil Rights era,[27] the white Evangelical majority was aligning politically with the Republican party.[28] According to the Pew Religious Landscape survey, only 6% of Black Protestants self-identified as Evangelicals.[29] The majority of prominent Evangelical figures, nationally, are white[30] and one cannot speak about Evangelicalism in America without addressing race.

As a religion founded in America, the Saints also have a fraught history with race and whiteness, although it does not always parallel that of Evangelicals. In his book *Religion of a*

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[23] Kidd, 56.
[24] Kidd, 66.
[25] Dowland, Seth. "The Politics of Whiteness: The Racial Basis of American Evangelicalism," *Christian Century*, July 4, 2018, pp. 26-31.
[26] Kidd, 101.
[27] Kidd, 94.
[28] For more on this please see Daniel K. Williams. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.
[29] Tisby, 162.
[30] This includes prominent televangelists such as Paula White or Joyce Meyer (Meyer hosts one of the most watched Christian TV programs "Enjoying Everyday Life"), megachurch pastors like Joel Osteen or Rick Warren, and dynastic figures such as Franklin Graham or Jerry Falwell, Jr.

Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness Paul Reeve argues that throughout the nineteenth century Mormons were not "securely white" in the eyes of many in America.[31] By that he means that they were denied the benefits and stature of hegemonic whiteness, and were instead conflated with other marginalized groups and racialized as Other, "As outsiders viewed it, Mormon race was a performance, that is, Mormons *acted* racially degenerate, therefore they *were* racially degenerate."[32] Mormons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had what Reeve terms aspirations to whiteness, meaning that while they were engaged in a tug of war between assimilation and peculiarity the rules for assimilation required the performance of proper racial conduct.[33]

The process of becoming legible as white for Mormon society included acceptance of prevailing racist norms. This process reveals the performative, stitched together nature of race in American society. It reveals that race was, and is, a shifting category rather than a biological reality. Much attention has been paid to the priesthood ban (and its rescinding) when discussing race and Mormonism, but Max Perry Mueller rightly notes that this framing (of race and the priesthood) effectively erases the gendered component of this marginalization. Instead he suggests that the racial policies of the pre-1978 era could be known as a "ban on full black membership"[34] Post-1978 the Church encountered a different problem: they went from not white enough to too white.[35] Since the 1990s the Church has been engaged in a campaign to diversify the public image of Mormons and Mormonism, the "I'm a Mormon" campaign, which featured

[31] W. Paul. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.
[32] Ibid, 263.
[33] Ibid, 2.
[34] Mueller, Max Perry. "Introduction: Beyond "Race and the Priesthood"— Toward a New History of Race and Mormonism." *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (2015), 8.
[35] Reeve, 257.

"an (increasingly) multiethnic, international community."[36] Roughly 2%[37] of Americans self-identified as Mormon, or a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and of that group approximately 86% identify as white according to the Pew Religious Landscape survey.[38]

Evangelical stages since the 1970s remain overwhelmingly white, with slightly more diversity in Pentecostal spaces (though Bowler argues that they are still, generally, segregated).[39] The most successful Evangelical women in the public eye crafted their identity and brand around being a so-called "professional wife".[40] Tammy Faye Bakker hosted her own show on PTL (the television network she co-owned with then husband Jim Bakker) with segments about fashion, cooking, home decorating, and bargain-hunting, meant to replace secular women's programming and magazines.[41] Shows like *Tammy's House Party* presented a faux middle-class reality, emphasizing frugality, amiability, and home-making as part and parcel of Christian womanhood. Part of being a "professional wife" (a term which could readily be applied to the conservative bloggers discussed in the next section) is embracing the fiction that being a homemaker is their primary occupation. Much as Bakker worked full time hosting shows on her network, many Mormon and Evangelical bloggers work full time, and often make a full-time income, curating their blogs. But they maintain the fiction, either implicitly or explicitly, of living a middle-class lifestyle in a single income home. Colleen McDannell explains that "Bloggers speak a 'language' that makes sense in the fantasy life of a particular type of woman but not to women living in

[36] Mueller, 3.
[37] "Statistics and Church Facts: Total Church Membership." Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Accessed May 11, 2020. https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics
[38] "Mormons - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Forum, May 11, 2015), https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/mormon/.
[39] Bowler, 8.
[40] Bowler, 79.
[41] Johnson, 105.

most of the world."[42] They are able to commodify domesticity while also deflecting and downplaying their roles as income earners and business women in order to perpetuate (and participate in) an idealized version of domestic bliss targeted to succeed in a capitalist and consumerist culture.

Blogs, Social Media, and Online Identity

Early forays into online religion in America were more of an imitation or extension of offline religious practice. Digital spaces have been used to supplement, not replace, in-person churches. However, Heidi Campbell notes that for Christian traditions online communities can fuel individualistic tendencies already present in many Protestant denominations, because these online spaces are always available and they allow for uses to engage with ritual and the sacred without traditional gatekeepers.[43] This means that authority can spread to those who would not otherwise have access to it, and a lay person can gain a following or achieve some level of prominence without going through the traditional or proper channels.

The construction of a digital self is fully performative; online identities are simultaneously highly curated, edited, and uniquely personal. These spaces allow users to become producers of identity and religious narrative. Brenda Brasher argues that, at least in part because of these creative and performative elements, online religion is the natural next step, culturally, for meaning making and preserving or continuing one's religious heritage.[44] It diminishes the restrictions of locality and opens up the possibilities for broad religious exchange.

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[42] Colleen McDannell. *Sister Saints: Mormon Women since the End of Polygamy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019) 180.
[43] Campbell, Heidi A. "Religion and the Internet: A Microcosm for Studying Internet Trends and Implications." *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 680–94.
[44] Brenda E. Brasher, *Give me that online religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

Online religion, she asserts, gives pride of place to imagination and the senses. It is uncharted territory, and provides nearly infinite space for the development of traditions. Cyberspace has become a new space for signification and identity development as well as communication and development of new social orders. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Evangelical Christians have both proven adept at utilizing the internet for evangelism, personal reflection, and building community. In the so-called "Mormon Blogosphere" theological innovation happens among the lay members, as does doctrinal interpretation. Kristine Haglund argues that the tradition of lay preaching and lay theology within LDS history has led to a religion that is invested in praxis, and grounded in lived experience.[45] The internet provides room for discussion and meaning making, outside of the purview of the general authorities.

The online stage has provided a democratic means for women to perform their gender while also shaping and constructing their cultural archetypes. The body of the religious woman is the canvas upon which the cultural and religious expectations are crafted into a solid gender identity. Through these platforms a significant number of Latter-day Saint and Evangelical Christian women co-create, sustain, and perpetuate systemic gendered norms through repetitious acts of performance. However, these platforms reflect the diversity of opinion which has always existed among women in each of these groups.

While Mormon blogging communities have begun to receive more attention, after the 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney, most has been focused on Mormon feminists, who rose to national prominence through their outspoken criticism of the Church. But conservative women bloggers actually take up more real estate online. Attention often gets focused on women

[45]Patrick Q. Mason, John G. Turner, and Kristine Haglund, "Blogging the Boundaries: Mormon Mommy Blogs and the Construction of Mormon Identity," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 244.

who use their personal agency to buck or reject norms, but there are many others who use their agency to inhabit these cultural norms. Conservative women get flattened out into mere props for the patriarchy, but they are not passive.

There is a community of feminist and liberal-leaning Mormon blogs such as "The Exponent" and "Feminist Mormon Housewives" that have created an online space for Mormon women to verbalize new definitions for Mormon femininity, where they are constructing a new identity using the existing language of normative gender. By situating themselves within this pre-existing context they can maintain their set apart identity as members of the Mormon community. *The Exponent* is the blog associated with the Mormon women's magazine *The Exponent II*, which was founded in the 1970's and modeled after an earlier women's newspaper in Utah called *The Women's Exponent*. The blog has a stable of regular contributors who write about topics ranging from ideas for family home evening and lessons that can be presented to the Relief Society to masturbation and sexual assault. By dealing frankly with topics that are often hidden, blogs like The Exponent work to deconstruct normative gender archetypes and replace them with newly constructed identities.

On the other end of the spectrum, also fighting to define what it means to be a Mormon woman are the colloquially (and some would argue, derisively) named "Mormon Mommy Bloggers." I have chosen largely to avoid that moniker, as many women find it to be either pejorative or inaccurate. I have instead chosen to refer to this grouping as "lifestyle," as women in this group often focus on so-called "lifestyle" topics such as interior design, cooking, baking, and DIY crafts. They portray a rose-tinted image of life as a stay-at-home mom. These act as a means of performing and re-creating hegemonic feminine identity. The world of the lifestyle influencer is purposefully constructed to reflect a highly idealized gender performance, as

Colleen McDannell explains it, "Blogging reinvigorated Mormon domesticity, giving the stay at home mom not only a platform to assert the spiritual significance of nurturing children but also a place in the commercial economy."[46] Such bloggers are using their platform to publicly construct a more traditional form of Mormon femininity, one that also utilizes existing language and ideals from within the Mormon tradition to create a gendered body that fits with the established expectations of feminine identity. By focusing on the importance of modesty and traditionally feminine occupations such as stay at home mom, they can present female bodies that are modestly but attractively dressed as a means of re-making and reinforcing traditional gender identities. "Mommy Blogs" act as a counter (both directly and indirectly) to feminist blogs, performing a version of idealized femininity on a world stage. Kristine Haglund argues that they are doing feminist praxis in that they make "the real lives of women visible and worthy of attention"[47] even though it is done to inhabit and reflect patriarchal norms.

For lifestyle influencers and bloggers it is about a seamless incorporation of faith, politics, patriotism, and family life. They have the Church as part of their personal "brand," like upcycling garage sale finds or wearing chunky scarves in fall. In this way they are demonstrating a lived and applied theology. They are using these blogs to work out the "raw material" of their religion, and how it intersects with every aspect of their lives. They construct and present a picture of idealized motherhood and femininity, important core values within the Church (remember, Claudia Bushman argues that the family, not the individual is the basic unit of society within the Church)[48] and function as a means of codifying so-called traditional feminine norms against attempts to break down and re- create them. In general, they focus on topics

[46] McDannell, 174.
[47] Haglund, 240.
[48] Bushman, Claudia L. *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-Day Saints in Modern America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

traditionally within the women's domain such as cooking, baking, interior design, and DIY crafts. These blogs have broad appeal outside of the Church community, and in some cases become a significant income source and public platform for shaping the face of the Church to the world.

Evangelical content creators do not have the same strong ideological camps that one sees within the Latter-day Saint tradition, but are utilizing the internet in similar ways. There are networks of women bloggers who mutually post on each other's pages and share links to each other to build a wide-reaching support network for, primarily, stay at home moms. They will participate in online conferences such as the one hosted by Homemaking Industries, which was founded by blogger Jami Balmet, where they share tips about how to raise children and maintain a home from a Christian perspective, as well as advice on how to drive more traffic to your site, and what topics are more likely to generate clicks. Evangelical bloggers tend to focus more on overt displays of religion, whereas many LDS bloggers build the image and lifestyle first, a more strategic approach which allows them to build relationships with their readers before engaging with religion.

Blogs also provide a public communal space for sharing experiences with both insiders and outsiders of Mormon culture. One of the main criticisms of "mommy blogs" is that they create an overly idealistic image of Mormon femininity. They do, but that is because they function as a means of codifying so-called traditional feminine norms against attempts to break down and re-create gendered identity. Lifestyle blogs also allow women to present as an idealized wife and mother. They focus on cooking, crafts, budgeting, cleaning tips, and general home design. They are the public stage on which Mormon women perform their identity as Godly wife, mother, and homemaker. These online communities, created by the bloggers who

participate in them, provide a space for women to safely express themselves in ways that they might not be willing to do in real life. However, that is largely contained in forums and conferences, rather than in the public-facing blogs, which are more performative (though they will often make allusions to "normal mom" stress).

There are some Evangelical creators who break out of that mold, however, and speak openly about more controversial topics. Writers such as Jen Hatmaker or the late Rachel Held Evans have risen to national prominence by speaking honestly about issues such as postpartum depression, feeling alienated by patriarchal church doctrines, or simply feeling doubt in their faith. These blogs push back against the more dominant narrative of the Mommy or Lifestyle blog, seeking to tear down the wall of hegemonic gender performance. In general, these blogs fall into a more confessional or essayist model, rather than having a theme or utility such as homemaking, homeschooling, or fashion.

Theoretical Framing

This project is pulling together threads from three distinct fields of study: feminist and gender theory, religions of North America, and digital religion. As such, the literature I am building on comes from a broad variety of scholars and perspectives. For feminist theory and gender studies I am primarily building upon Judith Butler's work in gender theory. In particular her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Undoing Gender*, and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* as well as articles such as "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," originally published in the Johns Hopkins University Theater Journal, in which she first articulates her theory of performativity.

In this dissertation I look at women who choose to break from expected gender performance as well as those who choose to uphold it, and why. Phenomenologically such acts must be understood as both the things that create meaning as well as the things through which meaning is performed or enacted.[49] Thus these performative acts of gender serve both to create and then reinforce gendered identity. Gender gains meaning through its expression.

This concept, that gender is created and given meaning through repetitious and public acts serves as the theoretical basis for the work I plan to do in this dissertation. What constitutes these different types of performances? Butler compares daily gender performance to an actor on a stage, where everything is chosen specifically to telegraph something about the character to the audience. If, for religious women bloggers, the world is their audience, what choices are they making, and what do they want to say about their characters?

Expressions of gender are deployed to make a body legible within a society which demands categorization. Butler builds upon Michel Foucault's theories of power and knowledge to illuminate the ways in which bodies are made legible in society through performative acts of gender. Foucault described power and knowledge as twin structures which create together a loop of mutually beneficial production and naturalization. In Foucauldian discourse power is not generated from the top down but can be better understood as a network or perhaps a circulatory system, connecting and moving through the social body. It is mobile, linking the big to the small while simultaneously creating outposts in both. It is diffuse and not centralized, and has no identifiable universal goal. It is permanent, repetitious, and self-producing.

Power makes it possible for knowledge to discover so-called "truth," but legitimized and sanctioned knowledge feeds back into power, giving it the tools to infiltrate and control.

[49] Butler, 521.

Knowledge creates official ways of knowing, and thus legitimizing knowledge, which then power uses to create categories into which legible and illegible bodies can be sorted and thus pathologized or legitimized, but ultimately controlled. Cultural institutions maintain power by creating certain official channels for the production of knowledge (and thus for the delegitimization of other ways of knowing). Foucault drives home this point by asking, "Which speaking, discursing subjects-which subjects of experience and knowledge-do you then want to 'diminish' when you say: I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist?"[50]

Butler builds upon this understanding of power and knowledge to explain how political ideologies, legal bodies, and cultural institutions have colluded to create and naturalize gendered bodies. When power sanctions certain truths about the body through the legitimizing force if institutionalized knowledge those truths can then be utilized for demographic classification. Foucault argues that the creation of populations as categories provided a means for those in power to justify the collection of knowledge about bodies, as it was now demographics, a scientific pursuit. Thus sex became a matter for national concern, no longer just a moral or religious matter. Suddenly the nation needed to know what use citizens were making of their sex. The creation of demographics and populations relied upon conformation of bodies. Illegible bodies are then pathologized by knowledge.

According to Butler, gender is what makes a body acceptably legible within such a system. Gender is what personifies us, what makes us recognizable as persons. These accepted truths of science have created technologies of power by which the body is ascribed a natural, a-historical state, when in fact the body is always culturally inscribed, naturalized rather than

[50] Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge. A Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1980) 85.

natural. Sex and gender are always, as a result, situated within discourses of power and knowledge. For Butler there does not exist a prediscursive gendered body. Gendered bodies exist for discursive ends. They are created as texts meant to be read by society.

If, then, the gendered body is a text, a book, it must be written, and the rules and norms of gender dictate what story can be told. The doing of one's gender is thus a public act. One never "does" one's gender without an audience, even if that audience is imaginary, because gender can only be read through distinction and opposition. And learning to do one's gender well is an act of necessity, because, as Butler says, "The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable."[51] Performing gender in a way that is not socially legible can lead to ostracism or violence. If one is not legible or "readable" within the gendered paradigm in society under these discourses of power, one will not be classified as "real." To not be real is to be a figure of suspicion, somehow less than human.

Gender is performed through repetitive acts which build up, layer upon layer, to create a finished portrait every day. Not all such acts are performed consciously or willingly, because from infancy the body is trained to do gender. It is in this way that gender becomes naturalized within one's own mind, because these acts, the way that one speaks, sits, adjusts their clothing, or how they perceive themselves in relation to both objects and other bodies, are like bricks, each individual one cemented to previous, building a monument to natural gender. Thus proper performance of gender becomes a necessity for an individual to exist as human within society. Butler proposes some alternatives, and some ways to create what they call "gender trouble" and such ways of troubling the waters of gender will be explored in the following chapters. I will also

[51] Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender* (Boca Raton, Fla.: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004) 2.

explore how naturalized gender is upheld and reinforced through its public performance on social media.

Methods

Tsuria, Yadlin-Segal, Vitullo, and Campbell offer what they call a "tripod" methodology for studying digital religion which focuses on defining the research within digital environments, utilizing digital tools, and applying unique digital frames.[52] Because of the unique nature of digital religion we must first define the type of environment in which this study will take place. There has been some debate about whether certain digital venues for religion exist in a *third space*, a sacred space situated between online and offline. This theory allows us to distinguish between digital environments based on user participation and function, as "[not] all Internet venues are automatically third spaces, but rather that certain websites, blogs, and social network platforms can become meaningful as they are charged with religious values."[53] While not all of the blogs in this study fully evolve this hybrid identity, there are some, particularly those which are focused less on lifestyle topics and more on theology or politics, which have become a sacred third space for their users, and must be treated with respect and care.

Similarly, framing something as digital changes the epistemology and understanding of the subject. Framing here refers to the theoretical lenses with which a researcher approaches her subject. Once again this requires hybrid theoretical framing, as we must consider the means of transmission as more than simply a tool, but instead as an important piece of the whole. The use of digital communication in the form of a blog is fundamental rather than incidental, and creates

[52] Ruth Tsuria et al., "Approaches to Digital Methods in Studies of Digital Religion," *The Communication Review* 20, no. 2 (March 2017): pp. 73-97.
[53] Heidi A. Campbell and Giulia Evolvi, "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies," *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (September 2019) 7.

a new and unique environment. Incorporating the medium of transmission into my research continues to validate online spaces as worthy spheres of investigation.[54] Thus the forms of communication facilitated by a blog must inform how they are analyzed. It is vitally important to include women's voices, as they are the ones who are creating and populating these dynamic new spaces. My interest is not simply in what they are writing, but also why. This is a study of both the creator and the thing created, and how they function as identity performance and creation. As such I will place these interviews within the framework of feminist theory, and in particular Judith Butler's theory of performative gender as articulated in *Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender*, and various articles and essays, as discussed above.

The core of my research has been oral histories and interviews with women who write and produce these blogs, using the tools I gained from participating in Dr. Claudia Bushman's Oral History project, the oral history research tool I completed at CGU, and my participation as a fellow at the Advanced Summer Institute of the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Interviews were conducted through online video conferencing, and the audio was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were made available to each narrator, who then had the opportunity to review their words and ask for any omissions. Transcripts were very lightly edited to remove verbal tics or false starts only if doing so did not alter the meaning of the narrative. These have not been edited out of the audio.

The blogs I feature in the following chapters meet several limiting criteria. First, they were all founded after the year 2004 and published in some form through at least the year 2018, with preference given to those still publishing. This date range encompasses the rise of popular blogging platforms such as WordPress (first released in 2003-2004) and is the first year that

[54] Tsuria, et. al.

prominent tentpole blog *Feminist Mormon Housewives* began publishing online. Second, they all were founded by women. While some of the blogs I will discuss have a community of writers which may include some men or non-binary people, they are all primarily maintained and produced by women. I have chosen to focus on female bloggers not because they are the only ones producing interesting content that is worthy of study, but rather because I believe that they are doing something that is both interesting and novel, which deserves further examination. Third, all of the blogs in this study fall within several broad categories: feminism, fashion, and modesty, and lifestyle/"mommy blogs." These categories are porous, so there will be cross-pollination (for example, both fashion blogs and lifestyle or mommy blogs may have posts about interior design, and both mommy blogs and feminist blogs may have posts about politics). But I have chosen to divide them by their overall theme which incorporates how they self-define (taking pains to not apply labels where they are not wanted).

I have chosen to conduct oral histories as a feminist praxis. This research method can create space for conversation between the interviewer and the subject, and I strove, in each of my interviews, to fight against the othering that can be a result of any qualitative research. With that in mind, I am aware that the researcher is not absent, and the interlocutors were not speaking into the void. As I was asking that the women I interviewed open themselves up to me and allow me into their homes (albeit virtually) my ethics demanded that I do the same for them. Because just as I am hearing their words and theorizing about their lives, I too exist within a paradigm which requires a gendered performance. It is without question that the responses I got, for good or ill, were influenced by my presentation and situationality. It is impossible to know how any of these narrators would have responded to a different interviewer, we can only know how they

responded to me. As such it would be disingenuous to remove myself, to pretend that each dialogue was really a monologue.

Even so, I am not the focus or subject of this work. My goal was to open a door for the women interviewed to self-define and to tell their own stories. I was open with them about this project, how I intended to utilize their interviews, and what perspective I was bringing with me so that they could make an informed decision about their participation. Claudia Bushman, in her introduction to the edited volume *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, articulates one of the guiding principles for oral history as a feminist act when she says that, "Writing our own stories empowers us [...] What they say is only a representation of what is in their minds, not the impossibly elusive truth. Yet with all the limitations, these stories illuminate their worlds. We have to get such stories down. If we want to live forever in the minds and annals of the earth, if we want other women to be represented into the future, we have to leave a record."[55] These women and their stories represent not only a snapshot of cultural and historical turning point (namely, the rise of widespread internet communication and social media) but are, each one, women trying to leave a record. This project and the resulting archive will be an additional means for them to do so.

Summary of Findings: Comparison of Traditions

In her working definition of Evangelicalism Kate Bowler offers four main criteria, the fourth of which is that Evangelicalism has created a subculture that defines itself "over and against the wider American culture."[56] Members are encouraged to be "in the world but not of

[55] Gavin, Sherrie LM, Elizabeth J. Mott, Allison Keeney, Susan Woster, Pamela Lindsay Everson, Susan Robison, Lisa Thomas Clayton et al. *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection* (Greg Kofford Books, 2013) xvii.
[56] Bowler, xv.

it," a slogan taken from Romans chapter 12 and John chapter 17.[57] This cellophane identity, where one is sealed away but visible, is shared in popular Mormon culture. In addition to Spencer Kimball's call to find a "style of their own," Elder James Cullimore, when speaking at General Conference in 1973, gave a talk in which he exhorted members of the church to be in the world but not of the world. He quoted from John Chapter 17, as well as several other verses from the Christian Bible to support his claim that Mormons "would not want to be free of our responsibility of being in the world by being taken out of the world, for this life is a probationary state. The 'world' is our opportunity to prove ourselves. This is a part of the great plan of the Lord, to be confronted with the things of the "world," that we might overcome them and be strengthened."[58] The world, for Mormons and Evangelicals, is a proving ground, a series of tests and trials which will strengthen and refine one's faith. As both religions emphasize mission work, it is necessary that members do not cloister themselves away fully. As Elder Cullimore put it, "The righteous lives of members of the Church throughout the world is a great leaven to the gospel loaf."[59] This impermeable visibility, where influence flows only one way, is a key element to the subcultures of both of these traditions, and was apparent in the lives of the women featured here.

Both of these traditions would be considered high demand religions. High demand religions will commonly involve large commitment of time and resources for the church on the part of the adherent, some degree of encouraged or forced separation between the member and

[57] These are the most common references, however this idea is found in many places in the Christian Bible.

[58] "To Be in the World but Not of the World." Accessed July 4, 2023. https://site.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1973/10/to-be-in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world?lang=eng&adobe_mc_ref=https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1973/10/to-be-in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world.

[59] Ibid.

the rest of the world or outsiders, and will require strict adherence to lifestyle codes surrounding things such as gender roles, family life, attire, media consumption, and technology use.[60]

Women from both traditions spoke about this insider/outsider mentality, often feeling both comforted and constricted by these cultural boundaries. For many, these cultural ties were one of the first things mentioned when I asked what they liked about their current ward or church. However, both Evangelical and Mormon women reported having run-ins with religious authorities in which they were either castigated, called out, or removed from ministry for reasons related to their gender. This happened to both conservative and progressive women across the spectrum. Each woman I spoke with, wherever she was with regard to her religious adherence, had a well-developed sense of what it should mean to be a woman in her religious tradition, and had developed strategies to cope with these demands.

As religious traditions which are invested in American identity, these two groups have developed in parallel, although not always in conversation, with regard to cultural identity. This is particularly true when discussing gender roles in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A prime example, mentioned elsewhere, are Marabel Morgan and Helen Andelin. Helen Andelin was a devout Mormon who wrote a series of self-help books aimed at teaching women how to adhere to the norms expected of a "traditional" mother and wife. According to Colleen McDannell, "At the very time that feminists asked women to assert their independence, reject assumptions about their childish nature, and foster a mature sexuality, Andelin developed a self-development program based on just the opposite."[61] Andelin's *Fascinating Womanhood* series, of which the first volume was published in 1963, coincided with a cultural backlash within

[60] Myers, Summer Anne, "Visualizing the Transition Out of High-Demand Religions" (2017). LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations, 5.
[61] McDannell, 96.

Mormon culture against the perceived threat of the women's liberation movement. The book was a success, and she began offering conferences, seminars, and supplemental material.

In parallel with Andelin, although a little later, Marabel Morgan, a devout Evangelical, was having similar concerns. She expressed her concerns in 1973 in her bestselling book *The Total Woman*. In their public narratives, both Andelin and Morgan claim that they were in long term but stagnating marriages, which led them to seek out wisdom from the Bible, prayer, and traditional texts. They arrived at shockingly similar conclusions: the root of this disenchantment was in their (and society's) abandonment of so-called traditional femininity, which had emasculated their husbands and upset the balance in their relationships. They also proposed the same solution: women needed to return to a traditional, godly relationship structure. As Emily Johnson explains it, Morgan "encouraged women to stop nagging their husbands and to focus instead on changing themselves, to adapt to their husbands' needs and then watch how their husbands became more attentive to them in return. She also emphasized the sexual aspects of marriage, encouraging wives to spice up their marital sex lives with arousing costumes, erotic games, and other strategies designed to break up boring, even sexless, routines."[62]

In the parallels between Andelin and Morgan we can see a template for modern Mormon and Evangelical women. Andelin and Morgan were addressing the same topics: marital dysfunction, the perceived breakdown of the nuclear family, the dangers of feminism and the decline of traditional ways of life. They both presented themselves as housewives first and authors second, employing what Kate Bowler would call deferred significance to fit within their own proposed framework, and they both grounded their arguments in conservative Christian

[62] Johnson, 11.

traditions. And while there were some contemporary comparisons[63] Morgan achieved a higher level of mainstream success.[64] But still, they were making similar arguments, pulling from similar sources, and responding to similar concerns all while operating in largely separate spheres from each other.

This model remains in place for modern influencers. Many of the women I spoke to were only passingly familiar with the work of women doing very similar things but from the other tradition. But when I, as an outsider, spoke with them I was continually struck by the similarities in their experiences, concerns, and points of view. Despite the many areas where their interests, outlook, and beliefs overlap, I found that Mormon and Evangelical bloggers and influencers were not in dialogue with each other directly, even those who were in writing groups which did not have specific parameters other than the broad designation of Christian. One possible explanation for this continued siloing is the perception of Mormonism among Evangelicals. In a survey from December 2012 Pew Research found that 40% of White Evangelicals did not consider Mormons to be Christian.[65] While this data is somewhat old, it holds true for what I found during the interview process. In general the Mormon women I spoke to did not participate in writing groups with Evangelicals or form partnerships with them, but viewed them, generally, neutrally. The Evangelical women I spoke with were interested in the work of Mormon influencers, and were generally aware of their brands and impact, but did not seem to view them as members of the same group as themselves. When they spoke about Christian writing

[63] Most notably a 1975 article in the New York Times which interviewed attendees from each of their respective conferences.

[64] Johnson argues, and I tend to agree, that this difference in success was due at least in part to Morgan's willingness to discuss sex in more explicit terms and her claims to be apolitical.

[65] "Americans Learned Little About the Mormon Faith, But Some Attitudes Have Softened." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, December 14, 2012. Accessed July 4, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/14/attitudes-toward-mormon-faith/.

conferences or groups they would include Catholic and Orthodox Christians as well as Protestants, but did not include Mormons. This is one of the key areas where I would like to follow up with several interviewees, to delve further into why these groups in particular are kept separate, and how their faith, and perception of the other, impacts these decisions.

Summary of Findings: Gender Performance

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler argues that gender is the "discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts."[66] Discourse is one of the key means through which bodies are inscribed with cultural codes. Discourse in this sense can be done by or to an individual. The women in this study are engaged directly in discursive inscription. Gender is constituted by the very things which are supposed to be its results. Thus gender is, fundamentally, a social and public act.

Throughout this series of interviews I found that, while most subjects would not use (or be comfortable with) the language of gender theory, they were each making conscious decisions about their gendered identity. As content producers they are engaged in a dual-awareness of themselves as both a private and public image, and many of them spoke about their choices in those terms. The "them" which is present on their public platform is a stylized series of choices which do not always line up with the "them" which is present in private. This was particularly true for those who were creating lifestyle and fashion content, but it was not limited to creators in those categories.

Being a woman in public, a public personality, caused participants to reflect upon what it means to be a woman, and specifically a woman within their particular religious tradition. While

[66] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10.

all of us perform gender in conscious and unconscious ways the women I spoke to had a heightened awareness of the power of discourse. One Mormon feminist commented, “if I'm giving a talk in church, I probably won't use the word feminism. If it's just me as a person, absolutely, I use it, I own it, I think it's important. But I know that for some people, they hear it, they hear that word, and they can't hear anything else, because they have been taught to fear that word. And so I will kind of approach it in a little softer way.” She has learned to curate her persona to fit different contexts; online she can be more openly feminist but in person, particularly in a religious setting, she is keenly aware of the expectations and boundaries that she must abide by in order to still be legibly read as a Mormon woman.

Many participants resonated with the language of curation or branding rather than performance. In initial meetings, when I would explain the project, I used the example of a video conferencing window, as we were all meeting virtually. I would joke with them that I had carefully chosen what they could see in that square, even if it was not necessarily indicative of what the rest of the room looked like. This led to many of them explaining their process for curation, the particular camera angles which showed part of the room while hiding what was less “camera ready.” This proved to be a helpful way to introduce one element of gender performance, the part that is done consciously, without using terms like performativity which may have caused confusion or in some cases hostility.

I utilized a style similar to that of popular bloggers like the late Rachel Held Evans, discussed further in chapter 4. She was particularly adept at presenting her message in a way which was relatable and non-threatening. She would do this by including personal anecdotes, avoiding jargon unless absolutely necessary, and presenting herself like a friend along for the journey with the reader rather than an authority or teacher. This mode of communication which

is often (sometimes derisively) called folksy, is also employed by many of the most successful women in Evangelical teaching and ministry. As Kate Bowler notes, women in conservative traditions will often lead with the personal, commonly a self-deprecating anecdote which serves to put the audience at ease and make the speaker seem less threatening and more relatable. This was a common mode of communication for the women I spoke with, who would also employ deferred significance to downplay their own prowess and achievements. This shields them from criticism and allows them to operate in a sort of liminal space in which they can be successful as long as they continue to be legibly feminine in the expected ways. In doing these initial meetings and interviews I had cause to reflect upon my own presentation, and found that I too fell into these patterns. As Butler says, the acts of gender are both conscious and unconscious, they are a styling of the body. Much like the women I was interviewing, I had internalized a process for passing what Bowler calls "the acid test of relatability."[67] We, as women, had learned ways to appear non-threatening, to use humor and personal anecdotes to soften the edges of what could otherwise be perceived as unacceptably unfeminine. I found that these methods and orientations span across the divide of religion and political affiliation, that the boundaries and expectations which come with being read as a woman affected us all.

Chapters

Chapter 1: Why They Write

In this chapter I will be addressing two broad, foundational questions, the first of which is: why do they write? What, broadly, are the reasons why women choose to create content online in various forms? This will provide the first glimpse "behind the curtain" to see the ways

[67] Bowler, 13.

in which online activity impacts and interacts with the "offline" lives of bloggers and influencers. Second, how do they navigate gendered expectations and understanding within their respective traditions? These questions help us to begin unpacking the performative elements of content creation, which can be best seen in the interactions between online and offline selves. This chapter features three women: Aubrey, Rachel, and Heather. Each began (and continues) to create online content for reasons which are simultaneously deeply personal and widely applicable to many of the other women in this study. Aubrey and Heather come from the Latter-day Saint or Mormon tradition, whereas Rachel is an Evangelical Christian. In contrasting their experiences we see both the commonalities, for example all women are mothers to multiple children who have at different points in their lives been stay at home moms, and the differences in political and cultural positions. Their narratives are broken down into three sections: introductions, gender and family life, and why they started.

In this chapter is also a more in-depth introduction to the scholarly study of digital religion and a broad introduction to the current work being done on conservative American Protestant women in the spotlight. In particular I address Kate Bowler's book *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* and Emily Suzanne Johnson's book *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right.*

Chapter 2: The Hustle

Women create online content for a multitude of reasons. For many it is not just a means of expressing themselves but also a way to connect with other women. Of course, there is a monetary aspect as well. Ultimately a blog will serve a purpose. It will be an income generator, it will be a platform to promote other writing or businesses, it will be a way to connect to community, or some combination of all three. But this is work. Whether it is writing, editing, or

researching, women can dedicate significant amounts of time to curating an online presence. In this chapter we will move from the *why* to the *how* of content creation. This can include everything from emotional or spiritual fulfillment to monetary compensation. There is not one direct path, and this chapter will explore both how these writers ended up where they are, and what motivates them to stay.

In this chapter we will meet four women: Jamee, Amberly, LeeAnn, and Jessie. Each of them has built a sustainable business through blogging and social media. Jamee and Amberly are Latter-Day Saint women whose work focuses on marriage and family life, whereas LeeAnn and Jessie are Evangelical Christians who each run consulting businesses which teach other Christian content creators how to build their brands with the goal of monetization. These women are featured in four sections: Introductions, Building a Business and Finding a Following, Refining the Brand, and Gendered and Sexed. In the theoretical section of the chapter I explore the history of American Christianity and new media and continue to expand the lens of gendered performance online.

Chapter 3: Living the Lifestyle

This chapter will focus on lifestyle influencers. I have chosen to avoid the label of "Mommy Blogger," as it is often applied pejoratively or dismissively to any blog written by a mother. I have chosen instead the category of "lifestyle" as I feel it more accurately represents what women within this category are doing; they are creating and marketing a lifestyle. This is the largest of the categories under consideration, with the broadest internal diversity of focus. There are also those who move between fashion and more general lifestyle content, which can include parenting, marriage and family life, and homemaking. But all within this grouping create content which presents a carefully curated and crafted lifestyle, and incorporate elements of

personal narrative and life tips for the reader. Women in this category have found their niche through writing about a variety of topics related to personal and family life such as fashion, parenting, health and wellness, and travel. Although, as mentioned above, these categories have porous boundaries, and it is not unusual for someone who is primarily a fashion blogger to occasionally write about parenting or (more rarely) politics or feminism. All of the women featured in this chapter have built their following by creating content which incorporates religious doctrine into daily life, making practical applications and adaptations to display a religiously faithful lifestyle. In this chapter I will explore how these lifestyles are created and maintained, and will delve more deeply into how these presentations create (and naturalize) a wholesome and amiable identity for Mormon and Evangelical women which is overwhelmingly white and middle-class.

This chapter features four women: Karim, Jesse, Maryruth, and Sarah. Karim and Jesse are Latter-day Saint fashion and lifestyle influencers on Instagram and YouTube, whereas Maryruth and Sarah are Evangelical Christian bloggers who primarily write about health and wellness. These women are featured in three sections: Introductions, Life on Display, and The Religious Body. In the theoretical section of this chapter I introduce R. Marie Griffith's influential book *Born Again Bodies* to begin a discussion of embodied religion in America. I also utilize the work of Michel Foucault and Elizabeth Grosz to discuss the construction of socially legible bodies.

Chapter 4: Writing While Feminist

For many women properly doing one's gender in this way is an act of survival. Legible religious femininity brings with it community acceptance, social capital, and helps to maintain in-group status and familial relationships. Stepping outside of those boundaries, causing gender

trouble, leaves one open to potential ostracism or even expulsion or excommunication. Each of the four women in this chapter have had to tread this dangerous path. For some the main challenge came from wrestling to make a new embodied presentation outside of the bounds of purity culture, others struggled to balance familial obligations and expectations against public activism. But all of them had to contend with what it means to be not just a religious woman, but to be legibly read as one within a religious community. This chapter features four women: Lisa, April, Elle, and Meghan. I have chosen these four because their experiences speak to issues shared by many Mormon and Evangelical feminists; each story will demonstrate the precarity of Mormon and Evangelical feminists, and how the choice to maintain or subvert gender norms will have a direct impact upon their ability to remain within their religious communities. These women are featured in four sections: Introductions, Feminist Awakenings and Men, Women, and Different Roles, Activism, and Religious Authority. Lisa, April, and Elle are Latter-day Saint women, whereas Meghan is currently going through the process of deconstructing her Evangelical Christian faith. In the theoretical section of this chapter I explain the history of the Mormon Bloggernacle and the rise of feminist communities online. I also introduce the work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Christel Manning, each of whom have done important work in nuancing the stories of religious women through historical research in Ulrich's case and ethnography in Manning's.

Chapter 1: Why they Write

Chapter Summary/Introduction

The act of writing creates a public performance of identity. As Butler asserts, "the body is always an embodying *of* possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention."[68] The twentieth and twenty-first century have seen a rise in popular writing by Evangelical and Mormon women to correspond with the growth of general media proliferation and popular faith marketing. Early examples include advice columns, such as *Mary Marker* in the Deseret News, written by Ramona Wilcox Cannon from 1947 to 1974, which gave struggling women advice on how to cope with household frustration and angst. Mary Marker is significant for this project because Cannon offered advice to women whose letters reflect their struggle in living up to what they perceived to be the Mormon ideal of womanhood. The fictive Mary Marker provided a sympathetic ear while also stressing that it was possible to "have it all" with proper care and planning.[69] One could point to this style of writing (and performance) as a proto-lifestyle blog.

Almost two decades later, in 1990, Focus on the Family began releasing *Brio*, a monthly magazine aimed at young women. At the front of each issue was an advice column written by the editor, Susie Shellenberger. *Dear Susie* tackled a wide range of issues affecting young women from a conservative Evangelical perspective. Shellenberger, who helmed both *Brio* and *Brio and Beyond*, the extended publication for women in their twenties, approached her column with three goals: "to guide teen girls into intimacy with Christ, to help teen girls establish a positive self-

[68] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution."
[69] McDannell, 78.

esteem, and to direct teen girls into developing healthy relationships."[70] *Brio* was meant to offer an alternative to secular magazines such as *Seventeen* or *Teen Vogue*, and Susie spoke to her readers in the guise of a fun mentor or youth leader. Much like Mary Marker, Dear Susie provided gentle guidance on matters specific to feminine life under the umbrella of male religious authority (in this case, James Dobson and Focus on the Family).[71]

Similarly, Mormon and Evangelical women have flourished in the self-help market, leveraging life experience and marketing themselves as "veterans of life itself."[72] This market had a boom in the 1960s through the 1980s, and writers such as Beverly LaHaye or Tammy Faye Bakker presented themselves as, essentially, professional wives,[73] which qualified them to share their advice on topics ranging from cooking or parenting to sex from a religious perspective. Runaway hits like *Fascinating Womanhood* by Helen Andelin, first published in 1963, and *The Total Woman* by Marabel Morgan, first published in 1973, sold millions of copies and spawned seminars and retreats for women seeking to better engage in proto-complementarian marriages.[74] These books are significant in that they demonstrate the ways in which religious women, using public writing, have, in the words of Kate Bowler, "carved places for themselves out of the hardwood of American complementarianism."[75] By leveraging their culturally acceptable positions (as wife and/or mother) these women were able to shape public dialogue about gender as well as provide an alternative to feminism. Both Andelin and Morgan were advocating for a

[70] Charlotte M. Martinez, "Representations of Femininity: A Content Analysis of the Adolescent Christian Magazines Brio and Brio and Beyond and Their Mainstream Counterpart Seventeen" (dissertation, Ohio University 2012) 1.
[71] The initial run of Brio Magazine, with Susie Shellenberger as editor, was from 1990-2009.
[72] Bowler, 155.
[73] Bowler, 79.
[74] Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right*. Andelin was writing from a Mormon perspective while Morgan was coming from the conservative protestant tradition of the sun belt.
[75] Bowler, 5.

signified performance of wifely submission,[76] and while few modern content creators would go so far as to suggest, as Morgan does, that women daily greet their husband at the door in a new sexy outfit[77] one can reasonably draw a through line from the personal narrative-style writing of someone like Morgan or Andelin to modern influencers and bloggers.

Women influencers and content creators are seeking to embody those same possibilities and social role of women within these two movements, using public performance and exhibition, according to Colleen McDannell "Mormon mommy blogs resonate with Fascinating Womanhood themes: through makeup, fashion, recipes, crafts, and home decoration women can assert a manifestly feminine identity."[78] These acts of creation are not always conscious, and in fact are often performed ritualistically and unconsciously, a piecing together of different parts into a cohesive whole that is both routine and meticulous. The repetition of acts of gender creates gender, and both groups are seeking to do their gender within the expectations of their religious community and the broader American society. This is not to say, of course, that these acts are always performed independently, consciously, or willingly. As Butler says, "the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes."[79] The body is constructed socially, and women do perpetuate and aid in creating this construction, but they are also confined within the historical and phenomenological expectations of their community. Women are neither passive vessels receiving codified gender nor fully autonomous actors in constructing gender. They aid in building the engine of gender, but the parts come from society.

In this chapter I will be addressing two broad, foundational questions, the first of which is: why do they write? This will provide the first glimpse "behind the curtain" to see the ways in

[76] Bowler, 102.
[77] Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman* (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1975) 113.
[78] McDannell, 181.
[79] Butler, 422.

which online activity impacts and interacts with the "offline" lives of bloggers and influencers. Second, how do they navigate gendered expectations and understanding within their respective traditions? These questions help us to begin unpacking the performative elements of content creation, which can be best seen in the interactions between online and offline selves. In the following pages I will drill down into the familial dynamics of the women featured here, which sets the stage for later theoretical development. Over the next several pages we will meet three women: Aubrey, Rachel, and Heather. Each began (and continues) to create online content for reasons which are simultaneously deeply personal and widely applicable to many of the other women in this study.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Digital religion, or digital religious studies, is a field that has been developing since the 1990s, and Brenda Brasher has been one of the early voices contributing to this growing community of scholarship on online religious experiences. In her book *Give Me that Online Religion* she asserts that online religious spaces should be considered as equally valid as physical religious spaces, and that they have the ability to reach across traditional boundary lines to create more accepting, cohesive, and equal religious communities. Her work covers both "traditional" religions and new religious movements. *Online Religion*, as one of the early texts in digital religion, provides an important foundation for doing work with online religious communities. However my work will be able to move beyond the consideration of online spaces as valid loci for religious study, thanks to scholars like Brasher who have, over the last several decades, established firm groundwork.

Brasher's scholarship also extends into the realm of Evangelical women. Her book *Godly Women* is an ethnographic study of two separate fundamentalist Evangelical congregations with

which she spent six months embedded. Brasher's goal with this work was the study of the lived experiences of fundamentalist women, and to explore the ways in which they created identity and meaning within conservative religious traditions. Although Brasher focused on in-person communities in *Godly Women*, when taken in conjunction with *Online Religion* it presents unique insights into doing ethnographic work focused on identity creation.

The internet as a third space for social construction has gone through multiple phases, each identified by the development of new technology and how that technology enhances or curtails user experience. These phases are assigned software designations, web 1.0, web, 2,0, etcetera. It is in the phase of web 2.0, roughly beginning in the early 2000's,[80] that online content moved from largely static, informative pages to social networking and user interaction. Web 2.0 ushered in the era of widespread social networking, which broadened the possibilities of online community building and identity creation. It is in this era that Anna Poletti, a scholar of memory and autobiography whose work focuses on new media and materiality, argues that new technologies of identity originate for many web users, as for the first time, "acquiring and maintaining online identities makes up the core activities of many users."[81] Communal blogs like The Exponent, where Heather is a long time contributor, not only became a third space for women to build community outside of the home, workplace, or church, but also became a space for acquiring an online identity. These early stages of identity technology and creation are made possible by the development of new web technologies which made the internet more user interactive.

[80] For more on this development see Aghaei, Sareh. "Evolution of the World Wide Web : From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0." *International journal of Web & Semantic Technology* 3, no. 1 (January 31, 2012): 1–10.
[81] Anna Poletti and Julie Rak. *Identity Technologies Constructing the Self Online*. (UW Press) 3.

While these new technologies, and this new conception of what the internet could do, and each of the three women in this chapter are using the internet in different ways and through different mediums, the internet is not an unbounded space. While it does offer the opportunity for new identity technologies, those same technologies are simultaneously creating new norms and limits. When done online, identity is both, as Poletti and Rak point out, a "process and a product."[82] It is performatively produced by users, but is both internal self-perception and a packaged "thing" which can be commodified, imitated, or stolen. Each user must hold a dual identity of producer and product.

One of the most prominent scholars in the field of digital religion is Heidi Campbell. She focuses on the ways in which religious communities negotiate online spaces and new technologies. Campbell's work explores the ways in which religious communities in America in particular are utilizing technology and the internet in innovative ways. Her book *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds* provides a strong introduction to online communities from within five of the major world religions. She includes base studies for each group as well as broader data regarding usage trends and currents across traditions. In her book *When Religion Meets New Media*, in which she focuses on Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities, she suggests methods for doing research in new and emerging digital spaces and includes strategies for bridging the divide into digital communities. Her methods were particularly helpful when mapping out this study.

Kate Bowler, in her book *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*, discusses how Evangelical women navigate the building of a public image within the strict confines of complementarian theology. As she puts it, "The visible and invisible

[82] Poletti and Rak, 9.

rules that govern the lives of Evangelical women can be mastered and occasionally subverted by those willing to play a difficult long game with handsome rewards and harsh penalties."[83] Although the women in her study generally have a much wider reach than the women I spoke to, these women also face this precarious challenge, and how they choose to tackle it was one of my primary areas of inquiry. I have also found Bowler's definition of Evangelicalism to be helpful when drawing the boundaries around who will and won't fall under that label. She identifies four key components of Evangelicalism: first, that the modern movement in America emerged out of the debates between fundamentalism and modernism in the early part of the twentieth century, second, that adherents generally have a conversion experience and emphasize the authority of scripture, third, a tendency toward revivalism, and fourth, a subculture that defines itself "over and against the wider American culture."[84]

A good companion to Bowler is Emily Suzanne Johnson's book *This is Our Message: Women's Leadership in the New Christian Right*. Both Bowler and Johnson examine women in Evangelicalism from approximately the mid-twentieth century, but Johnson is focused specifically on the development of the New Christian Right, and the ways in which women helped to build and lead this movement throughout its development. Johnson is particularly helpful for understanding conservative women, and how they navigate authority structures which are not always open or welcoming to them. She explains that "Over the centuries, conservative women have continually negotiated subtly shifting theologies of gender and family while also carving out positions of authority for themselves,"[85] and in this book she charts the ways in which several different prominent Evangelical women have done this particular work. My

[83] Bowler, xiv.
[84] Bowler, xv.
[85] Johnson, 5.

project expands beyond the "big names" which are Bowler and Johnson's focus, and the women in my study have a broader diversity of experiences and perspectives, but they are also doing this delicate navigational work within their respective spheres. While those prominent women helped to create the Evangelical landscape of the 20th and 21st centuries, the women in my project provide a view into the lived experiences of the movement.

Introductions

Aubrey: In the Blood

Aubrey Chaves was born and raised in Utah, and although her family did move around when she was younger, they always returned. "I was born in Salt Lake City. And then we moved around a little bit but came home. You know, Utah is home. Both of my parents were raised here," she explained, when I asked about her religious background. "I'm like, sixth generation pioneer stock, so I'm Mormon as deep as Mormonism goes. So yeah, really pioneers and polygamy on both sides. All four lines."[86] For Aubrey this family heritage is difficult to untangle from religion, and from her Mormon identity. As she put it, "I think if it could be in your blood, it's in my blood." Mormonism was not contained to one corner of her life, but colored every aspect, providing a lens through which she could both understand and interpret her world growing up. "My family has always been extremely active, really religious, and church is the number one thing, so I feel like I'm about as Mormon as it gets."[87] Some of her earliest memories revolve around this integration of religion and family. "I think my very earliest memory must have been when I was about three," she recalled. "There is a hymn called 'Call to Serve', and the

[86] Aubrey Chaves, interview with the author, January 13, 2022.
[87] Chaves.

chorus says, ‘far and wide, we tell the father's story.’ And I have this memory of my mom standing behind me and like stretching my arms out, far and wide. It's like, I grew up thinking that those were official [hand motions].”[88] Many of her early memories include the sensory experiences that come with attending church, particularly the music.

“The very first ward that I remember [...] I remember especially my dad being really involved in that ward with the youth, with the young men in particular. And so I just remember that ward, feeling like everyone was at our house a lot, laying in the yard, and just being there. And so it almost feels like my memories of that ward are almost as much at home as they are at church.”[89] Both of her parents held callings working with the youth in the church and her maternal grandparents had even served as mission presidents, which meant that her extended network was almost exclusively composed of active church members, further strengthening this entanglement. “[I]t was so interconnected. Like, I don't remember realizing yet that not everyone in our neighborhood went to our church, it just felt like it was where the whole neighborhood went on Sundays. And then the whole neighborhood would congregate for holidays. And like, it just felt super interconnected to me, which I think was really kind of a blessing. I imagine that was pretty isolating for anyone who was not really involved in the ward. But like, as a five-year-old, it just felt like my whole world was there. It was really coherent, like, at church, and at home, it was all the same.”[90]

Broad church integration of this sort was common for women I spoke to who grew up in Utah, this feeling that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was more than just a spiritual home, that the connections made within the Church encompass their entire lives,

[88] Chaves.
[89] Chaves.
[90] Chaves.

creating an interconnected network which felt more like family than congregation. Aubrey recounted to me a particular event from her teenage years which, for her, exemplified this hybrid family network. “I remember getting in a car accident once when I was sixteen, and my parents were out of the country, and I was babysitting, which I don't even know if that's legal,” as the eldest child she had been left in charge, but found herself in over her head when help came from an unexpected source. “I was on the side of the road and my bishop just happened to drive by. And he just—I remember he was with his whole family, and he just got out of the car, and they left him. And he stayed with me the whole time and helped me talk to the police officers and like, he just was my dad in that situation. And that just feels like–that's just how it was. And I really took that for granted, I think.”[91] Claudia Bushman argues that the basic unit in Mormonism is the family rather than the individual,[92] and stories like Aubrey’s illustrate how this emphasis on family life and connections extends outward to create a culture in Mormon dominated spaces which imitates the nuclear family structure. As Aubrey put it, “it was like a family in that we didn't earn those relationships, they just were. And so if it works, it works great.”[93] The functioning of this faith family is dependent upon everyone fulfilling their prescribed roles. As long as Aubrey was willing to properly perform her roles as daughter, wife, mother, and faithful church member, she was able to participate in this network. But even from a young age she began to recognize its limitations, and to feel like she could not ever truly fit.

[91] Chaves.
[92] Bushman.
[93] Chaves.

Rachel: Catching the Vision

Rachel Schmoyer and Aubrey share many similarities. Rachel is a stay-at-home mother to four kids who also grew up in a religious family where both of her parents were heavily involved in the church, including working with the youth. However, Rachel belongs to the Bible Fellowship Church, an Evangelical Christian denomination most popular in parts of New England and the Midwest. Her parents met while attending seminary in the 1970s. Her mother did not intend to go into ministry, and Bible Fellowship does not allow women to become pastors, but as Rachel tells it, "my mother does say it was unusual for her to go to seminary, but she just knew she was supposed to go to the seminary, and she had actually gone to it just to apply for a bookkeeping job that was there. And when she went into the office, they said, 'oh, are you here to apply to be a student?' And she said, 'You take women here to be students?' So she applied for both the bookkeeping job and to be a student."[94] While many of the men at the seminary were hostile to her presence, Rachel's father asked her mother to tutor him in Hebrew, a subject she excelled in whereas he was struggling. Six weeks later they were engaged.

After graduation her father returned to the seminary to teach Greek while her mother stayed home with their children. As she recalls it, they often had trouble surviving on just his salary. "I know my parents talk about praying for food," she said. "Like, when we were very little, it wasn't until I was maybe 10 or 11 years old that the seminary was either able to give my dad enough of a raise where, you know, basic necessities weren't stressed anymore. Once I got into high school, and I have two siblings that are just a little younger than I am, and when we were all in high school, my mom started to work part time."[95] Both of her parents received their

[94] Rachel Schmoyer, interview with the author, January 28, 2022.
[95] Schmoyer.

M.Div., and while her father would occasionally fill in and preach at a variety of churches within their denomination, her mother was never employed in ministry. “She [Rachel’s mother] calls her MDiv a master's in volunteer work,” Rachel said, when I asked about this. “She's been a very long time junior high Sunday School teacher so, you know, she does mention sometimes she pours her heart and soul into the lessons, and they're really in detail. She loves to research the background, like, understanding the Biblical culture will help them understand that.”[96]

Rachel grew up in Pennsylvania, in what she calls the “very outside suburbs of Philly,” and church has been a major part of her life for as long as she can remember, and her parents still attend the same church today. Growing up in a house with two M.Div.’s meant that Rachel and her siblings were taught early about the value of education, and she went on to double major in college. “I majored in early childhood education. And everybody also got a bachelor's in Bible at the college, which is what I wanted,” she said. “So I had always–growing up, I had always wanted to be a mom. But I also had this love of teaching, too. So you know, I didn't really rectify the two of them. But going into college I thought, well, I'll get the teaching degree. Maybe I'll teach a little bit, but I really just want to have babies and stay home with them.”

Her biblical education would serve her well later in life as she navigated serving in ministry alongside her husband Tim. After they married in 2002, he received his first appointment. “After we got married,” she recalls, “then our church planning director told us about the Camden Bible Fellowship Church, because that one, it was not a church plant, but it was small and needed somebody there and the guy who was there was going to retire soon. So we went down there, which was a great experience for us, it was a great experience for them too [...] but then we got to the point where we needed to go somewhere else. And now I understand

[96] Schmoyer.

what it's like when somebody says, well, there's just nothing else I could do at that church. And I used to think, really, there's not anything else you can do there? And now I understand. Yep. Sometimes there's just nothing else you can do because the people there have to be willing to catch your vision."[97] Rachel and her husband still belong to the Bible Fellowship denomination, and after feeling the call to leave their church in Delaware he received his appointment for their current church in Pennsylvania, where they have served for about twelve years.

Heather: Among the Wackadoodles

Heather Sundahl grew up feeling like she had a foot in two worlds. "I come from a really Mormon family on both sides," she said. And like many of the women in this study who grew up in Mormon families, she can trace her lineage back through the history of the Church. "They're pioneer people and, you know, on my mom's side we're related to the Knights, and they used Joseph Knights cart, Joseph Smith borrowed it to bring the plates from the hill Cumorah, so we're super entrenched."[98] There are several reasons why this sort of genealogical knowledge and storytelling has become such a large part of Latter-day life, and why the church has the largest collection of genealogical records in the world.[99] Within Latter-day Saint cosmology a believer is able to remain connected with their family after death, meaning relationships are not temporally limited if one has been baptized into the faith. The church also performs proxy baptisms for the dead, meaning there is incentive to find one's ancestors and, if they were not members of the church, have them baptized so that they can join the rest of the family in the afterlife. Additionally, knowledge of one's ancestors, particularly if they were already members

[97] Schmoyer.
[98] Heather Sundahl, interview with the author, November 9th, 2021.
[99] http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org. "Genealogy Is Important to Mormons Because They Believe in Eternal Families." *Newsroom.Churchofjesuschrist.Org*. Last modified May 23, 2011. Accessed July 4, 2023. http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/topic/genealogy.

of the church, contributes to a distinctive Mormon identity and in-group, which strengthens bonds within the community of faith. Having ancestors who, for example, migrated to Utah with a handcart, or who were present in Nauvoo, Independence, or Kirtland is a point of pride for many Saints. It is a direct connection to the (relatively) recent history of the church, but also provides a sense of communal identity for a group which has historically been composed of converts from diverse backgrounds. For Heather, this shared history helped to connect her to the church. Growing up in Southern California meant that she was not in the religious majority, as she would have been in Utah. "The assumption is that everyone around you is Mormon [in Utah]. And so it's just different. Whereas in California, you assume that nobody is."[100]

After living in Boston for a time (discussed further below) Heather and her family moved to Utah, which has come with a unique set of challenges for someone who grew accustomed to being in the religious minority. "Here, being here in Utah, I just feel like I'm anonymous, like nobody knows anything about me, and nobody really cares."[101] She has struggled to build relationships in her ward, particularly because her husband does not attend church with her, and is no longer active. "I just thought, okay, I can create different communities. I've been in my ward, well, I mean, not that long, but like, I don't think I'll ever get asked [to speak in a meeting]. My husband doesn't do church anymore. He's done. And I see that the people that they ask, the new people, it's couples, you know? They want the husband and wife to get up and introduce the family and talk about themselves. And she's not going to do that." Heather has expanded her faith community, and has found increasing support and companionship with other feminists online, although they are still learning how to build and maintain that community. "I think that these virtual relationships, they are stronger if you can actually meet in person, you know,

[100] Sundahl.
[101] Sundahl.

obviously, but I do think that these communities, and as long as we still see people as individuals and as humans, that like The Exponent Facebook group, or with Mormon Feminist Housewives, when it gets too big, people stop seeing each other as individuals, and then they just, they're not their best selves [...] And so that's tricky. So I think that these online things can create community, but only at a certain point, the numbers get too big."[102] She has not yet mastered the balance, but Heather continues to do the work, every day, to love and serve those around her, even when it seems impossible. "You gotta work through it. And you may never love each other. But like, they drove my kid every week to scouts or whatever. And so they're wackadoodle, but like, I appreciate that, you know?" These acts of service and community building, even with the wackadoodles, are how Heather hopes to manifest her faith as a feminist.

Gender, Family, and Complementarity

A common experience among the women in this study has been early enforcement of gendered expectations, often coming from both their family and their church community. While much of this socialization was subtle enough that it is not notable in their memories, for each of the three women featured here there were distinct moments which stand out as points of fracture. For some it happened at a young age and developed slowly over time, for others it was not until adulthood, and particularly parenthood, that they faced the most difficult challenges to their understanding of what it means to be a woman within their tradition. We will hear in this section from Aubrey, Rachel, and Heather about the moments in their lives which highlighted their gendered differences.

[102] Sundahl.

Aubrey: The Sacrament

Like many women interviewed for this project who grew up in Mormon families, one of the first cracks happened for Aubrey over the administration of the sacrament. The first time she remembers realizing that men and women were treated differently she was quite young, "I must have been really little, like, five, four or five." The memory remains vivid for her, however. "There's a really great children's museum in Salt Lake, and they have this world that is set up for little five-year-olds. And everything's just little, like you can—there's a grocery store with a checkout stand, and you can ride in little wheelchairs and like, everything is just miniature. And I loved that. It was just my favorite place in the whole world." She recalls visiting the museum with her mother and playing in the children's area when she had a fateful realization. "I remember asking my mom why they didn't have a sacrament table, because that was the thing I wanted to do, pass and bless the sacrament." She does not remember her mother's response to this question, only her own confusion about what she perceived to be an obvious oversight. "I didn't understand. I was like, why didn't they think of that? Like, that was such a big part of my life. I could do that, be the cashier at a store, and do all the adult things, except the sacrament. And I think that was the first time I realized I couldn't do it there, and I was never—I wasn't ever going to do it."[103]

Learning to abide by her expected familial role came with growing pains for Aubrey. From this young age she was able to discern what was expected of her, both within her nuclear family and her wider church family, but was constantly having to shrink herself to fit those expectations. For example, as a young woman she loved animals and wanted to pursue a career in the sciences, but by the time she was in middle school she had decided that she wanted to be a

[103] Chaves.

teacher, because both implicit and explicit messaging told her that as a (future) mom she needed to choose a career which would allow for flexibility. She does not remember when she made that switch, or even if it was a decision she made consciously. In hindsight she can recognize the influence of gendered cultural norms, but does not recall being aware of it at the time. I will quote from her at length here. "I really, really tried to always recognize what was expected of me and anticipate that, and not—I never ever pushed anything. I would really, like, perceive what the right answer was and deal with it before I had an argument about it. And so I don't ever remember having a confrontation about roles in church, it was really just an internalized kind of shame. And so, you know, any disappointment that I felt wasn't ever something that I expressed, like literally ever. It was just—I think it was something that I was trying to really make sense of in my head, which was probably the most unhealthy way to do it because I never totally articulated the pain. It was just really internalized shame from feeling like I'm second for some reason, but also an even deeper shame for any discomfort I had about that, because it felt like—it felt like if I'm not totally behind this and supportive then I really have a problem, like, I'm out of alignment here, and that's a bigger issue. So I think a lot of that pain was transmuted to some deep shame."[104] As we will see in the following sections, this guilt and shame over her perceived misalignment would follow Aubrey through to adulthood, ultimately resulting in a faith crisis which inspired her to seek out online spaces where other Mormons were asking the same difficult questions.

[104] Chaves.

Rachel: It all started with my daughter's tears

Rachel, who identifies as a complementarian, does not remember any one particular moment or sermon which shaped her understanding of gender roles in the church. Rather it just seemed to always be apparent. "Growing up, my impression was that women did belong at home," she said. "I don't remember that being preached from the pulpit, though. I don't think it was, if it was that went above my head, I really think it was from just observing the families in my church, because even the women who did work, they definitely still bore the brunt of taking care of the home."[105] That women stayed home and took care of the family while men worked seemed obvious to Rachel, it was the example she saw in her own home and throughout her church community. It was also emphasized in the media they consumed. "I think Focus on the Family Ministries was a big one for this," she said. "My mother was on the go all day. But when Focus on the Family came on, she sat down, took out her crocheting, and that's when like, that's the longest I ever saw her sit in probably my whole life was this half hour, she would sit and crochet while she listened to it." Focus on the Family, mentioned above in the introduction, was founded by James Dobson in 1977, and began as a radio show which later developed into a media conglomerate, headquartered in Colorado Springs, CO. Dobson rose to national prominence in 1970 with the publication of his book *Dare to Discipline*, in which he makes the case for, among other child-rearing tactics meant to stem the tide of disobedience, corporal punishment in the form of spanking. The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw a renewed interest in conservative Evangelicalism in response to perceived cultural threat, and Dobson rose to the occasion, producing a series of talks, videos, and books geared toward re-

[105] Schmoyer.

establishing "traditional" family values.[106] He began producing his daily radio show in 1977, a mix of advice from Dobson and interviews with like-minded public figures.

Colleen McDannell argues that Focus on the Family has maintained its position as one of the largest para church organizations in America because it studiously avoids denominational disputes or doctrinal conflict. McDannell observes that, "Most Focus on the Family publications avoid mentioning denominational associations that would indicate that there is dissent within Christianity."[107] Rather than ascribe to a particular denomination, Focus on the Family exemplifies what McDannell calls "generic, some might even say 'watered down' Christianity"[108] designed for broad appeal to the in-group of Evangelical consumers. Focus on the Family appeals to women like Rachel's mother, who statistically are the largest demographic of Evangelical consumers,[109] by offering a range of products which smooth over differences within the movement while simultaneously drawing distinctions between the Church and the World. While it is true that Dobson himself is outspoken about his political views, McDannell observes that rather than seeking to convert or convince on controversial topics such as reproductive freedom, Focus on the Family as an organization, though conservative, will carefully choose which topics to address and which to avoid based upon what is already widely popular and accepted among listeners.[110] For Rachel and her mother, Focus on the Family offered a faith promoting alternative to popular media. "I loved listening to Focus on the

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[106] *Jesus and John Wayne*, 82.

[107] Colleen McDannell, "Beyond Dr. Dobson: Women, Girls, and Focus on the Family," in *Women in Twentieth-Century Protestantism*, ed. by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Leison Brereton (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 119.

[108] Ibid. 120

[109] Ibid, 115.

[110] Ibid. 119. In particular McDannell presents the example of abortion versus family planning. FotF has many materials addressing abortion, as it is a widely accepted marker of Evangelical identity and is thus non-controversial to the in-group. She found, however, that they had little to no widely available material about birth control. When she inquired about this she was informed by a Correspondence Assistant that previous attempts to address the issue had been controversial and had elicited angry responses from both sides. As such the topic was deemed too difficult.

Family," Rachel recalls. "Because first of all, as I got older it was a little bit of a comfort thing, that we had heard it growing up, because we were always around. So we heard it, but also I liked the storytelling that they have, you know, because their guests are interesting. And I think it's interesting to hear about people's perspective and things there."[111]

Focus on the Family has been a mainstay within Evangelical homes for over forty years, and, in the circular way described above, has been instrumental in shaping Evangelical cultural identity. Publications like the now-defunct Brio Magazine[112] and other Focus on the Family products appeal to Evangelical women because they articulate "a religion that is unified, connected, practical, and relational [...] Behavioral traits that already are identity markers for Conservative Christians, such as the rejection of abortion and premarital virginity, do not provoke dissent among readers."[113] It has retained its position of prominence by speaking to the in-group of Evangelical women on issues they are already thinking and talking about. That is not to say that James Dobson and Focus on the Family do not have a political or religious agenda, which they unquestionably do, but rather that as an organization they are engaged in a give and take dialogue with their listeners and viewers.

Rachel did not question the viewpoints presented by Dobson or Focus on the Family until well into her adulthood. She explained to me that she, "very much had a traditional, which I thought was biblical, view of women's roles until about four years ago or so."[114] And while she does still identify as a complementarian, she had an experience which caused her to start questioning what she knew about gendered roles within the Church. "I was driving in town with

[111] Schmoyer.
[112] Although we did not discuss Brio specifically, it was an important piece of FotF's media empire throughout the 1990's and early 2000's.
[113] McDannell, 128.
[114] Schmoyer.

one of my daughters. She was about 10 years old, and we were at the traffic light. There's a UCC Church on the corner, and they just had on their sign announcing Pastor Virginia is here now. And I went, 'Oh, they have a woman pastor,' and my daughter went, 'Women can be pastors?' And I said, 'Well, some people think they can, but you know, we know that the Bible says otherwise.' And she started bawling. And by the time we got home she was so upset; she went up to her room and slammed the door. And I'm like, oh, my goodness, it never occurred to me that this would be a problem. I guess I just expected her to, by osmosis—like I did—understand this is the way it is."[115]

This experience with her daughter shook Rachel deeply, and she began to question things she had previously accepted easily. As she had been raised to do by her scholarly parents, she began to study the Bible to find out for herself. "And now that I'm reading about women's roles," she said, "I'm seeing things quoted from Jim Dobson, and things quoted from guests he had on the program–now I can see where some of those women's roles, not just in church, maybe, but you know, as a whole, like, hmm, that's not really in Scripture."[116] Through her study Rachel has discovered that much of what she thought was biblical truth about gender was heavily influenced by Focus on the Family and other popular Christian media that she had consumed. "A lot of that for me was from listening to Focus on the Family and the authors they had on there," she said. "So the last couple of years have been eye opening to me for gender roles. And for me, it was all started because of my daughter's tears." She is now trying to sort the wheat of scripture from the chaff of James Dobson.

[115] Schmoyer.
[116] Schmoyer.

Heather: Don’t do something you would be ashamed for someone to blog about

From a young age Heather felt drawn to religion, and to the community of faith. “I've always been, I would say, a believer,” she said. “Some people are just more spiritually inclined, and other people have a mind that's more like, prove it. And I've always been spiritually inclined. And so as a kid, you know, prayer and religious things always gave me a great deal of comfort.” She was particularly drawn to the idea of Heavenly Parents. As she explained it, “the idea of Jesus having a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother, having these people looking out for you, I always found that, and I still do find it, very comforting.”[117] As the youngest in a large family, this dynamic resonated with her. But with the doctrine of Heavenly Parents came ideas about gender which made her uncomfortable. “From a young age I recognized that men had more power, you know? That is not that women didn't have power, but it was a different kind of power, that men could be directly in charge, whereas women were, like, sideways in charge.” She recalls feeling uncomfortable with these differences from a young age, but it was not until she went to college at BYU that the dissonance of who she felt herself to be as a woman, and what the church expected of her began to feel overwhelming. From her perspective, “in the Mormon church it's really treated like these gender differences are permanent and divine, you know, women are nurturing, and men are this and that.” But that did not fit with what she knew of herself, what she wanted for her life, and what she felt to be true about God. “You know,” she said, “as I've gotten older, as I look at Christ, not the Book of Mormon, not the Doctrine and Covenants, not these other bodies of scripture, but when I look at Christ, I don't see Christ

[117] Sundahl.

privileging male above female [...] and I think that makes some people uncomfortable with Jesus. And so they try to turn him into a football player and make him super macho."[118]

Though she dates her feminist awakening to her time at BYU, the groundwork was laid much earlier by watching her mother struggle with many of these same issues. She recalls in particular a time when her mother was torn between her obligation to obey religious authority and her obligation as stake Relief Society president. I will quote at length here.

"There was this time, it was in the '80's somewhere, and the Prophet was Ezra Taft Benson, who was super, super conservative. And he gave this talk where he quoted Spencer Kimball, that whole 'come home from your typewriters,' you know, basically, all you women are out there working so that you can buy fancy things, and your children are home crying and your husband's sad, and God is mad at you. And this whole box of pamphlets arrived, and it's this talk, and my mom is supposed to distribute it to all the women in the stake. And my mom–like normally, she totally does what she's supposed to, even if it's really uncomfortable. And she just struggled. She's like, how can I in good conscience–I know, these women. Some people are working because it makes them so happy. Some people are working because they have these awesome skills, and their skills are needed. And some people are working because they have to feed their children. And my mom at the time was working because with my dad's work, we had no health insurance. So my mom was working so that we would have health insurance and she's like, how can I? And so she threw him away. That made a big impression on me, you know? That my mom, when push came to shove, if she had to choose between blind obedience that was going to harm the people that she was in charge of–because it's not that she chose women over the Prophet, she chose her duty to her calling, as being in charge of these women, over her

[118] Sundahl.

individual duty to do what the pipeline had said."[119] Watching her mother struggle to reconcile these dueling obligations had a lasting impact on Heather. It was comforting to know that she was not the only one struggling with these ideas, but it would still be many years before she began to find her own answers.

For many Mormon feminist writers there is a delicate balance, a running calculation that must be done if they want to remain in the church while still publishing about feminism. In her writing, and in her online presence in general, Heather wants to show that it is possible to be a feminist and remain in the church, although she still struggles to find that balance. Just as she grew up in a devout Mormon home that was outside of the Utah bubble, Heather has gotten used to occupying liminal spaces, and has learned to curate her message to suit her audience. "Like, if I'm giving a talk in church, I probably won't use the word feminism. If it's just me as a person, absolutely, I use it, I own it, I think it's important. But I know that for some people, they hear it, they hear that word, and they can't hear anything else, because they have been taught to fear that word. And so I will kind of approach it in a little softer way."[120] She has developed a sense of what she can say, and to whom, in order to safely communicate a feminist message. Her methodology incorporates a sincere desire to serve within the bounds of the church. "One of my sort of overarching concepts that, for me, it's really core to my brand of Christianity, Mormonism, whatever you want to call it. is reciprocity," she said. "You know, it's this idea that we love and serve and do for people, and that it's not transactional, it's not like, okay, I do this favor for you, and do this interview, and then you're going to do a favor for me, that's not how it works. I'm going to do this for you, but then someone else is going to do something for me. And that if you're always giving into the system, you're always going to be getting back and that

[119] Sundahl.
[120] Sundahl.

God's transactions are better than mine could be."[121] Part of this reciprocity, for Heather, is holding space for women at all different stages of their faith journey, something she strives to do in her blogging. The communal aspect of Mormonism, serving one's fellow members, sharing in their lives, and worshiping together has been one of the key things which keeps Heather a part of the church. "I think you need to be serving people who aren't like you, I think you need to be serving Trump supporters and, you know, flat earthers, or whatever. We're all so prone to just get into our bubble–and I get with my Mormon feminist friends and it's like, we finish each other's sentences, and you just feel like: these are my people, I love them. But I feel like I also have a responsibility, if I want to keep growing, to be part of a community that's geographic. And it's like, alright, these are your people too, and you need to get to know and serve and love these people. And so I take my calling very seriously because I just think it's—I need so much from God and from the universe that I feel like I have to be regularly doing my part."[122]

Heather's caution was gained through experience which taught her that she could face real world consequences for her online writing. "I've gotten in trouble with church leaders for stuff that I've blogged about," she said, "and it was not fun. It was really not fun." Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints each ward is led by a bishop, a male member of the congregation, a lay member, who is called to serve in that position of authority. Heather recalled a time where she was summoned to a meeting with her bishop to discuss her writing. "Some conversation happened in Relief Society that I felt was really important to get out there and have a discussion about, and there was someone that I'd written about–and I don't say people's names, but somebody in my ward, then turned me in. And then my bishop wanted to talk to me but

[121] Sundahl.
[122] Sundahl.

insisted that my husband be there with me, which totally infuriated me." Heather objected to the implication that this had anything to do with her husband, or that he had any say, or authority, in what she chose to write. The meeting quickly devolved. The bishop accused Heather of posting negative content about the members of her ward, and about specific members of her local Relief Society. "I said, three women in that room fit that exact profile. And you weren't there, and you don't know who I was talking about. And he went to the woman he thought I was talking about, and he read her my blog. And I was like, Oh, dude, you're an ass. You're just an ass like you—you have created trouble where none existed."[123]

From that point on Heather knew that she was on the radar of her local leadership. When her Stake President decided to hold a town hall meeting to discuss what Heather perceived to be unpopular decisions about Stake management, he announced beforehand, "I will only hold this meeting if people promise not to blog about it." Heather knew this was directed at her, a public rebuke which she took in stride. "Ooh got you running scared!" she said. "Like, don't do something you would be ashamed for somebody to blog about. Like, if that's your main concern, then maybe you need to rethink your choice." However, these run-ins with church leadership did leave an impression. She was no longer living in Boston, where her ward had been significantly more close-knit. "When I was in Boston it was so different, because I just felt like, even if I really pissed somebody off, two weeks are going to go by and their kid was going to vomit at church, and I was going to be the one cleaning it up, you know? So I just never—I didn't really worry about it too much. Because I'm like, you can be mad at me, but we're a small community, and I'm a worker. And so you're going to get over it." Moving from that close community back to Utah forced Heather to change the way that she interacted with her ward, and what she felt

[123] Sundahl.

comfortable sharing. She has learned to be circumspect, " it's not even fear anymore, it's just it's calculated," she explained. "I want people to listen to me. You know, if we're branding, if we're like—when you do your calling, when you are loving people's children, when you are bringing meals to new moms, when you're doing all of these things, people after a while, they don't really care what you call it, what you believe, what you call yourself. So like, I don't care if Heather's a polygamist, Heather shows up for me. I found that, you know, being service oriented, when you serve people, they feel love. When you're in need, you don't care who it is helping you. Like, the political stuff, like all of that, it falls to the wayside, you know, when you when you need something, and someone is there offering something in love, with love, then, you know, people don't care."[124] Heather is able to navigate the gendered expectations of her church community by building relationships locally and virtually. Her fellow feminists and Exponent writers provide support and community, but are not local to her. If she wants to fulfill her call to serve those who are different to her, she has ample opportunity within her ward, and has learned to use the expectations placed upon Mormon women, that she would be nurturing, supportive, kind, and helpful, as a means to share a feminist message with those who would balk at the term.

Heather's experience with church authority is unfortunately not unique, as we will see in the following chapters. It is illustrative of an important point in the study of digital religion: what sort of space is the internet? In a study of religious internet users, Heidi Campbell states that "the ability of the internet to challenge traditional political, social, and even religious authorities has become an accepted assumption."[125] Among both scholars and the general populace, the internet was thought to be a liberatory force for social movements, creating a new space for those who

[124] Sundahl.
[125] Heidi A. Campbell, Religious Authority and the Blogosphere, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 15, Issue 2, 1 January 2010, 251.

otherwise may be excluded from authority or power. The internet, particularly web 2.0, is also commonly portrayed as a safe, or at least safer, place for exploring alternative identity creation. While there is truth to these perceptions, as the stories of women like Heather show, the internet can be a lifeline for those who lack local community, it is not necessarily a liberatory space as it has often been portrayed. High control religious groups can still assert control over members in multiple ways. Religious authorities can assert public pressure on members regarding what they post, as happened to Heather, they can condemn the use of the internet or particular social media so that those who do use it are seen as rebellious or in violation, and in some instances (such as when serving a mission) they can limit availability and access to technology.[126] Each of these methods describes a top-down authority structure wherein power is concentrated in the hands of a few members. In later sections we will revisit this point to examine a Foucauldian conception of power as it relates to community surveillance.

Why They Started

Heather has been writing for The Exponent for over a decade, but Aubrey and Rachel are both relatively new to the world of making online content. To varying degrees all three expressed a version of the same origin story: they did not mean to start making content, but found themselves, through happenstance, contributing to blogs, Instagram, and podcasts. This accidental narrative, while certainly true to their experience, also exemplifies one of the ways in which women within these two religious communities are taught to downplay their ambition or achievements. As Kate Bowler explains it, "they must do what all famous women do and pretend to be average, subject to the acid test of 'relatability.' Their stories should be peppered with

[126] Campbell, 252.

mishaps–they broke the eggs bagging their own groceries, put their shirts on inside-out, and ruined their children's Halloween costumes."[127] What Bowler identifies on a magnified scale for the celebrities who are the subjects of her study can also be seen in the lives of most women navigating conservative religious traditions. Like much performative action it is important to remember that these acts of deflection are not necessarily done consciously or with calculated intent. Rather women from within these traditions are socialized to defer or downplay their ambitions and abilities. Thus, while the story of stumbling into success may feel (and be) true, it is almost never complete. Each of the women featured here have achieved great things through a combination of talent, drive, and yes, sometimes luck. The stories that follow will demonstrate the work that they have done to carve out a platform for themselves in the online marketplace.

Aubrey: The Shoulds

For Aubrey it started with cakes. Or to be precise, it started when she left her job teaching fourth grade to stay home with her new baby. She gave birth to her first child (out of four) at the beginning of her second year of teaching but decided to finish out the year while her husband, Tim, worked from home and took care of the baby. "I think that was a really good way for us, because I think I would have had a really hard time adjusting to a newborn, because it's just, in a lot of ways it's very quiet and easy at first, you know? They sleep so much. And I think it would have been really hard to go from so much social interaction to a newborn baby. And what ended up happening was so much social interaction to a nine-month-old baby, and then they're awake and very active, and we could go places and do things. And so that was a lot better for me."[128] While she had loved being a teacher, Aubrey was ready to start this new chapter in her life. It

[127] Bowler, 13.
[128] Chaves.

had always been her intention to stay at home with her children. She does not remember precisely when she decided on this career path, as she tells it, “When I got to middle school age, I remember saying I wanted to be a teacher, but I don't remember where that impulse came from. I think at that point I maybe was starting to really internalize the shoulds, you know? And that was an acceptable profession that people would encourage you to do.”[129]

In chapter three of her 1951 work *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* psychoanalyst Karen Horney presents what she calls the "tyranny of the should,” a theory about self-talk and self-reflection wherein one either develops or adopts a list of “shoulds” which they ought to be able to embody. As Horney puts it, this inner list consists of all that one “should be able to do, to be, to feel, to know—and taboos on how and what he should not be.”[130] These rigid dictates stem from both internal and external expectations of what it means to be the best or ideal version of oneself. The shoulds act as ruler used both for measuring one's progress and disciplining one's failures, they are the result of “the necessity a person feels to turn into his idealized self, and from his conviction that he can do so.”[131] Thus the shoulds one adheres to are not perceived to be unobtainable (although they almost always are) but are instead understood to be obtainable if only one were not deficient in some way: immoral, lazy, stupid, et cetera.

Aubrey’s shoulds revolved around her role within her community of faith: what she should do and be as a Mormon woman. Her choice to pursue a teaching career is a direct result of her internalized shoulds, although she was not aware of that at the time. “I don't remember ever making that decision,” she explained. “But I do remember thinking–I do remember, at some

[129] Chaves.
[130] Horney, Karen. *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-realization* (Taylor & Francis, 2013) 65.
[131] Ibid.

point, shifting and saying I wanted to be teacher, and all of that was with this caveat that like, but of course, I'm really just gonna be a mom, like, no, I'm not actually—this isn't actually what I'm going to do."[132] At the top of her list: she should be a stay at home mom. Teaching was a backup, something she could do until she had children and then fall back on if necessary. It was not a passion or a vocation. The model, the ideal, was a mother who stayed at home, and while she does not remember making a conscious decision to follow that model, she does recall her perception, at the time, of working mothers. "I do remember a real feeling of superiority to women who were working with families, like I had friends where their moms worked, and there was definitely this feeling of like: their mom works, and so they need rides. And their mom works so like, we're gonna help them do whatever we're supposed to do for our activity. And like, they basically don't have a mom, like that—that was the way it felt to me. So I'm sure—like it was so out of the question, because it was like this trial. Like, I really thought it was just this really difficult thing that their family had to deal with."[133]

The family, both nuclear and church, functioned because mothers fulfilled their role. Aubrey perceived her mother picking up the slack for children whose mothers worked outside the home, and this reinforced her list of shoulds. Thus even at a young age she was molding herself; adjusting her expectations, interests, and identity to fit within this idealized form. She felt that this should be natural, that she should fit these expectations, and that it was a failure on her part that she did not. The pursuit of her shoulds led her to a degree in elementary education and a marriage, during her senior year of college, to her childhood sweetheart Tim, with whom she had reconnected with when they both happened to be home from college at the same time (her from a semester abroad, and him from his mission). "In some ways, it went exactly the way

[132] Chaves.
[133] Chaves.

my sixteen-year-old self would have laid out my whole life, I think," she said, when asked to reflect upon her life thus far. "And so it's hard to ever say that I'd want something to be different because I felt like we really grew, Tim and I, really grew up together, and have sort of matured in our faith together. And so I definitely wouldn't change that." Unlike many of the women interviewed for this project, Tim and Aubrey have gone on their journey of faith deconstruction and reconstruction together. "But if I was talking to, you know, my thirteen year old daughter, or to my thirteen year old self," she continued, "I think what I would have wanted to be different was just like, recognizing that I had legitimate passions and gifts, and the right thing to do would be to go all in and not limit myself based on what would easily give me an afternoon off."[134]

When faced with the reality of no longer working, Aubrey found herself at loose ends. "I had been really channeling a lot of creative energy into teaching," she explained. "And so that felt like it came to a full stop when I came home. And I remember going that whole first year just, I didn't even realize what was happening, but I think it was just like, the creativity needed an outlet." She began making bows and headbands for her daughter, but eventually space constraints within their apartment caused her to channel that creative energy into baking. Baking, for Aubrey, was a perfect solution because it "was a way to be really creative and to make something artistic without needing to find a shelf space for it. I think the very first cake I made was for her first birthday, and it just totally checked every box and was such a cool way to be creative and use some artistry. And then you could eat the cake and throw it away and feel like it totally fulfilled its purpose, and I didn't have to trash it, but it was not in our house anymore." Soon her family and friends were paying her to make cakes for them, and word of her skill spread through the community. She would put her kids to bed and then start baking, sometimes

[134] Chaves.

staying up all night to work on a cake. “I know it was probably bad for my health to be missing sleep,” she said, “but it felt so good for my mind to just be in like deep time. It was such a gift of just hours and hours of meditation.”[135]

As she began to gain clients, Aubrey ran into a problem: she had very little interest in starting a business or moving toward a career making cakes, but she could not justify giving them away because of the time and expense involved. She also felt a deep ambivalence about advertising or sharing her work, “I think for a long time I was seriously undervaluing what they [the clients] were getting. But it was worth it.” These acts of creation were meditative for her, but also became a Zen-like practice where, like a Buddhist monk creating a mandala in sand, she would create a work of art and then release it, reveling not in the having or keeping but in the creating. “It was so life sustaining for me to just have hours alone where I could be like, maximally creative, and then give it away,” she explained. “Every cake was just this coming full circle, like working so hard on something that was all about one particular person. And then I could give it to them and see their reaction, and they could go have a party with it. And it just—it was really life sustaining. I think it was a way that kept me feeling like I wasn't losing myself as a mother.”[136]

Cakes have become a popular category on Instagram. Several cake influencers have made the transition from social media to traditional media, such as Amaury Guichon, who parlayed his popularity on TikTok and Instagram, where he has over ten million followers, to media appearances and his own reality show on Netflix called “School of Chocolate.”[137] Similarly

[135] Chaves.
[136] Chaves.
[137] Taggart, Emma. “These Amazing Life-Size Sculptures Are Made Entirely From Chocolate by a World-Renowned Pastry Chef.” *My Modern Met*. Last modified July 7, 2021. Accessed July 4, 2023. https://mymodernmet.com/chocolate-sculptures-amaury-guichon/.

Christine McConnell, who became internet famous for sharing her goth-inspired baking and design on Instagram where she has just under six hundred thousand followers, and who then starred in her own Netflix show, "The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell."[138] Netflix has become one of the main vehicles for influencers (and cake trends) to make this transition with shows like "Nailed It," which tasks amateur contestants with recreating trending bakes, and "Is It Cake?," which capitalizes on the social media trend of illusion cakes, or cakes made and decorated in such a way that they are easily mistaken as other objects. Instagram baking accounts, and cake accounts in particular, have been featured in the New Yorker, Town and Country, Teen Vogue, and the CBC or Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The most popular accounts feature elaborate cakes with intricate designs such as McConnell's ,*Gremlins* cake, representing one of the creatures from the film.[139]

In many ways the cakes that gain the most traction online fit the same criteria as other influencers; they are aesthetically interesting, elaborately styled, and photograph well. This particular style of cake has become popular enough to inspire backlash like the Reddit community r/FondantHate[140] which takes aim at the sugar paste decoration fondant, a pliable material used to create a smooth finish on the outside of a cake and for sculpting design elements. Fondant exemplifies one of the key criticisms of Instagram cakes: style over substance. These cakes are, in many respects, meant to be seen rather than eaten. The creation process can take multiple days, and elements are often chosen for aesthetics rather than flavor. According to Mary Francis-Heck, senior food editor at Food and Wine Magazine, "Fondant is the modeling

[138] 'The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell' Is Martha Stewart Meets Tim Burton | The New Yorker." Accessed July 4, 2023. https://www.newyorker.com/recommends/watch/the-curious-creations-of-christine-mcconnell-is-martha-stewart-meets-tim-burton.
[139] McConnell, Christine @christinehmcconnell. 2015. "I made a Gremlins cake…" Instagram, June 28, 2015. https://www.instagram.com/p/4fnosPlhcX/?hl=en
[140] "Fondant Hate" https://www.reddit.com/r/FondantHate/

clay of cooking. It's a cool way to work with sugar, and you can make real life things that are technically edible. I appreciate it as an artistic medium. But it doesn't taste good, and it isn't good for you."[141] Instagram cakes, like other Instagram content, collapse over time into specific forms and archetypes. The styles that do well and trend become the standard, and if one wants to compete in that marketplace one has to conform. The market forces of Instagram likes represent Poletti and Rak's point about the dual identity of online creators, "In some cases, the form of identity expression works to give the writer access to certain kinds of power and knowledge formations, which were not available to him or her before. In other cases, the form of representation constructs the limits of what an identity can be."[142] The most successful accounts are those who, like Christine McConnell, combine a distinctive personal brand with the strict expectations for an Instagram cake, always curating to those exacting aesthetic standards. That successful conforming is what will then allow for a creator to achieve a high level of success. The way is narrow and difficult to traverse.

Aubrey was not sure she wanted to participate in that world. She knew that her cakes were both delicious and beautiful, and she took great joy in their creation. However, she had trepidations about sharing them publicly. "I think it was really hard for me to decide that it was okay to just show this work for the sake of letting it be shown," she said, "because it felt braggy."[143] Aubrey loved sharing her creations with those for whom she made them, but found it difficult to post photos of them online, although she is not sure where that guilt and discomfort originated from. "Where does it come from? I don't know, it just felt like it didn't fit." However she was able to connect this discomfort with some of her shoulds. "I remember always talking

[141] "How Fondant Became Reddit's Enemy." *Food & Wine*. Accessed July 4, 2023. https://www.foodandwine.com/news/fondant-hate-reddit.
[142] Poletti and Rak, 6.
[143] Chaves.

about not being in the spotlight. Like, that was the idea of, you shine the light on other people and not on yourself. And that was just an ethic I grew up with, I think."[144] Despite these trepidations she did start an Instagram account, Luna Cakes, named after her nighttime baking meditations, and when it began generating interest and orders, she was able to justify it for herself. "I felt like, okay, now it's okay to post here and let people see it. It's not bragging, it's like–it's the way I can advertise, this is how I'm getting orders. Eventually it was to the point where like, I would post a cake and I would almost always guarantee two orders from each post. And so that was kind of a steady way to not have to think about any business things. Orders were just constantly flowing as long as I kept posting."[145]

As long as her cakes, and her Instagram, served a practical purpose she could justify to herself the time and effort she put into their creation. This speaks to a larger theme in women's work and women's art. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is often quoted, and her assertion that "well behaved women seldom make history" has through no fault of her own become a bromide. However her work on women's art and textiles echoes this sentiment. Just as Linda Nochlin concluded in 1971, when she addressed the question "why are there no great women artists?," women's art is often overlooked, downplayed, or dismissed unless it adheres to a very narrow conception of what art is, and how it is created. The narrative of the so-called "great artist" is deserving of a Foucauldian genealogy which is outside the scope of this project, but as Nochlin notes, the common understanding of "great" art (and great artists) is predicated on the belief that "art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is."[146] This view of art

[144] Chaves.
[145] Chaves.
[146] Nochlin, Linda. "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews.Com*, May 30, 2015. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/.

silently presupposes an artist who is almost always male[147] because it does not take into account societal factors which allow certain people to not only make art, but make a career of it. These societal advantages are often denied to women, who are then excluded from making the kinds of art that fits within traditional western ideals. Ulrich pulls these threads to deconstruct what is considered art, and what is worth preserving and remembering. In her work *House Full of Females* she uses a quilt made by the fourteenth ward in Utah in 1857 as a primary text for understanding the lives of Mormon women in the region. As she notes, the work of women, particularly when it is in the form of handicrafts, is rarely preserved with the same care as more "traditional" (static, not meant for use) art. The everyday nature of this art, and the uses to which it is put, means that it often does not survive. Let us weave in an additional thread to this narrative. Not only is women's art in the form of practical items rarely preserved, but Mormon women have historically been encouraged to undertake pursuits which create practical, tangible, benefit as well as pleasing aesthetics. Home industry played a large role in the economy of early Utah, from the Deseret Silk Association to the sale of handmade goods, Mormon women were encouraged to be industrious, and like the bees with which they were commonly associated, their production was meant to serve multiple purposes.

When Aubrey bakes a cake, it is not simply a creation for the sake of itself, but rather it serves multiple purposes. It is beautiful, fun, or exciting, and it is by turns nourishing, indulgent, and celebratory. It is meant for use. "It felt like there had to be a one-to-one connection, like this has to be useful to be worth it," she told me. "And so even, you know, making bows, even that was like, it's for her and so it's something she's gonna wear, I'm not buying it. Like I'm saving money, all of that felt really important to justify the work."[148] She could not share her work

[147] And usually holds several other characteristics which, within their society, confer some amount of privilege.
[148] Chaves.

simply for the joy of sharing it, or because she was proud of her work (although she was). She recognizes this pattern, but still struggles to escape from it, saying that "it's hard for me to justify ever just posting because it feels good to say I'm proud of this."[149]

Rachel: Hard Writing

Some women use their blogs to promote an existing or developing project, and for some it is a launchpad, the foundation from which they can achieve their ultimate goal of publishing a book. Rachel had never really been interested in social media, as she put it, "I was one of the last of my friends on Facebook personally, like, this doesn't come naturally."[150] But once her children were all in school full time she realized that she wanted, and needed, additional income. "I asked my friends, like, what are—what do you guys do for extra income? I didn't want to sell Pampered Chef. I didn't want to be away in the evening and get a separate job. But one of my friends was a copywriter for a wine blog. And she had done other copywriting before. She's like, Rachel, you could totally do that."[151] She had some experience writing newsletters and other small projects, and the flexibility of copywriting appealed to her. Through a friend she was connected with a digital marketing agency which hired her to do blog writing for their stable of clients. Through this agency she got a crash course in blogging and social media, and found that she had a knack for finding and writing to a specific audience. While attending a women's Bible study on the Book of Revelation an idea began to form. She recounted to me how it happened, "I just felt this burden of, I've got to tell women, this is how you read Revelation, there's so much there, like it's not scary, you can read it. And there's so much to apply to your life today. So I had

[149] Chaves.
[150] Schmoyer.
[151] Schmoyer.

the book idea first. And so because I had already been doing freelance writing, I understood the idea of pitching and everything. So I wrote a book proposal."[152] She signed up to attend one day of the Philadelphia Christian Writers Conference with the hope of securing either an agent, a book deal, or both. The Christian Writer's Market Guide lists seventy conferences for 2023,[153] and several of the women I spoke to for this project mentioned attending at least one, often multiple, conferences. At a conference attendees can meet with agents and publishers, attend workshops and panels, and network with other writers.

Rachel had researched the agents who would be present, and decided on one to pitch to. Initially her pitch was going well. "I remember him really liking my idea and then he came to the platform and went [makes face]. I said, I'm sorry, I didn't know, this is the first time I've ever heard this word platform, because this was 2017, so this was all new to me. I didn't know what this platform thing was until I came here today." He told her that she needed to build an online presence, a social media platform, before she would have a chance at publishing her book. "I remember coming back home from the conference," she said, "and I told my husband about the day, and I remember laying in my bed, and like, my eyes wide, staring at the ceiling and telling him I have to start a blog. If I'm going to get this book published, I have to do it. And I said, this is going to change our lives forever."[154] She began researching how to build a successful social media platform, but had serious doubts. "I had always thought that it's too late, if you didn't start blogging in 2008 or before, like, it's too late to have a big platform for that. That was something I really had to get over mentally, and just realize that my audience is still there, I just need to find

[152] Schmoyer.
[153] "Christian Writers Market Guide – The Essential Reference Tool for the Christian Writer." https://christianwritersmarketguide.com/.
[154] Schmoyer.

them."[155] Using the skills she had learned from her time at the digital marketing agency Rachel built her online platform, incorporating her blog, "Read the Hard Parts of Scripture," as well as accounts on all the major social media platforms, and has learned to be adaptable in order to find her audience. Rachel's trepidation here is not necessarily ill-founded. The period of time that she is referring to in the early 2000's, as noted above, was a boom for bloggers in general, and female Christian bloggers in particular. New platforms like WordPress and Blogger allowed for a very low barrier to entry for starting a blog. Technologies like JavaScript, a programming and scripting language designed specifically for use in web browsers, significantly simplified the process for designing and customizing web pages in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[156] These free blogging platforms, combined with the relative ease of learning basic JavaScript and the increased accessibility of home computers and internet, created an ideal scenario for a blogging boom. Rachel and several other participants in this study remarked upon this phenomenon, and recalled watching some Christian women launch their careers, often as "Professional Wives," through blogging. However, like most booms, it did not last, and Rachel was correct in noting that as the field became more crowded it was now nearly impossible for a new blogger to follow that trajectory.

Despite her initial doubts Rachel found that creating an online persona came easily to her, as she explained it, "I'm very comfortable with a public persona because of being a pastor's wife. And so that was not a great leap to me, to put that public persona on Facebook." As a pastor's wife, and as the daughter of an itinerant pastor who often went with her father when he was preaching, Rachel learned to develop and distinguish her public life from her private life, and

[155] Schmoyer.
[156] For more on this see: Keith, Jeremy. "A brief history of JavaScript." *DOM Scripting: Web Design with JavaScript and the Document Object Model* (2005): 3-10.

social media became an easy extension of that. “I was 20 when I became a pastor's wife. So my whole adult life has been that way,” she said. “[and] anybody who visits our church has a bulletin handed to them with our address and my cell phone number on it, because we want to be a minister's family that's accessible. So I don't think as hard about editing some of those personal things out as what somebody else might.” As Kate Bowler notes in *The Preacher’s Wife*, curation of this kind is common for women in ministry families, particularly when their husband is the pastor. To be a pastor’s wife in an Evangelical church comes with an unspoken set of cultural expectations and obligations. As Bowler explains it, “The public lives of Christian women were shaped in large part by two powerful forces: first, the complementarian theologies that prescribed a limited set of feminine virtues and capacities; and, second, the industries that sustained their careers, which had their own rules about leading women.”[157] Navigating through these often conflicting obligations is a skill that Rachel, and many pastor’s wives like her, had to master. Bowler argues that this is a delicate calculation undertaken by such women as a means of survival in an industry which is hostile to non-conforming women, saying that “Almost all women in the largest churches, parachurches, and on other platforms went to great lengths to hide their importance as a way of shielding themselves from criticism.”[158] By deflecting their significance women are able to simultaneously remain legible within the strictures of complementarian ideology and maintain their own businesses, blogs, or platforms.

Last year Rachel was reminded of the importance of maintaining that public persona when one of her tweets resulted in denomination-wide controversy and the formation of a new committee to study the role of women in teaching and preaching. “Last February my husband asked me, at the suggestion of one of his elders, to teach, or co-teach, his Bible study through

[157] Bowler, 5.
[158] Bowler, 12.

Ezekiel. The elder knew I had studied it recently myself, because I had Bible journalled through Ezekiel on Instagram." Ezekiel is one of the difficult parts of scripture that Rachel addresses in her book, and she was excited to share her insights. "I had, in my joy, tweeted that I'm so thankful I go to a denomination that lets women teach with their husbands, you know, and then I said, because so many complementarians Just leave their women in the kitchen."[159] What she thought of as a throw away joke was read by another pastor within their denomination as an attack on and misrepresentation of complementarian ideology. Several pastor's approached Rachel's husband with concerns about her online activity, and expressed surprise that he would break the commandment given in 1 Timothy 2:12.[160] Ultimately those pastors petitioned the denomination to form a study committee to research the issue and establish clearer doctrine. Rachel was asked to serve on that committee.

Rachel takes part in several online groups, such as the ones run by LeeAnn Fox and Jessie Synan, discussed in the next chapter, aimed at helping women to monetize their blogs and social media presence, and after publishing her book she now periodically speaks at Christian writers' conferences, teaching other writers how to utilize social media. She explained in our interview how she made the transition from no online presence to social media expert. "I started to gain energy from the blog," she said. "Then I started social media accounts, because I was working for the digital marketing agencies, I had an understanding of how social media worked for building an audience. So I was really thankful for the Lord providing that job that really gave me the skills I needed to do that. But eventually, I quit the digital marketing jobs so that I could focus on Read the Hard Parts."[161] She recounted for me an unexpected victory brought about by

[159] Schmoyer.
[160] "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." 1 Tim. 2:12, NRSV.
[161] Schmoyer.

this adaptability. “It was the day they rolled out video pins [on Pinterest],” she said. “And I got beta. I was like, I'll try it. So I get out my phone, and I showed one of my freebies that I have for my website, which is just a Bible reading tracker. And I just did a little video of me talking, this is how it works, and a link to my MailChimp landing page, right? And I have gotten over 2000 email subscribers from that. And because I was first–my video isn't great. But it still goes, like I still get 15 to 20 a week, even though I don't really focus on Pinterest anymore. But if you jump on something new, it's to your advantage when you're building a platform for sure.”[162] Although she still primarily identifies as a stay at home mom, and has taken breaks from writing and publishing, such as when she needed to homeschool during COVID shut downs, Rachel has built a sustainable engine for generating income.

Heather: I don’t want people to think that you can’t believe and be a feminist

Within Mormon Feminist circles many women did not feel like they could have the conversations about feminism that they wanted to have in their own wards or communities, and thus the online bloggernacle provided a forum where they could express themselves and find like minded people. Early blogs in that space were things like “Feminist Mormon Housewives” and “By Common Consent.” These were group blogs, where a rotating group of women would write and share posts and would then engage in the comments section. The blog comment sections became both a debating ground but also a place to recruit new authors. Several women that I spoke with started out as readers and commenters and were then asked to write a post. These group blogs provided a virtual community, and many women dedicated significant time to maintaining, moderating, and writing. Heather was an early reader and writer on communal

[162] Schmoyer.

blogs, although she started her work with The Exponent magazine. “We moved to Boston, and immediately–so Judy Dushku was in my ward. Judy Dushku was one of the founding mothers of Exponent, and just an all-around mensch. Judy was in the ward and called me up, her calling was, like, substitute newsletter writer or substitute interview the new people in the ward, some calling like that. And we just immediately connected and she's like, oh, my gosh, you've got to be part of Exponent. And I didn't even know what Exponent was.”[163]

In June 1970 Claudia Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Judy Dushku, and other Mormon women living in and around Boston started meeting to discuss Mormonism and Feminism. The next year, in a special issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* curated by members of this group Claudia Bushman wrote, “Although we sometimes refer to ourselves as the L.D.S. cell of Women's Lib, we claim no affiliation with any of those militant bodies and some of us are so straight as to be shocked by their antics. We do read their literature with interest. Several people who have been invited to join us have declined, and rumors persist that we are involved in heretical activities.”[164] The women who made up this group, many of whom went on to become prominent scholars, founded *The Exponent II* in 1974, a magazine for Mormon women which addressed topics ranging from church history and doctrine to feminist theory modeled after an earlier newspaper, the Women’s Exponent, which was published in Utah from 1872-1914.[165]

Heather felt like she had finally found her home with the other women working on Exponent II, “It was just the loveliest thing to have all of these super smart, educated, empowered women, but who were also, you know, doing their job in the ward, who were like,

[163] Sundahl.
[164] Dialogue, Vol 6 No 2, page 5.
[165] Hilton Sheldon, Carrel.“History,” (Exponent II, August 27, 1999) https://exponentii.org/1999/08/27/history-by-carrel-hilton-sheldon-arlington-massachusetts/.

okay, this has some value, and we're going to stay with it, but we're also going to try to bring people along."[166] For the first time in her life she had a community of women with whom she could share both her feminism and her faith. She was an editor for the magazine for nine years, during which time a group of contributors decided to start an online companion to the print magazine, called The Exponent Blog, but she did not start contributing until she had stepped down from her editor position at the magazine. She has been an active member of The Exponent blogging community for over a decade, one of the longest running contributors.

These blogs do face attrition, however, as people leave the church. Heather described The Exponent as a type of waystation, a place where it was safe to be both Mormon and Feminist, but not a place where many writers stayed for long, something that she also struggles with. "People come and go, and there's plenty of times where I've wanted to go," she said. "I'm like, okay, it's been a decade, I don't have anything to write anymore."[167]

For many of those contributors The Exponent was just a stop on a larger faith journey, and some will choose to continue writing for the blog, even though they do not belong to the church any longer, while some will sever ties completely after going through their faith transition. But Heather has made a conscious decision to stay, in more ways than one. "I've always known that there are some of our readers who really are active believers, and who are looking for reasons to stay, reasons to, you know, make it work. And so I have tried, sometimes more successfully than not, to bring some belief and faith and spirituality into it—and I've stayed, because I'm like, if I leave there's nobody blogging who is an active believer. And some people are active, but they don't believe. And some people believe, but they're not active. And

[166] Sundahl.
[167] Sundahl.

we have a few people on the blog right now, I'm not the only one. But I think in two years, they might go through the cycle, they might be gone. And so I feel this responsibility."[168]

Over her time writing for Exponent, both online and in print, Heather has challenged herself to keep her writing accessible for this diverse set of readers, which has included writing occasional alternative lessons for the Young Women's program. Each year the church releases a series of talks and materials on doctrinal topics meant to be used in the weekly classes for young men and women.[169] For several years Exponent has been releasing alternative lessons on the same topics which fit church criteria and can be used in official classes. Heather has challenged herself to help curate these lessons. "I love that we do the young women's lessons. And periodically I do them because I feel like it is good for me to have to keep a more conservative audience in mind and find ways to sort of say the same thing. But just making sure that it's really doctrinally backed up. You can say anything you want, if you can back it up with Jesus, and you can basically say anything." Writing for a conservative audience forces Heather to hone and curate her message, and is one way that she remains in the in-between of her multiple worlds, holding a door open for both sides. "I'm not afraid to piss people off if I need to, because I've always felt like I was too much of a believer for the real—not militant, just the devout feminist [...] And I'm too radical for a lot of real mainstream people. And so I've just gotten comfortable being in that kind of in-between position."[170] She has made her peace with liminality, and like a Mormon Bodhisattva, Heather has chosen to stop on the threshold, acting as a bridge for Mormon women seeking a path toward feminist enlightenment.

[168] Sundahl.
[169] These classes are divided by gender and will have some overlap and some specific lessons.
[170] Sundahl.

Conclusion

By looking at the experiences of Aubrey, Rachel, and Heather as they curate their online and offline lives, we can see the ways in which women in these two religious communities find fulfillment and pursue their creative goals, and how they understand their own role and position within the community of faith. Each had experiences which called into question what they understood about gender and gendered roles, and which caused them to look for creative solutions to the problems presented by complementarian ideology. For some, like Heather, this meant finding a community of like-minded feminists who were also on a path of deconstructing (and, in her case, reconstructing) their faith to accommodate a broadening understanding of what it means to be a faithful Mormon. For others, like Aubrey and Rachel,[171] this has meant scholarly pursuits, reading commentaries and histories, and learning to face up to the hard parts of one's own tradition. All three are committed to serving and working within their faith communities to share knowledge and, in Rachel's case, perhaps shape doctrine. But each has found that they must decide carefully what to share, and how to share it in order to maintain their sometimes tenuous positions within their faith community. Rachel and Heather both faced real-world consequences from religious authorities for things that they wrote online, and it has taught them to be cautious and calculating. As Heather said, "You can say anything you want, if you can back it up with Jesus."[172] Because they are able to strategically hew to gendered expectations placed on them as women who are all also wives and mothers, Aubrey, Rachel, and Heather have each

[171] As mentioned briefly, in addition to her Instagram Aubrey also hosts a podcast with her husband Tim which covers topics relating to Mormonism and Mormon scholarship. Though she does not have a formal education in Bible as Rachel does, she has taken this opportunity to explore topics relating to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often ones which she finds difficult or controversial.
[172] Sundahl.

found their own distinct ways to make sense of their traditions, remain in their faith community, and share their work with the world.

Chapter 2: The Hustle

Chapter Summary

Women create online content for a multitude of reasons. For many it is not just a means of expressing themselves but also a way to connect with other women. Of course, there is a monetary aspect as well. Jessie Synan built a successful consulting business in which she taught other bloggers and content creators how to utilize social media. Ultimately a blog will serve a purpose. It will be an income generator, it will be a platform to promote other writing or businesses, it will be a way to connect to community, or some combination of all three. But this is work. Whether it is writing, editing, or researching, women can dedicate significant amounts of time to curating an online presence. Jessie Synan and LeeAnn Fox both teach women how to monetize their work, but that includes learning social media analytics, how to find and analyze google data, using keywords and search terms, it is a complicated and time-consuming process. Once it is mastered, however, it can lead to a sustainable side income, and for some women like Jessie and LeeAnn teaching others how to do it became a full-time job.

After exploring how they got their start, and why they continue to write, in this chapter I will focus on women who are utilizing their online platform as a means of either promoting their business, as Jamee Arthur and Amberly Lambertsen do, or as the business itself, like LeeAnn Fox and Jessie Synan. Both Evangelical and Mormon women have strong online blogging or social media networks, and I want to dig into what that community does and means for them. For each of these women that online network has facilitated the growth of their business and brand, either through mutual sharing and promotion or as the primary consumer.

In the following sections we will move from the *how* of blogging to the *why* of content creation. What caused them to start writing? Why do they continue? This will provide an insight into both why they began writing/posting, and what it has meant for them. This can include everything from emotional/spiritual to monetary compensation. There is not one direct path, and this chapter will explore both how these writers ended up where they are, and what motivates them to stay. Some, like LeeAnn Fox, were able to make content creation a full-time job, although she also downplays her own entrance into blogging, exemplifying what Kate Bowler described as deflected significance[173], a means of navigating a complementarian society which does not often reward women who step too far out of place. This theme of stumbling into success is common particularly in content either written by or targeted to conservative religious women, a point that I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation. Humorous, self-deprecating writing is popular among women in both traditions, but I want to further explore why folksy amiability is so common, and how this presentation is crafted and performed.

Several blogs, such as LeeAnn's blog *Kingdom Bloggers* and Jessie's *Pray With Confidence*, have a rotating community of regular (and sometimes guest) posters who all contribute, and I will put those in a separate category from the ones which are written and maintained by an individual. For the former, I am interested in the collaborative process, and how individuals within the group participate and view their role within those networks. For those who maintain an individual platform, this chapter will look at online connections with others in the "blogosphere." In this chapter I will explore how these networks help to both craft, maintain, or subvert the public notion of Evangelical or Mormon womanhood.

[173] Bowler, 12.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

American religions have classically been eager to adopt new technologies. The independent nature of US Churches has meant that they are in competition for limited resources. Historically, American Christian groups had significant space in which to develop, and room for expansion and isolation of distinct sects. This, along with the lack of an official state church, allowed for a marketplace of ideas unlike that of other majority Christian countries, and new communication technologies have, throughout US history, given these smaller or more fringe group's access to a wider audience. Religions have rarely, if ever, been the driving force behind the development of these new technologies, but they are often early to hop on board. This has been true of Christian sects in particular. Brenda Brasher notes that this innovative use of communication technology can be dated back to Martin Luther, who utilized the printing press to challenge religious authority and prevailing norms. This technology allowed him to reach a wider audience, and she asserts that it also inspired him to publish more writings in the German vernacular, meaning that he was able to reach significantly more readers to argue his case, furthering the democratization of Protestantism.[174]

This tradition continues in American Christian history. Evangelical fundamentalists adopted radio technology relatively early as a means of evangelism. As Joel Carpenter explains, "Fundamentalists were the heirs of a two-centuries-old revival tradition that had always relied on mass communication to generate public interest and translate the gospel into a popular idiom."[175] They utilized mass printed tracts (written in common language), radio, theatrics, jingles, and eventually television to spread their particular gospel message. Carpenter notes that Billy

[174] Brasher, *Online Religion*, 14.
[175]Carpenter, Joel A. *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*. (New York: Oxford university press, 1999) 125.

Graham successfully modeled his particular speaking style after radio announcers of his era, making him an ideal candidate to head up a new revival, as he was incredibly market-ready. He had been a rising star for several years before he helmed his first major revival in LA, but that secured his position at the forefront of the Evangelical movement. Graham was able to turn the pessimistic millennialism of the fundamentalist movement into revival in a way that no other preacher had been able to do. He was handsome and his style of speaking was practiced and smooth. In other words, he was camera ready.

Following in Graham's footsteps, televangelists marked out a niche market wherein they were able to present a (largely conservative, sometimes charismatic) gospel message using the tools of the TV trade such as professional camera work and direction, lighting, sets, and makeup. Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians (the two are, of course, not synonymous) have honed this knack for taking modern advancements and shaping them to suit the needs of Christian evangelism and devotion. Some, like Jack van Impe, began as televangelists but eventually moved to a primarily online presence. van Impe became a pioneer of online religion with his "Prophecy Portal" website, where he not only made apocalyptic predictions, but made them available for purchase to the average consumer. van Impe successfully integrated online shopping with televangelism and millennial panic, a triple threat.[176] Van Impe passed away in 2020, but his website remains active with content regularly being posted by members of his ministry team. This model for the combination of religious content with digital and physical products in some ways mirrors the growth of the Contemporary Christian Bookstore, offering products and services designed for Christians (usually Protestants, often Evangelicals) and billed as an alternative to secular or worldly options. Over the last approximately fifteen years, as

[176] Brasher, 178.

online presence and online shopping have become more normalized, the aesthetics of a Christian bookstore, or a Deseret Books, have been ported online. A new subset of digital business has arisen for those looking online for community, or who want to market a product to members of their religious group. These hybrid businesses offer online courses or bootcamps, individual consulting, and access to a network of other creators, all of which can mean the difference between survival and failure in an online marketplace.

Religious devotion has always been marked by interactivity, both with objects and with community, and thus the internet in particular has brought about significant developments in religious life in America. Early forays into online religion were more of an imitation or extension of offline religious practice. Digital spaces have been used to supplement, not replace, in-person churches. However, Heidi Campbell notes that for some Christians, online communities can fuel individualistic tendencies already present in many protestant denominations, because these online spaces are always available, and they allow for users to engage with ritual and the sacred without traditional gatekeepers. This means that authority can spread to those who would not otherwise have access to it, and a lay person can gain a following or achieve some level of prominence without going through the traditional or proper channels.

It is helpful here to pause and consider the question of technology. Broadly understood, technology refers to using knowledge (particularly scientific knowledge) to interact with human life and the physical world. Technology can be a physical tool, something to augment human ability to run, jump, or open difficult jars; or it can be virtual, such as Microsoft Word, the program I am using to write this dissertation. But the key identifier, traditionally, is use. Technology is developed by humans to enhance or restrict human life and activity. The technologies of the internet have many uses; they optimize data collection for analytics, they

facilitate long distance communication, they assist in the building of social infrastructure, but technology is never inert or passive.

The construction of a digital self is fully performative, online identities are simultaneously highly curated and edited and highly personal. These spaces allow users to become producers of identity and religious narrative. Brasher argues that, at least in part because of these creative and performative elements, online religion is the natural next step, culturally, for meaning making and preserving or continuing one's religious heritage. It diminishes the restrictions of locality and opens up the possibilities for broad religious exchange. Online religion, she asserts, gives pride of place to imagination and the senses. It is uncharted territory, and provides nearly infinite space for the development of traditions. While this is often the case, the internet has also created new possibilities for identity technology. Foucault uses the word technology to refer to an intentional method, skill, or approach, neither negative nor positive inherently. In *Technologies of the Self* he introduces four different modes of technology. Most relevant for the work being done by the women featured in this dissertation are technologies of signs, which refers to how we use signs and signifiers, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. Technologies of the self can be utilized to improve, to shape, to change, to create ourselves, to create happiness. A technology of the self is how we "do" ourselves. How we make what we believe will be happiness or some type of perfected identity.

As the technology of the internet advanced, making it accessible to more people and increasingly user friendly, those internet technologies, which enabled new forms of self-expression, became technologies of the self. Users were now able to utilize these new tools to shape, to carve the self, "transform[ing] themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness,

purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[177] Discourses of power, which are invested in the idea of a natural or essential sex, require correct performance of those naturalized identities. Internet identity technology is a new power which allows for these new bodily performances. That performance is then read, from the surface inward, as the evidence for the stable, essential identity. As Butler put it, "to conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender."[178] Power collapses the distinctions between gender and its normative expression as a means of legitimizing the knowledge of essential sexed/gendered identities, which then further consolidates the authority of the dominant norm.

Each of the women in this chapter spoke about turning to the internet to fill a lack in their lives, and in turn utilizing the internet as a means of forming community and facilitating meaning-making. In the pages below we will meet Jamee, Amberly, Jessie, and LeeAnn, each of whom has carved out a niche for themselves in an increasingly crowded online marketplace, and whose work, to varying degrees, has shaped the online signifiers associated with Mormon and Evangelical women.

Introductions

Jamee: Looking Back, Moving Forward

Jamee lives in Utah with her husband Cameron and their two young children. She runs an online business called Date Crates, which offers "dates in a box" for busy couples who need some help spending quality time together.[179] She was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of

[177] Foucault, *Technologies of the Self,* 18.
[178] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.
[179] "About," https://d8crates.wixsite.com/website/about

Latter-day Saints, however her family's history with the church is complicated. "Both my parents are LDS or Latter-day Saints," she explained. "However, they kind of split in the middle of my childhood. My mom stayed LDS, what a lot of people consider faithful. So she, you know, continued to go to church and do those things. However, my dad did not."[180] Her father struggled with alcohol addiction, and stopped actively attending church when she was twelve years old. She continued to attend regularly with her mother and three younger siblings. In hindsight Jamee now recognizes the ways in which her father's drinking shaped her childhood, although she did not recognize it at the time. The thing she remembers most from this period is a sense of confusion and shame. "I remember it bothering me because I had church leaders tell me that that wasn't okay. And I had friends no longer be allowed to play with me because my father wasn't active. Plus the drinking on top of it. So yeah, I was bothered by it, but not because of me, because of other outside sources."[181] Her father's drinking had other side effects as well. Although she was active in the church throughout her life, she never had a ward or stake that felt like home, as her family moved frequently, never allowing her to put down roots. At the time she attributed these moves to her father's job, but once again hindsight tells a different story. "So now in my adult years, my perspective I guess is that my parents' marriage got so rocky because of my dad's drinking, that he would promise to stop and then we would move to have a fresh start, to start over. And then after about four years it would go back to the same cycle. And we'd repeat it over and over and over again. Again, that's my adult brain now realizing that. As a kid, yes, it was my dad's job, he would go from job to job."[182]

[180] Jamee Arthur, Interview with the author, December 8, 2021.
[181] Arthur.
[182] Arthur.

Like many LDS women in Utah, Jamee married her husband Cameron shortly after he returned from serving his mission. She was twenty, and he was twenty-one. Now, ten years later, her perspective about this has shifted. At the time, she recalls, "being 20 and I was like, oh, I'm going to be weird if I'm not engaged. Like, honestly, I remember thinking that, and that's just a messed-up thing to think. But I remember thinking that like, oh man, something's gonna be wrong with me if I'm not married by a certain age."[183] She was keenly aware of the pressure placed on young women within the Mormon culture of Utah to get married and have children, although at the time she did not question those norms. Instead she questioned whether she would fit into those roles, rather than asking whether the gendered expectations should stretch to accommodate difference. Cameron, as a returned missionary, was already on the path towards fulfilling these gendered expectations. Jamee has a good relationship with her in-laws now, but recognizes the pressure that Cameron, who was not sure he wanted to serve a mission, faced from his family regarding their expectations for young men in the church. "Cameron's family is very LDS, like, strictly, and he—I mean, his mom to this day will say you get them on a mission, and then you get married. Like, that's the way it should go. And I—yeah, I don't know if I agree with that. But yes, it is a very prominent thinking."[184] They had briefly dated in high school, but reconnected when he returned home.

As they were preparing for marriage, knowing that they would be getting married in the Temple, they encountered a problem: Jamee was not considered Temple worthy, because she had had sex before marriage. She was working with her bishop to get her Temple recommend reinstated, but they would have to push back their wedding date in order to accommodate the year timeline for reinstatement. In order to be considered Temple worthy a member needs to be

[183] Arthur.
[184] Arthur.

able to successfully pass an interview with a member of the bishopric or stake presidency. They are questioned about their faith as well as their conduct,[185] and if they are found to be unworthy they can lose their recommend, meaning that they will not be able to enter or take part in any Temple ceremonies. None of this was hidden from Cameron, but his family was less understanding. His mother confronted him when she found out about the delay, "[She] told Cameron, why are you marrying somebody who's not worthy to go in, you know, today, right now?" The fact that she had lost, and was working to regain, her recommend caused Cameron's family to question Jamee's suitability as a wife and potential member of their family. Luckily for Jamee, Cameron did not share those concerns. When confronted, Cameron advocated for her. In recounting this to me, Jamee took a moment to praise her husband. "I just love Cameron so much," she said. "Because he just, instead of agreeing with his mother, he kind of said, look, why would I not marry somebody who understands the mercy of God and can work through hard things? And that you know, it gets better as she goes, that's what life's about."[186] Ten years on, Jamee has found herself facing a familiar challenge: Cameron, like her father, has chosen to stop attending church. She is now working through what it means for her relationship to the church to be an individual one, rather than mediated through her family. "For a long time I remember it bothering me, because we're supposed to do this as a family, we're supposed to do this together. And I got to the point where I was like, you know, what if we don't?" She is still sorting out what elements of church she wants to hold on to, and what she can let go. For the time being, she has chosen to continue attending, and she remains active. As she explained it, "If you as an

[185] There are currently fifteen official questions which are asked in every worthiness interview. The first four ask about one's faith: in God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the priesthood. The following nine ask about one's actions, do you: obey the law of chastity, follow the teachings of the church, avoid promoting beliefs or practices contrary to church doctrine, keep the sabbath, tell the truth, pay tithing, meet your financial obligations and support your family if applicable, obey the Word of Wisdom, and keep your Temple covenants which includes wearing your garments.
[186] Arthur.

individual need time away, then do that, but you know for me, then I'm going to go and do what I need to do."[187]

Amberly: Family Rebel

Amberly was born and raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She is the oldest of five children, and her parents emphasized the importance of quality time together. "We did a lot of playing outside and playing together because we didn't watch a lot of TV in our family" she explained. "So a lot of our stuff was entertaining ourselves. Something I always tell people about our family is, in our family you were not sent to your room for punishment, your books were taken away so that you could go get you know, if you're not doing your homework, if you're not getting your chores done, your books are taken away because we would get so engulfed in our books."[188] Each member of the family was also encouraged to learn a musical instrument, and family time would often include playing and singing together. These are fond memories for Amberly, but she also recalls fighting feelings of disconnection or isolation. "I'm the oldest and I have two brothers just younger than me, and two sisters. And so they kind of always were like, each other's pals. And still today, they kind of are. And so I've kind of always been like, not the outcast, but like the alone one, if that makes sense." As an adult this has been exacerbated by the fact that she is the only one of her siblings who remains active in the church, "they kind of have more that they connect on where they can talk to each other about having left the church and the things that they might do that I might not do. And so I feel like that kind of distance just a little bit."

[187] Arthur.
[188] Amberly Lambertsen, interview with the author, November 18, 2021

As the odd one out among her siblings, she found herself craving increased independence. “A struggle that I had was just feeling constrained. Feeling, I don't know, tied down, I guess, I don't know, by the family rules. I was a very independent person. I wanted to learn on my own, and my parents had more strict rules and boundaries and consequences and so I was always in trouble. I was always grounded.”[189] It is not that she wanted, necessarily, to step outside the bounds of the church or of her family’s values, rather she wanted to have authority over her own life, and to have the trust of her parents in doing so. Her rebellion was not against the doctrines of the church, she was and is devout in her faith. Even so she was labeled, even by those outside of her family, as the troublemaker, the one unwilling to fall in line. The irony of this label is not lost on her. “It's just funny because since my siblings have left the church–the first sibling that left, my parents were talking to a neighbor, and a neighbor told them they always thought I was going to be the one that was going to give them trouble. Because I was the rebellious, ‘rebellious,’ you know, pushing the boundaries, did my own thing, independent person.”[190]

In high school Amberly’s rebellion looked like staying out a little too late on the weekends and blowing off math or science homework. But her ultimate rebellion was moving to Rexburg, Idaho to attend cosmetology school. Rexburg is home to Brigham Young University-Idaho, one of three campuses bearing the BYU name.[191] In 2020 Niche, a data analytics group which focuses on education, ranked BYU-I as the most conservative college in the country,[192] ahead of both other BYU campuses as well as notoriously conservative Evangelical institutions

[189] Lambertsen.
[190] Lambertsen.
[191] The “main” or original location is in Provo, Utah, and the third campus is in Laie, Hawaii.
[192] “Most Conservative Colleges in America,” *Niche* (Niche, n.d.), accessed April 3, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20200924025449/https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/most-conservative-colleges/

like Liberty University, Cedarville University, or Bob Jones University.[193] Rexburg is, as Amberly described it, "even more Mormon than Utah, I feel like its own little Mormon bubble."[194] For conservative Mormon parents concerned about their rebellious child, a move to Rexburg should have been a comforting development. But always the rebel, it was in the Mormon bubble of Rexburg that Amberly faced what she called her faith struggle, which she explicitly distinguished from a faith crisis, saying that "it wasn't that I didn't want to go, it wasn't that I was having testimony, I don't know, faith crisis is what people call it. It just was that it wasn't convenient for me. It was cold, I didn't want to get up or I had to work that day." She had been placed in a singles ward rather than a student ward and felt disconnected from the church and her community. It wasn't until she moved back to her parents' house after finishing cosmetology school that she once again felt connected and at home in church.

Returning to Utah also brought her back into contact with her now-husband Joe after he returned from serving his mission. They had lived in the same neighborhood growing up, different wards but the same stake. She recalls having a crush on him during seminary classes but never actually connecting, "he and I never actually talked in high school, though. He sat a couple of rows away from me. And I would just sit and listen to him and his friend talk. And I would watch him the whole time." Amberly had gotten heavily involved with her singles ward and was a leader in her congregation when she and Joe were paired up for an activity. As she tells it, "there was one night where he came in late, and there was a seat next to me, we were in groups of three. And he sat down next to me, and we started talking, and we were a group, we

[193] It is important to point out that while Niche does utilize data from a variety of sources for their rankings, these particular rankings were based on self-reported student surveys. In the 2020 data Cedarville was second, Liberty third, BYU-Provo was fourth, and Bob Jones was fifth. In 2023 the rankings have shifted somewhat. Niche now ranks BYU-Provo first, Liberty second, Bob Jones third, Cedarville fourth, and BYU-I has dropped to sixth.https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/most-conservative-colleges/.
[194] Lambertsen.

were paired off to do an activity that night, and we were just laughing the whole time. And we've talked every single day since. The week we got engaged they did a slideshow for their next lesson and there was a big slide: Congratulations to Joe and Amberly! And: See? Institute works!"[195] They have now been married for twelve years and have two children. She started blogging about their relationship in 2011 on a blog titled *Life with Amberly and Joe*. In 2014 she transitioned that blog to *A Prioritized Marriage*, a blog aimed at married couples offering "products, companies, ideas, and stories that will benefit your marriage. These tools and resources will help you make your marriage a priority, no matter what stage of life you are in."[196]

LeeAnn: The Sinners Resume

LeeAnn did not have a lot of religious experiences growing up. Her parents divorced when she was young, after which she lived with her father and paternal grandparents in what she refers to as "the Bible Belt of Texas."[197] Her grandparents would take her to church with them on occasion, but their form of Christianity, Southern Baptist, did not resonate with LeeAnn, and she compartmentalized Sundays apart from the rest of her week. In middle school she went to live with her mother, and stopped attending completely. This childhood sojourn in East Texas was the sum total of her religious experience until she retired from the United States Navy in the early Twenty-Tens. For the first time in almost twenty years she found herself at loose ends. She had been medically retired due to several chronic health problems, the results of eighteen years

[195] Institute classes are for people ages 18-30. They are often, but not always, located near college campuses. Institute courses cover a broad range of topics and can sometimes fulfill course requirements at church-affiliated schools.
[196] "About" https://aprioritizedmarriage.com/about/
[197] LeeAnn Fox, interview with the author, January 14, 2022.

in the military, and did not have a sense of direction for this next stage of her life, and as she said, “you know, when you're down on your luck, you end up at church.”[198]

LeeAnn had what she calls “the sinners resume,” a long list of life choices which, to her, seemed at odds with Christianity and the church as she knew it, “for me–it wasn't so much about God. It was how God was taught. So Southern Baptist Bible Belt, you're just going to hell for everything. Like, why go to church? It's so depressing. Everyone's crying, the preachers up there, hell brimstone and fire and all that stuff. And like, you woke up today, you're going to hell, like who wants to join that party, right?”[199] But life circumstances which included a soon to be ex-husband who had drained her bank account, two young children, and trauma related to her military service had her looking for help anywhere she could get it. That is when she decided to attend a service at Church Unlimited.

Church Unlimited is a non-denominational Christian megachurch headquartered in Texas. It was founded by head pastor Bil Cornelius and his wife Jessica in 1997, and they currently have five locations, what they call campuses, as well as a prison ministry and a popular online ministry.[200] Like many megachurch pastors, Bil Cornelius has been quick to embrace new media platforms, and has been particularly successful on TikTok where he has over one hundred and nine thousand followers. According to Kate Bowler, the number of megachurches in the United States has increased by over three thousand percent since 1970.[201] Megachurches are corporate conglomerates. In addition to the campuses they will have bookstores, coffee shops, and other small business offshoots designed to keep parishioners within their network and funnel in outside customers. Evangelical celebrities and megachurch pastors have a uniform, with some

[198] Fox.
[199] Fox.
[200] “Who we are” https://churchunlimited.com/whoweare
[201] Bowler, 2.

variations. Some will wear suits, like Joel Osteen, some jeans, like Matt Chandler. But they are overwhelmingly white, of indeterminate middle age ranging from late twenties to late fifties, with carefully styled accouterments. Bil and Jessica Cornelius are presented on their church's website arm in arm. They are tan, they are blond, they are white, and their teeth shine. They are surrounded by their three smiling, tan, blond children. The image projects vitality and wealth. They would be equally at home on the set of Real Housewives of Dallas. That is a strategic choice. "Our mission statement is to take as many people to heaven as we can before we die, period. That's our mission statement," LeeAnn explained. "And it's why we're the church for the lost, right? If you're driving by you wouldn't know it's the church, there's one minuscule little metal cross, but it's very, like you almost don't even notice it because he doesn't want it to look like a church. It almost looks like an amphitheater or something because he doesn't want people to be afraid to come inside because it's churchy."[202] Non-denominational Evangelical churches who want to be seeker sensitive will eschew traditional elements (what LeeAnn calls "churchy") in favor of contemporary music, informal clothing, and buildings which bear more resemblance to modern office blocks than to cathedrals.[203] The goal is to be welcoming to those like LeeAnn who may be turned off by churchy elements, but who would respond well to traditional theology if it were presented with modern flair.

This way of doing church was a perfect fit for LeeAnn as she was transitioning into civilian life, "for me, having come from the military, and all the things I've seen and done there, you know, I needed something that was more hopeful [...] It's very Bible based New Testament. But it's not–it was explaining things to me, but making it not the King James Version. Nobody

[202] Fox.
[203] For more on this see *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* by Kimon Howland Sargeant, Rutgers University Press.

understands that, right? Nobody speaks that language. And so how was I to understand that. And so from there, I mean, I just got fired up, and my life just turned around."[204] LeeAnn's conversion story follows the redemptive narrative arc outlined by Marie Griffith in *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Griffith worked with a group called Women's AGLOW International, an international parachurch organization which facilitated women's prayer groups. It was a nominally nondenominational group, but had very strong Evangelical and Pentecostal leanings. AGLOW provided for women a place in which they could tell their stories and receive comfort, fellowship, and prayer from fellow women. AGLOW's demographics skew heavily white and middle-class, and the women that Griffith interviewed reflect that class-consciousness. The narrative confessions given by women in AGLOW meetings, as well as those that were published in their magazine, follow a standardized narrative pattern: they start in a place of pain (emotional, physical, etc.), and when the speaker "hits rock bottom" they are inspired to pray, because they are finally broken enough to accept that "they can't do it alone."[205] They pray for help, and help arrives. They receive redemption and are healed of their pain.

Although the stories all follow this basic narrative arc, they are not false or constructed. The women who attend AGLOW meetings do so because they have found authentic comfort and support in Christianity and in this group. They are not consciously conforming their stories to fit this narrative arc, but rather have this lens of brokenness to redemption, which allows them to make sense of the pain that they have felt, and to find a way out of that pain. It follows a modern self-help model. LeeAnn's redemption story fits into this narrative pattern as well. She went to church at the point in her life where she had perceived herself to be at rock bottom: dealing with

[204] Fox.
[205] See in particular Chapter 3, "Into Light and Life: Healing and Transformation."

physical and emotional trauma, the betrayal of her spouse, and the end of her career. In her church she found the help that she needed. As she explained it, "it was really an attitude—not attitude: a mindset shift. But knowing that no matter all these things that I had done, that God was still with me. And so that just kind of propelled this whole new life change for me."[206]

Jessie: Charcuterie Board of Faith

Jessie's family were what she calls "checklist Christians," meaning that they attended church on Sunday but did not incorporate religion into their lives in any other ways. In hindsight she can trace the slow drift of her family away from Christianity and religion in general. One particular event sticks out in her memory. "When I was seven, my brother was diagnosed with cancer, with bone cancer. And he ended up losing his leg, which–he's been cancer free for decades now, so I mean, that was in hindsight a good thing that happened. But someone nearby told us that, told me that, if we had just prayed more it wouldn't have happened. So that kind of took–I don't know how much my family knew that that specific thing happened. But I think it was a bunch of little things like that, that kind of took my family away from the church a bit."[207]

When they attended they went to Lutheran or Congregationalist churches, both of which would be considered mainline protestant. The category of mainline, much like the category of Evangelical, is difficult to pin down. Both are most often applied to protestant churches and can encompass multiple denominations, both make allusions to the cultural loci and character of members, and both have porous boundaries with significant crossover. Evangelicalism has been discussed at length above. One common grouping for mainline churches is by denomination. This will most often include Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, United Methodist,

[206] Fox.
[207] Jessie Synan, interview with the author, January 12, 2022

Evangelical Lutheran, and Northern Baptist.[208] This grouping is helpful, but does not speak to the character or doctrine of these churches. Elisha Coffman in her book *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* suggests that alongside this denominational grouping is a list of general characteristics which can help to distinguish mainline from Evangelical protestant; most mainline churches can be characterized by liberalism, ecumenism, low-tension with American culture, social gospel, and modernism.[209]

This distinction is important when discussing Jessie's story, as she now identifies as an Evangelical, which was an unexpected development for her family, for whom the term Evangelical carried negative connotations particularly after her brother's illness. "I don't know if my family actually knows that specific story," she said. "But I think just a lot of the hypocrisy that they saw, you know, when Evangelical is almost a bad word in our house, like, they'd be like, oh, those crazy Evangelicals [...] everyone's locked up in the prejudice they don't know about, and I had no idea that like, this was the prejudice. I just assumed that if you were Evangelical, that meant you're a crazy Christian. And that's just all I knew until I got out of my bubble."[210]

When she left home to attend college Jessie stepped away from religion. When she met her husband shortly after graduating they started to tentatively explore together, trying out different denominations to see what would suit; what her husband calls a "charcuterie board of faith." They had just moved to North Carolina and were trying to put out roots, to find a community. They attended Quaker meetings for a while, and bounced between a few different churches until, almost on a whim, decided to try out a large nondenominational Evangelical

[208] Coffman, Elesha J. *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (Oxford University Press: 2013) 4.
[209] Coffman, 5.
[210] Synan.

church. “There was nothing that was like flashy about it,” she explained. “It was literally in like a strip mall. But we, every time we drove past, I just felt that like little push inside of me, like, we should really go there, we should really go there.”[211] At first she was skeptical of the church, the pastor, and the method of delivery, particularly when the pastor began talking about salvation and baptism. “[T]he cynical part of me that had a lot of church hurt was like rolling my eyes like, oh, great,” she said. “And by the end I just felt God so strongly in that room, and just so strongly, like, present in a way I've never experienced before in the Protestant churches. It was just, I think my husband used the word mountaintop experience. And that's really what it was like.” Jessie found herself deeply moved by this religious service which previously raised her suspicions. The strip mall church, so different from both the mainline churches of her youth and the Quaker meetings she had recently been attending, broke through her cynicism. By the end of the service she was ready to take the plunge. “And so at the end, you know, they do a thing where you close your eyes, and you raise your hand if you're saying yes to Jesus that day. And all of a sudden, I feel my hand going up, and I was just like, oh, I wish I was in control of my hand. I guess it's just happening. And, you know, it's just–it's like, everything changed in that moment. And it's like nothing changed at that moment at the same time, like I was still who I was, but it was just, all of a sudden, life looked a lot different. So we kept going.”[212]

Jessie and her husband were baptized and continued to attend this nondenominational church and dedicated much of their time to volunteering with the youth group. She was also building her business online, blogging and teaching other bloggers. Though they did not agree with many members of the church politically, she felt like they had found a spiritual home. Unfortunately, those cultural and political conflicts would soon force a confrontation.

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[211] Synan.
[212] Synan.

Building a Business, Finding a Following

In order to create a successful online platform one needs an audience and a customer. In this section we will hear from Jamee and LeeAnn. Jamee leveraged her own relational and family history into a business in which she helps married couples maintain or rekindle the romance in their relationship. This business situates her within the realms of self-help and self-care, two prominent cultural categories on social media, particularly Instagram, where she does the bulk of her sales and promotion. Through Instagram she has taught herself how to market her business using native features of the platform and influencer networks.

LeeAnn has built a successful business teaching other Christian bloggers and influencers how to monetize their work. When describing her business, she downplays both her skills and drive. Instead she presents herself as an imperfect vessel through which God is able to do work in the world. This deferred and downplayed significance shifts focus away from her prowess as the owner of a successful business, taking away her agency and allocating it to God. As an Evangelical woman LeeAnn is, knowingly or not, following a pattern in which successful women must reassert their innate fragility and fallibility in order to maintain their position within Evangelical Patriarchy. By presenting herself as less capable or shrewd than her success would indicate that she is, LeeAnn is able to present as relatable, imperfect, and non-threatening to a male hierarchy.

Jamee: Perception and Reality

Jamee's husband Cameron has to travel frequently for work, which means that Jamee has to shoulder much of the day-to-day parenting. "That's kind of tough, because being at home with the kids is really hard for me," she explained. "And I know that that's another, like, Mormonism

thinking, is that moms should be stay at home moms, and that's how we provide for our families. And I've never fit into that category. Which is funny because right now I am, I would consider myself a stay home mom."[213] She knows that with the ages of her children and Cameron's variable schedule, he is an airplane mechanic and Director of Maintenance at his job, it makes sense for her to be a stay at home mom for the time being, but the title comes with cultural baggage that makes her uncomfortable. "I had to do something to kind of not let that be my identity, because I just don't do well when I just—I can't say just, because it is a hard job, and I know there's moms that love it. But I am not, I'm that person that believes that moms can work too, and it'll be okay."[214] She wanted something that would give her flexibility while also providing an income and room for growth. As she was thinking about potential businesses, she was also dealing with personal tragedy.

After struggling for many years, Jamee's parents divorced, three years previously at time of interview. Shortly after the divorce her mother also stopped attending church. To Jamee it seemed that both of her parents became inactive because they were not able to live up to the perceived standards of a "good" LDS family. Her father stopped attending in the 1990s and her mother around 2019. Jamee can only speculate, but she recalls her mother struggling to reconcile her own marital strife with church doctrine. "She would always say this, I remember growing up: I don't want Satan to win. And if we end our family, that is Satan winning. And so somewhere she got that idea that she was going to be shamed, and, you know, just never going to recover, almost, from that decision. And so yeah, I think definitely that had an effect on her."[215] This also had an effect on Jamee. Although she would not agree with her mother's doctrine here, she was

[213] Jamee Arthur, interview with the author, December 8, 2021.
[214] Arthur.
[215] Arthur.

shaken by the divorce. The idea for Date Crates was, at least in part, a result of watching her parents' marriage deteriorate. I will quote at length here:

> Date Crates came about because I was tired of having no dates in my marriage. And it was–it also came down to my parents divorcing. That was a huge eye opener to me, like, oh my gosh, if I'm not, you know, making my marriage a commitment or working at it as much as I can, I want to do better at that. Like, I just–I don't want it to end because of something that I could have done to prevent it. And so that's kind of where the birth of that came. And I knew I wasn't the only wife who struggled with wanting connection with their spouse. And it's just hard because life gets hard.[216]

Date Crates is designed for women (Jamee explained to me that she did not necessarily target women to the exclusion of men, however she found that most of the time it was wives, not husbands, who were reaching out and purchasing her products) who "loves her marriage but doesn't know, sometimes it gets in this rut, and doesn't know how to get out of it."[217] Jamee, like Amberly, has built a model that centers the married couple within the family unit. Although she has been on a journey to discover an individualized faith, she remains in Bushman's Mormon paradigm which sees the family as the basic unit of society, rather than the individual. Date Crates is for women like Jamee and her mother who are working to craft a sustainable relationship within an unsustainably rigid patriarchal system. "Because I know what it feels like to feel disconnected to your spouse," she explained. "It feels like the world is just heavy, and everything you do is heavy. And it's because that little piece of connection is not there for some reason. So I'm just talking to the wife who, you know, loves her husband, but wants to kick him

[216] Arthur.
[217] Arthur.

in the butt sometimes. And I want to help her know that she's worth it. She's doing everything that she can, and just spark some ideas of how to make it better, just little doable things."[218]

Jamee's business falls within a category of small businesses, often founded and run by women, which utilizes the trappings of the self-help genre to appeal to women who are experiencing burnout associated with the unattainable standards set for women within a patriarchal society. In the tradition of *The Total Woman* and other similar titles, Date Crates offers a guided solution for wives looking to rekindle romance with their husbands. "Marriage should just be your net to fall on when life gets chaotic and crazy," she said. "And if I can help other couples realize that then that's what I wanted to do, and help bring that focus back to one another instead of your attention going millions of other places, because it just does."[219] Underlying both, however, is the assumption of women's emotional labor. Unlike earlier forays into this genre, however, Jamee has taken strides to make Date Crates modern and egalitarian. While her goals and premise are altruistic, these underlying assumptions are still present. Even so, Jamee is offering a pragmatic tool for women who are finding this system, and these expectations, overwhelming. And the service provides measurable value for her customers.

Instagram is the main platform on which she promotes her business and finds new customers. Through Instagram she has networked with other women operating business within this genre and has expanded her audience. Through this process she has struggled to find a balance between honest representation and maintaining her public image. Recently she has begun to question the ways in which Mormon women in particular represent themselves. "I just– I wish that people in LDS culture, in the LDS church, would just be more real. Like, I think a lot of times now, you know, in my 30s, I'm recognizing that a lot of people go through life, and they

[218] Arthur.
[219] Arthur.

have stuff going on. That's how it goes. But we shove it under the rug because we're so scared of the perception of other people that if we can't come off as perfect, or that, you know what I mean, we don't show up as perfect, then something bad is gonna happen. I don't know. That's the way that I see women in the church, or that's how they view their role. And I just, I wish that would change."[220] For Jamee, Date Crates represents a way in which she can make a change by being honest about the struggles in her own marriage. Instagram and Date Crates have helped her to articulate a pattern of human behavior, "for some reason us humans, like, we think we're the only person going through this problem. Like, we're the only person that has the struggle until you put it out there, and people are like, oh, hey, I totally know what you're saying, and that's totally me. And I was like, oh, well, then that's good. So come on over and we'll problem solve together, because I'm stuck too."[221]

LeeAnn: Kingdom Professional

After retiring from the United States Navy LeeAnn had difficulty finding work. "I got a job with the state helping veterans, which lasted about three years," she said. "I have a lot of medical issues. I have migraines, a bad back, then I was still struggling with my anxiety because I really had—I was avoiding all doctors. Um, so it was really hard for me to work a typical job because I needed to take off a lot, especially when I have migraines. So I'm here. I'm like, I have to pay my bills, food stamps, my unemployment is about to run out."[222] She enjoyed her job with Veterans Affairs, but could not maintain a traditional office job, she needed something with flexibility to accommodate her health. It was around this time that her sister sent her a Pinterest

[220] Arthur.
[221] Arthur.
[222] Fox.

link, known as a Pin, about how to make money through blogging. LeeAnn was intrigued, even though she did not have a background in tech, "one thing they all know about me is that I'm handy. Like, I can come up with stuff, I can almost like MacGyver it, right? Like, I can figure it out. I just need a little hint." She began researching blogs and search engine optimization (known as SEO for short), and teaching herself while she looked for other work. Also during this time she began getting involved with Church Unlimited, and decided to convert to Christianity.

LeeAnn had created a group on Facebook where she was offering tips and paid consulting for bloggers looking to monetize. There are many such groups which use targeted advertising to find people looking to make money online, as LeeAnn was. The people running these groups will offer courses, boot camps, or one-on-one consultations, all for a fee. Some, like Jessie, specialize in social media while others like LeeAnn focus on SEO and blogging. These groups can be controversial in the blogging community, as some see them as predatory, charging high fees for information which is readily available for free elsewhere and targeting those who are not tech savvy. LeeAnn's current group is targeted to Christians, but her previous groups were open to everyone. Her current group has a multi-tiered structure. "I do my training three times a year, and so people are like waiting for the next class to start so they can go through it. And then once they finish the boot camp training, which is eight weeks, they are invited to join my membership, which is a monthly–they pay a small monthly fee, but those are the ones who are really committed and want to stay focused and have accountability. And so I have the free group, the paid group, and the student group."[223] Most of her membership comes from word of mouth, other bloggers referring new people to her from other blogging or skill-building groups.

[223] Fox.

LeeAnn now runs multiple such groups, but still speaks about her work in a deprecating manner. For example, when asked about the origin of her main blog, Kingdom Bloggers, she told the following story:

> I joined a life group at my church for writers. I was like, I'm not a writer. These are people that like, wanted to write books. Some of them are. I was like, but this is as close to my peeps as I'm going to find here, right? Nobody knows about blogging. When I say blogging, they look at me like I'm stupid. So I was like, I'll join this life group. Well, it turns out, they all had their own personal blogs to go with their books. They just didn't know what they were doing. So I was giving little tips and hints and this and that. And one of the guys, he had a podcast and I helped him get stuff on Apple, iTunes, all this stuff. They're like, you know, you should really teach this. For some reason, I had done some research on SEO. Like, what's the most searched things that people search on Google? And the amount of God related stuff, biblical searches, was huge, which really surprised us because, you know, they make you think it's all about the Kardashians or whatever. But the amount of Biblically related searches was just off the chart, and so he's like, you should really teach this. I was like, well, I don't know how to, I'm still learning the Bible. I don't know how. They're like, you know, you just figure it out.[224]

In this story LeeAnn refers to herself diminutively and derogatorily. Blogging is not writing, or not "real" writing, not like what the other members of the group were doing. And she, rather than offering expert advice from an industry professional, gives little tips and hints. She just happened to be researching SEO, as if by accident. Each deferment pushes her further from the controls, abdicating her agency in managing her own work. This performative diminishing reinforces the

[224] Fox.

perception of female Christian bloggers as hobbyists or dilettantes rather than professional writers and creators. LeeAnn's blog *Kingdom Bloggers* uses highly specific SEO to consistently appear in the top searches on Google, and she has brought together a group of writers to create content optimized for Google search terms under her specific guidance. She offers an exchange of services: she will help them build their own blogs for free if they will write content for hers. Maintaining these businesses requires skills in multiple areas such as web development, content editing, personnel management, and marketing. Several years on, she attributes her continued success to her willingness to put God in control.

> It launched in December of 2018 and by the end of that 12 months we had reached almost 100,000 people. Like it was just crazy. It's like you build it, they will come, and so that's what it was. It was me teaching them how to get their blogs ready, like for free. I didn't charge them. The only charge was: y'all write for me. And then that transpired into the actual course. And then my boot camp, which is what we have now. It just sort of built and three years later, we're just like, woah, when God calls you to do it, and he's kicking you, you better get up and do it no matter how scary and unprepared you think you are. Because he provided literally everything that was needed to make it happen. He just put it there.[225]

Blogging is both a business and a religious calling for LeeAnn. The financial success of Kingdom Bloggers is an indication that she is on the right path. In her framing, once she surrendered to God, he provided both the means and then the evidence of success. As such, she does not have qualms about making money from her mission. "My thing is, yes, I make money from my blog. And yes, it was also to help me pay the bills at the time. But if your focus is

[225] Fox.

making money, it won't work. If your focus is sharing the gospel online, then you will be rewarded. So you can have that as a goal, but the focus has to always be the evangelism side of it. And if you focus on that, then you lay the right fruit for fertile ground for the income streams to happen."[226] LeeAnn's perspective reflects elements of a prosperity gospel, a doctrine which teaches that Christians will see earthly as well as heavenly rewards when they are in alignment with God.[227] In their chapter on prosperity teaching in the *Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*, Jayeel Cornelio and Erron Medina proposed a modified prosperity gospel influenced by self-help and grind culture which sacralizes the hustle, or grind, of people like LeeAnn, to whom it "affords one an entrepreneurial mindset in which personal actions can unlock not only economic breakthroughs but also stable physical well-being and spiritual maturity."[228] Within this system financial success is a result of both hard work and blessings from God. This doctrinal evolution incorporates personal responsibility and work ethic, key components of hustle culture. It is no longer enough to have the correct faith, and to speak one's desire out loud (a key element of prosperity gospel inherited from New Thought teaching). Blessings will come to those who put in the work. LeeAnn is successful because she is in alignment with God's will, but she has to first be willing to do the work.

What gets left out of prosperity narratives like LeeAnn's is power, knowledge, and access. LeeAnn employs deferred significance to downplay her skills, instead attributing her success to a combination of divine blessing, luck, and hustle. This does not account for the very real power which she, and others like her, wield because they have the financial means. And the power of that accessibility, having the time to master these technologies and the financial means

[226] Fox.
[227] Cornelio, Jayeel, and Erron Medina. "The Prosperity Ethic: The Rise of the New Prosperity Gospel." In *Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*. Routledge (2020), 65.
[228] Ibid, 67.

to invest in a business like this—as most blogs or social media accounts will not be profitable for at least a year—is not possible for most people. Because she has this access, and because she has these tools, she can then create knowledge using that power, and she can use that knowledge to establish norms for Christian influencers. LeeAnn has accumulated significant knowledge, which she is able to then sell and teach.

Refining the Brand

Many influencers will go through multiple projects before finding one which is successful. In this section, both Amberly and Jessie started with projects that were meaningful to them personally, but which did not have broad appeal or marketability. These early projects exemplify a common attitude held by many consumers of such content, and which is frequently perpetuated by creators, that the best project is the one that you do for "the right reasons." That could be a religious calling, a personal mission, or a labor of love, as long as the ultimate goal is fulfillment and not monetary success. As LeeAnn explained it, "most people get into blogging thinking they're gonna write about their stories, or they're gonna share their testimony, 'I want to help other women by journaling my journey,' but that's not really what people Google. So they're misguided on what blogging is. And we all were."[229] Creating a successful online platform, successful in this instance meaning income generating, requires one to learn and then cater to the market. The resulting project can still be personally meaningful to the creators, but it is rarely the work they envisioned themselves doing. Amberly and Jessie each recognize this reality while still crafting a narrative of finding one's voice and following God's leading in order to continue to assert that they are doing this for "the right reasons."

[229] Fox.

Amberly: I don't talk about it in a raunchy way

Amberly and Joe were married in the temple in Bountiful, Utah in 2011, and now have two children. When they were first dating Amberly began a blog where she wrote about how they met, the dates they went on, and other details about their life together. "I started following friends, their blogs, they just like, write random thoughts or share what they were doing with their families, and I was like, oh, this is so fun [...] I just love sharing, like, let me tell you about my life, I will tell you my whole life story."[230] The early 2010's saw a boom in personal blogging. By 2009 over eight million women had personal blogs, many utilizing platforms like Blogger or WordPress which allowed for customization without requiring extensive knowledge of coding.[231] Smaller blogs, like Amberly's, in this era many times served as both a platform and a journal, with limited readership, often limited to those with an existing connection to the author. Over time female bloggers built largely informal networks in which they would read, comment, and share each other's work. Amberly recalled in our interview the first time she made such a connection.

> I had a friend, my very first blog friend, we joke because she was like my blog crush. Like, 'I love what you're writing!' She would share things about her marriage. And she would do Q&As that you could ask each other, she would share her answers and you can go ask your spouse, and that was kind of my first experience with relationship and marriage blogging, was her blog, and she lived [near me]. There's like one city between us and it's like 10 miles long. And I ran into her one morning at an Einstein Bagel. I was eating breakfast with my friend, and she was in line with her husband, and I was like, oh

[230] Lambertsen.
[231] Gina Masullo Chen, "Why Do Women Write Personal Blogs? Satisfying Needs for Self-Disclosure and Affiliation Tell Part of the Story," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 1 (January 2012): 171.

my gosh, I follow her, and I talk to her online. And I was like, twitterpated. And my friend was like, okay. And I went over and introduced myself, and we're still friends.[232]

Amberly felt comfortable making that approach because of the connection that she had developed with this fellow blogger, both through reading her posts and interacting in comments. Like many of the women interviewed for this project, Amberly has formed meaningful and important relationships through blogging and Instagram.

Amberly's first blog was titled "Life with Amberly and Joe," but when she started studying for her bachelor's degree in 2014 in Family Studies she transitioned to her current blog, "A Prioritized Marriage," where she incorporates stories from her own life with coaching and education for LDS couples. She explained why she made the switch, and why this topic is so important to her. "In the LDS church, we believe that we're going to be together for all eternity," she said. "And if you don't–if you're not connecting with your spouse and continuing to build that relationship that you built, that made you first want to get married together, you're going to get to eternity and you're going to not love it [...] And so I still share a lot of personal experiences and things that I'm learning professionally, but also personally, and how I'm applying those things. But that's kind of how I shifted from just sharing my life on the internet to sharing my passion in my profession on the internet." She has finished her bachelor's degree and at the time of the interview was working on her master's degree in Child and Family Studies, an area of psychology studying developmental periods for children and adults, often with a focus on inter-familial dynamics, and she brings this expertise to her blog. However, when describing how she selects topics and what she chooses to write about she employs language which downplays her knowledge and expertise, as well as the significant technological know-how necessary to run a

[232] Lambertsen.

successful platform. For example, she maintains an additional blog focused on date night ideas for her county in Utah, and has set up SEO for both projects so that she can see what is relevant and adjust her writing accordingly. This type of technological tailoring, the nuts and bolts of finding and maintaining an audience, can rupture the illusion that a blog is primarily the personal life and reflections of its author. While it is certainly true that Amberly is passionate about her topic, she is savvy to the wants and needs of her audience, and has developed a good sense of what will appeal to them. For example, she discovered that she would get a lot of engagement with posts that dealt with intimacy, and as a result has incorporated it as a regular topic, but she explains this decision in a way that softens the calculation. "I love talking about building intimacy in your marriage and how intimacy is more than the physical act of being intimate. That's a big popular topic on my website. Everyone wants to talk about intimacy in any way, shape, or form," she said. "And just like–I've just found my things that I'm really passionate about and I end up talking about them."

The nature of her blog means that Amberly has had to carefully negotiate what is public and what stays private, particularly when it comes to intimacy. "I remember the first time I ever had a blog post about intimacy," she said. "I had a sponsored post with a lubricant company. And I was like, should I do this? And I was like (gulp), and that was kind of beyond my comfort zone at the time. And now I'm like, I want to talk about that. Because it's something I think, especially with my religious background, it's something that's not talked about as much. And it's an important part of a relationship. And so I don't talk about it in a raunchy way."[233] She writes frankly about things like using sexual lubricant from the perspective of a faithful Mormon woman, and in doing so she provides an invaluable service to readers who are looking for a non-

[233] Lambertsen.

secular place to talk about sex. Unexpectedly, for Amberle, it was the non-secular part which has caused her the most consternation, as she explained to me, “I used to say I would never talk about sex on my website, but I can't say that anymore. So I wouldn't say there's anything really that's off limits. I, this is going to be funny, especially because we're doing this interview about religion. But I don't often post many religious things on my site.” She is open about her faith, and there are posts about attending the temple or finding help in scripture, but “there's a lot of Christian marriage blogs out there, there's quite a few LDS marriage blogs out there. And there's other religious marriage blogs out there. And they're very focused on that religion piece. And I really wanted my website to resonate with as many couples as possible.”

If her blog was going to stand out, she needed to find a way to appeal to a broader audience than other marriage blogs run by religious women. Many LDS influencers navigate a similar path. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints occupies a liminal space in American society, an object of ridicule equally for being perceived as overly wholesome and for being a radical and dangerous cult. The duality of this perception causes women like Amberly to hold multiple identities in tension when creating content, particularly if they want to have cross-market appeal. Amberly, in her openness and willingness to discuss topics others in her niche shy away from, is a unique and important voice. But she is constantly aware of these dualities. “I'm Christian, I grew up LDS, that all plays a role and there's going to be things that I don't know are a challenge in marriage, because it's very much outside of my culture, and I hope to be able to speak to that better later on. But that's kind of how I've wanted to approach it. I believe that marriage is eternal. I, you know–I don't know, I believe that God is a part of your marriage

to your spouse, and God–but they're not things that I—you're not going to find tons of scriptures in my blog posts."[234]

Kate Bowler describes "professional wives" as women who tout themselves as wives, mothers, and homemakers first while simultaneously working full time or, in the case of many professional wives, running an empire. Centering these roles (wife, mother, homemaker) not only provides cover against the criticism that a woman is not abiding by gendered norms, but also makes a political statement about those gendered norms. To say that you are a wife, mother, or homemaker rather than that you are (in the case of Amberly, LeeAnn, Jamee, and Jessie) a writer, small business owner, blogger, consultant, or influencer centers those roles, making them more important, or at least claiming that they are more important, than one's career. The second form of "professional wife" is related to the first, but her work will revolve around those three roles. Maybe, like Beverly LaHaye, she will write books about wifely submission and godly marriage while running a multifaceted political campaign against feminism.

Most simply incorporate these roles into their branding. As Amberly pointed out, there are a lot of blogs written by and for Christian women that deal with marriage and family life. The professional wife and mom has become an influencer category which is populated with recipe posts, cleaning tips, and pictures of happy children. Women in this category are selling the benefits of complementarian marriage where the husband works, and the wife does not. First, it is important to note that this single-income model was only attainable for a short time and for a small group of White families. Women of color have been systematically excluded from the problem with no name. But this ideal, which ramped up in the mid-20th Century culture wars wherein conservative women like LaHaye campaigned against feminist causes in support of

[234] Lambertsen.

"traditional marriage,"[235] has left a lasting impact on the culture of both Mormonism and Evangelicalism. Women like Jamee and Amberly have a vested interest in occupying the role of professional wife. It can be a lucrative category for bloggers and influencers, as the market for women looking for "inspiration porn"[236] continues to thrive. Also, these two religious traditions have embraced, at the institutional level as well as in individual congregations, this idealized complementarian model. As Jamee pointed out above, she grew up with the cultural understanding that Mormon women were meant to get married young and then be a stay-at-home mom. That cultural pressure comes with significant expectations which many women find difficult to embody. This fuels the demand for professional wife content. Simultaneously, as members of that community, they are also subject to those same pressures, and centering the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker allows them to negotiate between their often opposing cultural roles.

Jessie: How do you explain when God talks to you?

When asked why she started creating content, Jessie spoke about her conversion. "You know, when you step out in crazy faith, God calls you to crazy things [...] And, you know, I had raised my hands that I was giving my whole life to Jesus and all of a sudden I'm just thankful for everything. I got baptized, and I'm in the middle of praying, and I feel–I don't even know how to explain it. How do you explain when God talks to you? It sounds so weird, but like, I felt God

[235] Given the fact that single income households like this were the anomaly, rather than the rule, one must ask: whose tradition?

[236] The term "inspiration porn" follows a model of internet slang wherein the word "porn" is used to indicate that something is either aspirational, high quality, desirable, or some combination. On social media sites like Instagram and Reddit there are many different tags and categories which use this slang such as "food porn" for opulent or enticing food or "nature porn" for pictures showcasing the beauty of nature. "Inspiration porn" is a subcategory which refers to a type of content which one finds personally aspirational. This can include motivational posts as well as content related to parenting, exercise, diet, or any other lifestyle category.

being like, you should start a blog. And I'm like, okay, cool."[237] As a child she had gone back and forth between wanting to be a writer and wanting to be a pastor, and this felt like a combination of both passions. There was one small problem. "And so I turn around to Google. And I'm like, What's a blog? Because I think I had, like, heard it at some point, but had to Google what a blog was." Unlike many of her contemporaries, Jessie did not have much of a presence on social media. She would be starting from scratch. Early in this process she met LeeAnn, who was just starting to shift her focus away from general blogging and toward Christian blogging. Jessie was one of LeeAnn's first contributors, and they continue to work together often.

Jessie started with a blog that she now refers to as a "baby blog," meaning it was young and not quite ready, "the website was called One Last Coin based on the parable. And it was just the idea that everyone has a story, and every story mattered. And I was just in love with the website name, I was in love with the idea. And I was writing to people that walked away from the church and were interested in coming back, which is great in theory." She was passionate about the topic, as she was in the process of separating from her church, and was looking for other people who had gone through something similar. But passion was not enough to fill in gaps in her knowledge base. "I didn't understand SEO, and when I didn't understand SEO, it was like shooting in the dark, you know? Just throwing pasta on the wall and hope that it sticks. Like, I was Googling random keywords that didn't–I didn't really have a target audience and have a niche. And, you know, it ended up once I figured out what I was doing, it was like, okay, I need to completely start over. Like, I can't just take this and fix it, it needs to be something brand new."[238]

[237] Synan.
[238] Synan.

Similar to LeeAnn, Jessie speaks about starting her business in a manner which downplays her skill and instead promotes a narrative in which she stumbles into her successes. This narrative frames her as a passive participant rather than the protagonist of her own story. Within an Evangelical context women are discouraged from flaunting their successes and their skills. Both Jessie and LeeAnn have a well-developed sense for market trends and considerable skill in building and maintaining a reader base, but speak about themselves in a breezy and occasionally dismissive manner, such as when Jessie explained to me how she started focusing on social media and SEO. "I took a while to figure out the whole blogging thing," she said. "I made a ton of mistakes. But I kept figuring out social media. And I kept figuring out how to get people's attention on social media. And people kept asking just a ton of questions like, oh, you have a blog. That's cool. How do you get so many Facebook followers? Like, how do you get people to actually engage with you on Twitter? Like, how do you use Twitter? And so it started with me just kind of creating a free Facebook group going like, hey, let's just talk, because I loved the idea of digital discipleship and having people share Jesus online. I'm like, I might not be good at this blogging thing, but I can tell you how to get people online. And so it kind of went from there to the point that my husband and I ended up starting our own business of Christian social media marketing."[239]

Her new blog is about prayer, and at time of interview had become profitable enough that she was phasing out her social media consulting. She starts by doing SEO and keyword research to find what questions people are asking online about prayer. She will then take that research and write blog posts which address common questions and key words. Using those key phrases means that her blog is more likely to show up in google results, which means that she will get

[239] Synan.

more traffic and more engagement, which will then push it further up in google results, creating a snowball effect. Most content creators think of this process as doing competitor research, trying to find what other people in your niche are trending for so that you can either overtake them or at a minimum match their engagement. Jessie uses that terminology, but was quick to clarify, "in most niches, like if you're in the travel niche, or the food niche, or whatever, they're really, really competitive. But here the majority, I think I know right now, and I'm sure this will change in years, but right now, it's a pretty tight knit community. Like if I'm, you know, Googling anything of like Bible verses about blank in Google, the chances are what pulls up, I know all those people, we all know each other. And so it's a pretty—we cheer each other on when like we are all on page one and things like that. So when I say competitors, I don't actually mean competition. There's—we're all on team Jesus mainly and say we're all trying to get everyone to page one so there's a bunch of biblical truth."

Gendered and Sexed

Each of these four women have found ways to navigate the restrictions placed on women within the patriarchal hierarchies of Evangelical Christianity and Mormonism, and all four have made explicit choices to identify with these religious movements. Each articulated in their interview the benefits that they receive from this affiliation, whether social, material, or spiritual, and the often-difficult choices that they have had to make in order to continue that affiliation. In this section we will hear about a specific event in each of their lives which caused them to confront gender complementarity, and the negotiations that they have had to make in order to remain within their traditions.

Jamee: Folk Religion and Purity Culture

Jamee has remained active in the LDS Church, which includes serving a calling. Mormonism utilizes laypeople for most aspects of ministry and leadership.[240] Those serving in a particular calling will often receive some level of training, but will still have autonomy in how they execute their duties, as long as they remain within the purview of church doctrine. Jamee has served a number of different callings but has grown disillusioned with this system of ministry. "[T]o be considered faithful, you have to do your church attendance, you know? Make sure you are sacrificing your time with your family, your money from your careers, to help out the church or other people in it." The extra time commitment became particularly difficult when Cameron stopped attending church, and she felt that she was forced to choose between spending time with her husband and church work, "for a long time, I felt like I wasn't considered, you know, faithful or active because there's some weeks that I just don't go to church because I don't feel like it that day, you know, or I have other things going on."

In explaining this system to me, Jamee was struck by a painful memory. "Here's the difference with our religion versus other religions, is that it's just people, right? Like, they didn't go to school to become a pastor, they didn't go to school to do these things. It's just kind of people filling these spots voluntarily, and teaching the way that they live, basically. I remember a specific incident in Young Women that I don't think she meant to say these things, but the way I left that day, believing less of myself, because of the way she taught that day, affected me for years." Young Women is the colloquial name for the organization within the church for girls ages twelve to seventeen. Each year the church will release a theme for all of the lessons that will

[240] There is some debate about whether members of the Church Presidency, for example, should still be considered laypeople. They have not necessarily been trained in ministry, but they are employed by the Church in leadership and ministerial roles.

be taught in Young Women and the male equivalent, Young Men/Aaronic Priesthood Quorum. Women will be called to serve as teachers for Young Women and will thus be responsible for developing lessons around the official curriculum.

Jamee recalled attending one such lesson when she was sixteen which would have a lasting impact. I will quote at length from Jamee's interview, here:

> We were talking about keeping yourself worthy for marriage, not having sex before marriage, and saving yourself. That's like, a big thing, right? And so the way she decided to teach that day was to say this story about a couple who ended up getting engaged, and they were to be married in the temple. Like, that was the greatest thing, you know? And the girl in this relationship had actually had sex before marriage. So she didn't save herself. And so she was distraught about it, deciding if she should tell her new fiancé, if she should tell him or if she's, like, been forgiven and she shouldn't need to say those things.
>
> Well, she goes to her bishop, and he advises her to tell him, so she does, in the story, she tells him and then the man in the story calls off the engagement because of it. So this is the story. So this is what gets me. Instead of saying, you know what? Why would he think that? Why would he automatically call that off and not like, be loving towards her, and things, right? No, no.
>
> So this leader decided that day to say how sad that this woman had made a mistake in her life that she will be living with for the rest of her life. And so, I'm trying not to cry, but like, I remember leaving feeling so shameful. Because not three years later I had done the same thing. And like, what did I remember the most? This shame and the guilt that I was

> supposed to feel, instead of the forgiveness and the grace and the things that I'm supposed to do. And so yeah, that affected me for sure.

The shame and guilt which Jamee felt after this lesson stayed with her. In the last decade Mormon women have begun talking (and writing) publicly about their experiences with purity culture. It has been a frequent topic in the bloggernacle, particularly on blogs like The Exponent and By Common Consent, and has been featured in mainstream online publications like Religion Dispatches and Religion News Service. In 2013 Elizabeth Smart, who had been the victim of repeated rapes at the hands of her kidnapper, spoke at a forum on human trafficking at Johns Hopkins University. Smart, who grew up in a devout Mormon household, spoke candidly about the impact that purity culture had on her as a survivor of rape.

> I'm worthless. That is what it was for me the first time I was raped. I was raised in a very religious household, one that taught that sex was something very special that only happened between a husband and a wife who loved each other… For that first rape, I felt crushed. 'Who could want me now?' I felt so dirty and so filthy. I understand all too well why someone wouldn't run because of that alone. If you can imagine the most special thing being taken away from you? And feeling not that that was your only value in life, but that devalued you? I remember in school one time I had a teacher who was talking about abstinence, and she said, imagine, you're a stick of gum and when you engage in sex, that's like getting chewed, and if you do that lots of times, you're going to be an old piece of gum, and who's going to want you after that? And that's terrible, and nobody should ever say that, but for me, I thought, I'm that chewed up piece of gum. Nobody

> ever rechews a piece of gum. …That's how easy it is to feel that you no longer have worth, you no longer have value.[241]

The analogy which Smart mentions here, comparing women to a stick of gum, is one that is shared between Evangelical and Mormon audiences. Many of the women interviewed for this study, including Jamee, were raised with this and similar analogies. Whether is a chewed up piece of gum, a cupcake with the frosting licked off, or a bit of used tape, purity culture forcibly embodies women within these traditions in a binary physical state of either clean or dirty, objectifying them as a gift for someone else, a thing which will be either more or less pleasing to a future husband. The body of a woman is thus something that is inscribed, preserved or spoiled, but fundamentally and irrevocably altered through sex.

Joanna Brooks refers to this type of lesson as folk doctrine, something commonly taught and believed but not present in official church materials, any current guides for LDS youth, or the state curriculum of Utah.[242] Even so, she points out that "virtually untrained volunteer lay teachers tasked with instructing responsible sexuality to young people will fall back on what they know best—in the worst cases resorting to spent chewing gum, or ruined donuts, or other punitive object lessons."[243] Jamee can easily recall those feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness, and sees this as a pattern more broadly for Mormon women, "The guilt is such a big thing. I feel like that comes with LDS culture in particular [...] I think in LDS culture you can get so caught up in the he said, she said type of dialogue, where it's like oh, he said this is how I'm supposed to do this. Or he said if only I do this, and that's the only way I can get why, and

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[241] Brooks, Joanna. "Did Mormon Morality Teachings Really Make It Harder for Elizabeth Smart to Run?" *Religion Dispatches*. Last modified May 9, 2013. Accessed April 3, 2023. https://religiondispatches.org/did-mormon-morality-teachings-really-make-it-harder-for-elizabeth-smart-to-run/

[242] As of 2013.

[243] Brooks, 2013.

that took me a lot of years to realize that that's not the relationship that I want with my church."[244]

Amberly: I realized that God plays a role in my life every single day

Amberly is the eldest of five, and the only one out of her siblings who is still active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. As someone who has always felt like an outsider among her siblings, this feels like one more wall between her and them, even though she is also critical of the church. "I can easily tell you what I like least," she said, laughing. "I think like everyone else; I struggle with what we call church culture, and just things that are not gospel tied, that are more organizational tied. And I think there's the gospel and then there's the church and obviously, they're one but also there are pieces of the church that have nothing to do with the gospel. And I think a lot of times that's where a lot of people struggle with."[245] Even though she understands those struggles, she has not felt the alienation around gender that she often hears friends and siblings talk about. "I'm not—I'm not as progressive as most people," she laughs. "I am not one who feels that women need the priesthood, or that's not something that has ever—or that we need, you know, to be able to hold certain positions in the church. It's not something that I've ever felt." As an assertive person, she feels that she has been able to participate in shaping the wards that she has belonged to and has not felt overlooked or diminished because of her gender. "I've never been that person to suppress the thought, or I just say what I think and say how it is. And so to me, I've never felt suppressed in the church at all. And I know a lot of women do. And I just had a lot of good opportunities for service."[246]

[244] Arthur.
[245] Lambertsen.
[246] Lambertsen.

Amberly, as an assertive woman who is not challenging the authority or structure of the church, has carved out a role for herself where she can comfortably participate in the community of faith. Like many religious communities, Mormonism has a gender imbalance. According to the Pew Research Group's Religious Landscape Survey, as of 2014, the most recent year for which such data is available, women made up about 54% of Mormons in America.[247] There are many reasons why women are over-represented in church membership in both Mormonism and Evangelicalism.[248] In survey work done for *The Next Mormons* Jana Riess found that Mormon women scored nine points higher than men on issues of orthodoxy and certainty in their faith.[249] Some, like Evangelical writer John Piper, argue that this gender imbalance is the result of overall feminization of Christianity in order to make it more acceptable to the world (i.e. non-believers), and thus he calls for a return to "masculine Christianity."[250] Riess shows that young Mormon women's lives begin to resemble those of non-Mormons in measurable ways like education and size of family,[251] perhaps religious adherence is one way of maintaining a peculiar identity when other signifiers are shifting. In speaking to many different Mormon women for this project, I found that women like Amberly often have an easier time making space for themselves within the church when they do not challenge authority structures, even when they assert themselves in other ways.

Because she has found this balance, the benefits that Amberly gets from being a member of the church, the community and spiritual nourishment, outweigh her qualms with church

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[247] "Religious Landscape Study." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, n.d. Accessed April 3, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/.
[248] According to the same data from Pew Research women make up 55% of Evangelical Christians in America as of 2014.
[249] Riess, Jana. *The next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 92.
[250] "Some Sweet Blessings of Masculine Christianity." *Desiring God*. Last modified October 17, 2007. https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/some-sweet-blessings-of-masculine-christianity.
[251] Riess, 108.

culture, “I can have challenges with my neighbor or with the way my ward is run, or with choices that people who are higher up make, but I can't deny the experiences that I've had that tell me that God is real, and that the gospel is real.” She has felt, at different times in her life, the presence of God often manifested through the community of believers, such as when her daughter was born eight weeks premature. I will quote at length here:

> I remember everyday driving to the hospital just being like, stressed and overwhelmed. And I would sit in the hospital with her, and I would talk to my husband, and then I would stay with her while he'd go home with our toddler to put him to bed. And then I would come home after. And every day when I drove home, I would just cry. But I would always cry—I'd cry because I was overwhelmed, I'd cry because I could see those moments when I was being helped, when I was being held up, when I was being strengthened even when it felt like everything was falling apart. And just how I'd have lots of time to think, just sitting there cuddling with my baby, or driving back and forth from the hospital, or sitting and pumping for half an hour every few hours throughout the day so she'd have milk, and thinking about how—I thought about how all of those times when I thought that my plans were not working out, and I had a good plan, and who the heck thought that this plan would be better? And realizing how all of those moments put me in a position to be where I needed to be for myself, and to be where I needed to be for my family. And how if things had worked out the way I had planned it would be even more of a mess. And so for me, that was when I realized that God plays a role in my life every single day.[252]

[252] Lambertsen.

LeeAnn: In-Security

While in the Navy LeeAnn worked in anti-terrorism, and she has a degree in Homeland Security and Emergency Management. She was medically retired after eighteen years of service. She laughed at my surprise, saying that it was a common reaction. "[I did a] total 180 here. So when I'm not teaching you Jesus, I could totally teach you how to prepare yourself against terrorist attacks and prepare your home from infiltrators."[253] Even though she is out, and has been for a decade, she still finds herself reacting to situations using that training. She has a license to conceal carry a firearm and chooses to carry most of the time, even at church. As her children have gotten older she has tried to pass some of that on. "My daughter, she's 17 now, but when we were going to church before COVID we were serving, she served in the kids side and I'm on the adult side, it's not that far apart. But that's when we start having those rash of active shooters here and there and everywhere. But I would teach her what to do if suddenly there was an active shooter, so I knew what room she was in. And she had almost like you do fire drills at school, I would go through the drills with her."[254] LeeAnn wanted her daughter to be able to react out of instinct if she were put in a situation at church, school, or anywhere else, with an active shooter. These lessons for her daughter evolved when some of the other women at their church asked if they could join in. She takes a very pragmatic view of the necessity for these lessons in America. "I mean, you just have to do it, like you have to learn, and then practice it a few times, because then when it does happen, and chances are it will, then it's not a big deal," she was quick to clarify, "I mean, it's a big deal. But it's–at that moment, you're just like, oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing."

[253] Fox.
[254] Fox.

Church Unlimited offers many opportunities for service, and LeeAnn wanted to put her skills to use for the Church. When they decided to put together a security team her background in anti-terrorism and military police made it a perfect fit, and as she pointed out, she was not the only church member in their Texas congregation with a conceal carry permit. It was the job of the security team to patrol the campus watching for anything that seemed unusual or dangerous. "My pastor that was there at the time knew me, so he's like LeeAnn, and we want you on this. Then when he left to go to another church we got a new one, someone who didn't want to give me the time of day because I was a girl, and this is man's work. So I was just like, whatever. I mean, I get it to a point, that men are supposed to protect the women. But for someone who that was her life, it's kind of hard to retrain my brain to my new role, that's a whole 'nother story."[255] From her tone and body language it seemed that this had been an upsetting event for her, but she was loath to criticize her church or the leadership, and insisted to me that her church was not old fashioned when it came to gender. "Just talking to other people in my community, my blogging community, they go to churches where they live, and everything, I would say, mine is more with the times. There's still a little of what you would call man work and woman work, but not on the scale that I think it used to be."

It is important to LeeAnn that she be able to distinguish her church both from the Southern Baptist churches that she attended as a child and from more outwardly traditional Christian churches now. The non-"churchy" nature of Church Unlimited was an important element in drawing her in, and at several different points in the interview she spoke about how much she liked the modernness of different elements of the church. It seemed that she was uncomfortable associating what she views as a fundamentally modern enterprise with views

[255] Fox.

about gender that could be considered out of date or old fashioned, particularly when speaking with an outsider. “So it's a very more modern approach, not the typical, these are the men jobs, these are the women jobs, it's more of a person and what they feel comfortable signing up for,” she said. “So a little more modern, but I know a lot of my friends that go to other churches, like around the country, not Catholic, but just like different denominational, they say they still have the issue in their churches. So I don't know, we're just weird. Our church is different.” LeeAnn has had to change the narrative of being asked to step down in order to maintain her perception of Church Unlimited. She has negotiated this dissonance by utilizing the Evangelical concept of God pushing, or as she says, kicking, Christians out of their comfort zone in order for them to grow in their faith. This framing turns the narrative back onto her, making it a lesson about her own growth rather than a systemic problem in the church. I will quote at length here:

> Yeah, it was hard, I'm not gonna lie, it was–that was a part of my transitioning out too, is finding my new place and realizing the world and the military are different in how they look at men and women. But I also was very 'Well, if a man can do it, I can do it,' my whole career. But now that I'm deep in the Jesus stuff, I get it, I get the structure, that's not saying it's man's work and women's work, but I get the old school, you know, the men that like the hierarchy, if you will. I mean, I understand from a biblical perspective that the men are there to protect. But yeah, when you're like, I got more experience than all you people, you don't even want to talk to me because I'm like a girl. It was hard, but I tried not to take offense to it.
>
> I was like, okay, well, I guess God doesn't want me to do that anymore. Where I was still trying to do what I had been doing because I have all this experience, all this worldly knowledge, but God was trying to tell me: don't do that. This is where I want you to go,

this way. But getting that through my thick head took a little while because you still want to do what you know. And you're like, God, stop kicking me. I don't want to do that, you know? Like, I know this. Like, I know you know this, now I want you to go know something else.[256]

Jessie: Leading and Leaving

After her conversion experience Jessie and her husband began volunteering with the youth group at their nondenominational church. While she had initially been wary, she found in that church something that she had been missing. At the same time she was having difficulty reconciling the difference in her political views and those of most other church members. "And so it left us in a point of wondering if we belonged anywhere," she said. "Because we felt in these Protestant churches that we weren't feeling God on that level that we did at the nondenominational church. It's like, we tried so hard to worship on our own, but there's just something about community. And so we were these people that love the loud praise music and all of that, they don't find the Protestant churches."[257] Religiously they felt at home there, but she was constantly having to negotiate the cultural baggage that came with Evangelicalism. "I grew up pretty cynical of the church, you know, very cynical of these Evangelical people that were now my best friends. And so it was a really confusing place to be, especially being a person that was liberal in an Evangelical world, it's just–they don't really cross paths often. And when you're Evangelical people assume that you're conservative. And so I felt this weird back and forth."

For some time Jessie has felt called to go to seminary, and wanted to explore options for serving in ministry, which she found were closed to her. Her husband had taken on a leadership

[256] Fox.
[257] Synan.

role, and she could assist him, but could not enter the leadership herself. Her business was growing, and she felt more connected to God than ever before, but continued to feel a call to ministry. Her husband had committed to serving for fifteen hours a week, and they were struggling to balance their growing business and their commitment to the church. “I would tell people by accident that my husband worked for the church, because he was spending 15 hours a week doing the youth group stuff, and they had like levels of volunteering, and you climb the levels, but you didn't get paid for it. And it put a lot of strain on, you know, most of these people didn't come from money, didn't have money, and they're giving their time away. And I know for us, before our tithing journey, we were specifically pulled aside and told that we needed to start tithing if we were going to continue being in the volunteer position. And here we were, we were broke as anything, and my husband's giving 15 hours, I'm with the kids so he can be there. And then we're being told that we're not tithing enough. Again, I respect their beliefs, but it was heartbreaking.”[258]

She did not know it at the time, but these tensions were building toward an implosion. A member of their youth group approached them and asked to be called by a new, chosen name, as they identified as male. “I also believe that God doesn't make mistakes,” she said. “And if God makes someone a certain way, that's not a mistake, you know?” Jessie and her husband began using his preferred name, and advocated for him within the church. As a result they were asked to step down from their positions. I will quote at length here:

> So when we had that breakup of sorts I felt really, really lost. Because I felt God telling me like, I felt him telling me a while ago I was supposed to go back to seminary, I was supposed to be writing all these things. And I had this, like, perfect church in my head.

[258] Synan.

> And because of our specific beliefs, specifically about transgenderism, if we're just going to be honest about it, we were asked to step down and it was a really really hard, and I don't speak ill about this church, like the church had the best intentions, like they're a fantastic church that does amazing things, and none of this is about that church in specific you know, they had things they wanted to help uphold upheld [...] And so we just felt lost for a long time.

They now attend a Methodist church, and while she is happy with their theology and their politics, she does miss the culture of the nondenominational church. But as she has begun to heal from the wounds of that breakup, she has found new hope. "I think the best thing for me is just how welcoming and open it is. Like, you know, we see signs in town of churches that say All are Welcome. And it's like, really? Are all actually welcome? And this is just a place that there's no question about it," she said. "It's just, it does feel like family at this church. And it's a pretty new experience for us that we haven't had yet at a church."[259]

Conclusion

According to Kate Bowler, "In effect, conservative women were driven into the marketplace because of the restricted organizational roles they could occupy in their home churches."[260] Women seeking to earn money through content creation must learn to master multiple fields. They must learn to market themselves to consumers and brand partners which includes learning SEO and social media management. As Jessie explained it, "the hardest thing about Christian blogging is that there is not one part of it that you get overnight. There's actually not even one part of it that you get in a year. Like, usually websites take a year to even just start

[259] Synan.
[260] Bowler, 5.

to see SEO. And so if you're waiting a whole year just to see one thing get onto page one, that can be really discouraging for people. And you know especially, this is an Evangelical movement, and so you're going to get a lot of spiritual enemy attacks. And so if you're getting constantly attacked, telling you you're not good enough for this, and then you don't see anything for a year on social media where it takes a year to build, to start building your business platform, it can be a really, really tough, tough world."[261] They must also reconcile the realities of the market with their perceptions of themselves as content creators. Does catering to the market, which often means abandoning beloved projects for ones with broader appeal, change their self-perception as creatives and women called to serve for a purpose?

Each of these four women arrive at different self-conceptions as content creators. Jamee incorporates self-help ideas into her business, making it particularly marketable on Instagram. She is also able to use her personal experiences, both from her own marriage and from her parents' divorce, to inform the direction of her company and lend credence to it. She is one of what Bowler calls "veterans of life itself"[262] women who are able to leverage their experience and positionality as professional non-professionals, thus making her relatable while keeping her within the bounds of non-threatening religious femininity.

Similarly, Amberly has cultivated an audience by downplaying her Mormon identity in favor of her Christian identity. Though she is trained in Family Studies she frames her writing and advice through her own relationship, utilizing her expertise in a way that emphasizes her role as a wife first, then a mother, and then a practitioner. She has found her niche within the Mormon church because she is comfortable inhabiting those roles in that order. Women read her blog because she presents information about sex, intimacy, and relationships, including brand

[261] Synan.
[262] Bowler, 155.

partnerships, from the perspective of a conservative woman, thus fitting into the same niche as self-help authors like Marabel Morgan or Helen Andelin.

LeeAnn and Jessie maintain multiple online platforms. They both teach others how to optimize and monetize their work, with LeeAnn focusing on SEO and blogging while Jessie teaches social media marketing. They also run Christian blogs which utilize SEO to answer commonly asked questions about the Bible, prayer, and Christianity. Even though they have taught themselves these skills and built successful and sustainable businesses both women speak of their work and in some cases themselves in terms which downplay their own skill and significance while emphasizing their religious calling. As Evangelical women, they have both experienced pressure to adhere to accepted gendered positions, and deferred significance offers some degree of cover in a patriarchal system.

Chapter 3: Living the Lifestyle

Chapter Summary

This chapter will focus on lifestyle influencers. I have chosen to avoid the label of "Mommy Blogger," as it is often applied pejoratively or dismissively to any blog written by a mother. I have chosen to identify blogs within this category as lifestyle blogs, as I feel it more accurately represents what bloggers within this category are doing; they are creating and marketing a lifestyle. This is the largest of the three categories under consideration, with the broadest internal diversity of focus. An overlapping group focuses on homemaking and marriage, and blogs within this subgroup tend to be more overtly conservative, and are more likely to blend in political posts. There are also those, like Mormon influencer Karim, who we will hear from below, who move between fashion and more general lifestyle content, which can include parenting, marriage and family life, and homemaking. But all within this grouping create content which presents a carefully curated and crafted lifestyle, and incorporate elements of personal narrative and life tips for the reader.

Women in this category have found their niche through writing about a variety of topics related to personal and family life such as fashion, parenting, health and wellness, and travel. Although, as mentioned above, these categories have porous boundaries, and it is not unusual for someone who is primarily a fashion blogger to occasionally write about parenting or (more rarely) politics or feminism. Within this category are several who have parlayed blogging into lifestyle brands and fashion lines, such as Rachel Parcell, a Mormon blogger who now has a fashion line sold exclusively at Nordstrom. While not all of the bloggers in this category have that level of mainstream success, many of them have been able to make content creation a full-time job.

Judith Butler often speaks of gender in theatrical terms, and fashion blogging provides a particularly apt lens through which we can examine the styling of a gendered body. Many, such as Mormon content creator Jesse Espinosa incorporate modesty into their personal branding. Modesty is an outward signifier of inward piety. All of the women featured in this chapter have built their following by creating content which incorporates religious doctrine into daily life, making practical applications and adaptations to display a religiously faithful lifestyle.

Fashion blogs are a fascinating subset of lifestyle blogs. In addition to the sacred garments worn by most devout Mormons, women's appearances are regulated by both official doctrine and pressure from within one's own peer group. In the guidelines for missionaries there are specific instructions[263] for sleeves, necklines, and pantyhose. The task of maintaining a modest appearance is shared by both men and women. In fact McDannell argues that "The Mormon style required men to adopt practices and virtues that much of American society attributed to the 'ladies,'"[264] but women are placed under specific and visible strictures to prevent themselves from causing Mormon men to "stumble" into temptation and sin. In a devotional address to Brigham Young University-Idaho in 2013 Elder Tad Callister, a member of the LDS Church's Presidency of the Seventy and a General Authority said that "The dress of a woman has a powerful impact upon the minds and passions of men. If it is too low or too high or too tight, it may prompt improper thoughts, even in the mind of a young man who is striving to be pure."[265] Women are tasked with maintaining their own morality as well as that of their brothers in the faith, which places the onus for sexual sin on the shoulders of Mormon women.

[263] The official Church provides a style guide for both male and female missionaries, with written instructions as well as a photo series depicting examples of acceptable outfits. These comments reflect guidelines as they exist on the website as of Spring 2020.
[264] McDannell, 84.
[265] Callister, Tad. "The Lord's Standard of Morality." *Ensign*. March 1, 2014.

The act of creating and maintaining one's identity as a Good Mormon Woman is thus centered on the performance of modesty. Many content creators also focus on modesty as a means of re-affirming the role of Mormon women as threat to and protectors of male virtue. In doing so they are publicly re-enacting and re-affirming their identity as a Good Mormon Woman.

Christian fashion blogger Jeanette Johnson explains how she found her calling to be a Christian fashion blogger, after struggling to reconcile her faith with fashion:

> The tag [on the pair of jeans I was holding] said "God Loves You." It sucked the wind right out of me, and hot tears rolled down my cheeks. It mattered to Him. It really, truly mattered, because my heart matters. All of it. All of the tiny little things that make up my heart, including the creativity and joy in style that would eventually become a career in fashion. He rejoices in what your heart rejoices in, the same way you would with your own child.[266]

Johnson felt that there was a gap in the market for fashion bloggers who also followed tenets of the Christian faith such as frugality and modesty, and she was proven correct. Since the launch of her blog in 2010 she has gained over one million consistent followers, and recently published a book about faith and fashion.[267]

In this chapter I will explore how these lifestyles are created and maintained, and will delve more deeply into how these presentations create (and naturalize) a wholesome and amiable identity for Mormon and Evangelical women which is overwhelmingly white and middle-class. I assert that this demonstrates one of what Foucault calls the technologies of power; that it is diffuse and circulated from below to create and maintain normative societal structures. I will

[266] Johnson, Jeanette. "Fashion and Faith - Can They Coexist?" J's Everyday Fashion. February 18, 2016. Accessed February 16, 2018. https://jseverydayfashion.com/home/2016/2/17/fashion-and-faith-christianity-can-they-coexist.
[267] Faye Penn, "Can You Be a Fashion Blogger and a Christian at the Same Time?" InStyle.com, June 2, 2017, accessed February 16, 2018, http://www.instyle.com/fashion/can-you-be-fashion-blogger-and-christian-same-time.

show that these certain kinds of lifestyle blogs help to create and maintain these hegemonic norms, presenting an idealized feminine signifier without a "true" signified, thus contributing (wittingly or not) to the creation of a white-washed middle-class religious identity. In the following pages we will meet four women, each of whom has built their brand around different types of lifestyle content.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

R. Marie Griffith, in her book *Born Again Bodies*, argues that the culture of shame and body-policing in modern American Evangelicalism is something inextricably tied to the wider American culture's shifting beauty norms, and not something divinely mandated or divinely inspired. She draws on ancient body theology, starting with Thomas Aquinas, to give support to her argument that an emphasis on the "flesh" as negative contributes to the fat phobia and bigotry that is inherent in such a mindset, as well as revealing the harm that such beliefs cause to religious adherents. Her central concern is to uncover "the multiple ways in which body type, among other assorted possible signifiers, has come to seem a virtually infallible touchstone of the worth of persons about whom one knows nothing else, as well as the value-indeed, the deepest truths-of one's own self: a vital component of subjectivity."[268] She challenges the idea that there is a specific "right" body type, or that God has any preference for physical bodies, and shows that flesh-hatred has been an issue throughout Christian history, but that the particular American incarnation of consumerism has contributed greatly to the ways in which Christians in America hate their flesh.

[268] Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 7.

Flesh hatred and shaming have real world consequences for young women within the Evangelical movement. Evangelical men rationalize to themselves and others that if the women around them were able to somehow conform to their mythical idea of a "right" female body they would no longer be driven to sin. This belief is imparted to and internalized by Evangelical women, who then feel the shame and "wrong-ness" of their bodies. Moreover, when blame for sinful thoughts rests solely on the female body, blame for sinful actions follows as well. Thus, women are encouraged to perform a specific type of religious femininity.

Griffith also addresses diet, exercise, and health claims. Modern Latter-day Saint discourse in many ways mirrors that of Evangelicals, but with an added twist: many Latter-day Saint diet books base their directions around the passage known as the Word of Wisdom, in which Joseph Smith laid out dietary guidelines for his followers which include things such as prohibition on tobacco, alcohol, and so called "invigorating drinks" such as coffee or caffeinated tea. The Word of Wisdom is in this way akin to dietary laws in the Hebrew Bible and is used in Latter-day Saint diet literature as a roadmap toward "holy" eating.

There is intense pressure on Latter-day Saint women, particularly young women, to conform to traditionally modest beauty standards, and several of the women interviewed by Griffith explained that they perceived the drive to perfect one's body, to beautify and conform one's flesh, as tied to the Plan of Salvation. Lynn, a young LDS woman interviewed by Griffith, reported feeling such pressure in a Sunday Young Women's Hour. "We talked at length about being appealing on the outside (to attract men as well as non-members) and so had weekly lessons in make-up application, hair styling, and food preparation (which instructed us both in

how to make pies and pastries, and how to avoid eating them...or eating very little of them yourself)."[269]

Being overweight is equated with being body-obsessed, with a lack of willpower, and with sin. Here we see again the mind-body dualism which says that too much flesh, being too enfleshed, is the incorrect state for a proper Christian. One must conquer and master one's flesh if one is truly to achieve spiritual heights. The body is an obstacle that the Christian soul must conquer, and modern diets are like a Pilgrim's Progress. The goal is to conform an othered body to the acceptable forms (which, though not stated outright, are almost uniformly represented as White, Able-Bodied, and Middle Class). As might be expected women are the target audience for this Christian diet culture, which is really just naturalizing modern beauty standards and ascribing spiritual significance to physical attractiveness. But women are still seen as the most likely to fall into temptation, this time in the form of overeating, and they are also likely to take their husbands down with them. Once again Eve is tempting Adam away from God with food.

Eating, and overeating, is framed as a moral failure, and one that is written upon the body for all to see, a modern phrenology. These new theological discourses are not happening necessarily from the pulpit on Sunday but are present throughout the culture of both Evangelicalism and Mormonism. While few influencers, even those who focus on health and wellness like Maryruth, would make these claims explicitly, many of the women I spoke with expressed that they were constantly aware of how their bodies were perceived by their audience, and that they curated their presentation in order to communicate their spiritual fit-ness.

Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Volatile Bodies*, sets out a goal of understanding the body as a whole, not split up into parts, and to do this she must dismantle and expose narratives of

[269] Griffith, 196.

mind/body dualism, for, as she says, "Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds."[270] She sets out to do a Foucauldian genealogy of mind-body duality, and in doing so she explores how certain technologies of power, such as sexology and science, have supported these narratives. In this genealogy, she is seeking to uncover the ways in which the body has been colonized through "the discursive practices of the natural science,"[271] in particular biology and medicine. These fields are ripe for such an uncovering because they are seen as fundamental, objective, and without bias, and they present bodies as passive, pre-cultural, because it supports this naturalizing narrative. Bodies are neither pre-cultural nor a-historical. Grosz argues there is no "real" body which exists outside of cultural context, and efforts to find a "true" or "natural" body instead naturalize cultural inscriptions. We will return to Grosz and her theories of inscription and orientability below when discussing health influencers.

As this category, perhaps more than any of the others, relies on presenting the "correct" body, whether one is a fashion and lifestyle influencer like Karim and Jesse or a health and lifestyle influencer like Maryruth and Sarah, it is important to revisit the category of race, and how whiteness becomes encoded into lifestyle influencing. As previously noted, the type of identity creation which is being performed online by prominent influencers can have a centralizing and consolidating effect. As Foucault notes when talking about the institution and creation of the individual, the subject, as a demographic, narratives which legitimize power structures are themselves then naturalized and invested with authority in a mutually affirming cycle.[272] Thus individuals are both the effect and the vehicle for power. When one style of subject gains prominence and thus legitimacy that body becomes naturalized, presented as a

[270] Grosz, vii.
[271] Grosz, x.
[272] See Chapter 5 in "*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*."

prediscursive "natural" norm. In naturalizing certain subjects as a norm or ideal we hide or bury the societal forces which allow for one type of subject to gain prominence, instead presenting a unified, natural ideal.

When it comes to Evangelicalism and Mormonism, the women who are most likely to gain national or international prominence are overwhelmingly white and heterosexual.[273] As discussed above, women who want to gain and maintain a large audience within these traditions must carefully navigate conservative complementarian gender ideologies. This is true for those who want to participate in ministry and for those who are not in ministry but want to build an audience among the faithful. In addition to exercising deferred significance, women can make themselves acceptable by being legibly feminine within their traditions thus covertly signaling that they are abiding by, and conforming to, gendered difference. Kelsy Burke and Amy McDowell, in a study of Evangelical women leaders, propose an additional way. According to Burke and McDowell, "White women deploy gendered racial ideologies to navigate the constraints of conservative institutions."[274]

What are these racial ideologies, and how are they gendered? Religious scholar and Ethicist Katie Cannon observed an inherent contradiction in the fundamental theology of white Christianity, "How could Christians who were white flatly and openly refuse to treat as fellow human beings Christians who had African ancestry?"[275] In this study she unearths the core assumptions being made by white Christians, which are then taken to be natural and universal,

[273] For a demographic breakdown of prominent women in Evangelicalism please see Kate Bowler's "*The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities*" Appendix II and III.
[274] Burke, K., & McDowell, A. "White Women Who Lead: God, Girlfriends, and Diversity Projects in a National Evangelical Ministry". *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 7(1), (2021). 86.
[275]Cannon, Katie G. "Moral Wisdom in The Black Women's Literary Tradition." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 4 (1984): 171.

but which fundamentally do not account for the actual lived experiences of people of color in America. Her first key point is that white Christians assume that what works for them will work for everyone, but that racism disrupts these simplistic systems in ways that white Christians do not often see or acknowledge. For Cannon, dominant Christian ethics is founded upon the idea that people are fundamentally able to make decisions regarding their own fate and destiny, and that moral agency is free and self-directing. However this is not always true, particularly for black women who are at the axis of multiple strands of oppression. Their agency is heavily restricted, and she argues that "Black women's analysis and appraisal of what is right or wrong and good or bad develop out of the various coping mechanisms related to the conditions of their own cultural circumstances."[276]

The type of ideology that Cannon is addressing is invested in the myth of the self-made individual, who through hard work, determination, and prayer is able to become successful. Because these key assumptions about the nature of both American society and Christianity are taken by the dominant group (white Christians) to be both universal and, in some ways divinely mandated, any push back against this narrative is often seen as an attack upon the faith itself, rather than an acknowledgment that, as Foucault would say, certain knowledges and ways of knowing are subjugated in order to maintain such naturalized narratives. At various points in their respective histories both American Protestant Christianity and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have employed what Joanna Brooks calls "an allegedly canonized mish-mash of Old Testament genealogies"[277] to justify particularly anti-Black racism, often arguing that people of African descent had inherited the curse of Cain, or were descendants of Ham, thus

[276] Cannon, 175.

[277] Brooks, Joanna. *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence*. Oxford University Press (2020), 10. For further discussion of how Protestant Christianity more broadly employed such theories please see "Protestant evangelicals and recent American politics" by Mark Noll.

inheriting his curse for disobedience.[278] Such claims were used to justify slavery in the Americas and the exclusion of Black Mormons from the priesthood.

Burke and McDowell identify the ways in which white women accept and participate in racist hierarchical systems in order to attain and maintain some level of authority or power, thus reinforcing those hierarchies which will continue to harm and exclude women of color. Not only did the white women in their study overwhelmingly occupy positions of authority, they employ what Julie Ingersoll calls creative blending, melding elements of choice feminism with conservative gender ideology[279] which then emphasizes the role of personal choice in determining one's future rather than acknowledging societal barriers, because those barriers are invisible to them due to their privileged position. By naturalizing one bodily narrative they disguise the fact that it is based on the white experience, which is not and cannot be universal. As Mark Noll points out, "institutional Evangelical theology has never fully grasped the depth and prevalence of racism in America, nor understood the extent of social transformation required to root it out."[280] We can see these dynamics at play in the diverse experiences of the four women in this chapter, and the ways in which a white body is understood to be the norm within Mormon and Evangelical spaces.

Kristine Haglund is the former editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and has become a leading voice in online Mormon communities. Her work reaches both academic and lay audiences, and she has unique insight into online Mormon spaces. Of particular interest is her chapter from the book *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*. Her chapter, titled "Blogging the Boundaries: Mormon Mommy Blogs and the Construction of Mormon Identity"

[278] Brooks, 12.
[279] Burke and McDowell, 89.
[280] Noll, Mark A. "Protestant evangelicals and recent American politics" *Journal of American and Canadian Studies* 25 (2007): 13.

deals directly with one of the central tenets of this dissertation, namely the ways in which this category constructs a particular performance of Mormon femininity. Her expertise as both a member of several online religious blogs and a scholar and commentator makes her a uniquely valuable resource. In her analysis of lifestyle/"mommy" blogs, she notes that conservative women are often flattened, rendered one dimensional props for the patriarchy, in mainstream discourse, but that they are far from passive. In fact, she argues that it is conservative influencers who have been adapting the LDS tradition of lay preaching and ministry for a modern, online audience. Similarly, Caroline Kline, who co-edited *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, has also written about the so-called Mormon blogosphere and personally influenced the development of this project.

All acts of gender are public acts, as they are always done with a viewer in mind, even if that viewer is the self, and the body of the religious woman is an edifice upon which the mores of her tradition are carved. This is why former President of the LDS Church Spencer W. Kimball singled out women in his 1951 talk "A Style of Our Own," where he said, "One contributing factor to immodesty and a breakdown of moral values is the modern dress. I am sure that the immodest clothes that are worn by some of our young women, and their mothers, contribute directly and indirectly to the immorality of this age. Even fathers sometimes encourage it. I wonder if our young sisters realize the temptation they are flaunting before young men when they leave their bodies partly uncovered."[281] Here Kimball is attesting to the constitutive power of clothing within gendered performance. Women are conjuring, manifesting immorality in others by doing their gender wrong. Kimball reiterates his point, saying "I am positive that the

[281] Kimball, Spencer W. *Faith Precedes the Miracle; Based on Discourses of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Co., 1972) 163.

immodest clothing worn does have a marked influence upon morals."[282] He then goes on to quote an unnamed police official at length who argues that the way young women dress is inviting sexual assault, and that his unnamed Eastern city has seen a rise in sex crimes as a result. Kimball agrees, saying, "Why will young women, virtuous in intent, set up in dress and otherwise an appearance of daring sexual willingness?"[283] Women thus hold the creative power to shape the actions of others through their gendered presentation. Girls who "keep their lives sweet and pure"[284] act as a check against worldliness, whereas women who "display their sacred bodies to lecherous eyes"[285] not only invite sexual violation but directly contribute to the moral decay of society.

Kimball's speech was instrumental in the development of a distinctive Mormon style, what he called "a style of our own," which eschewed clothing which revealed too much flesh in favor of modest styles which covered, for women, the back, shoulders, and decolletage while maintaining a distinctly feminine mien. Kimball always intended this to be an act of defiance against modernity and secular culture, he encouraged women to vote with their wallets by purchasing from stores which offer modest clothing, and to use their influence in local schools.[286] This point is particularly relevant for influencers who can heed this call and transmit their distinctive style on a global platform. Doing so does require them to carefully curate every aspect of their appearance. In the following sections we will hear from Karim and Jesse, two

[282] Kimball, 167.
[283] Kimball, 167.
[284] Kimball, 168. This phrase, "keep sweet," has been adopted as a motto by many Mormon groups, although it is most famously associated with the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after it was used in the title of a documentary about that group.
[285] Kimball, 164.
[286] Kimball, 165.

Mormon influencers who have wrestled with what it means to be an emissary of this Style of Their Own.

Introductions

Karim Jones: The Come Heres and the From Heres

Karim is a Mormon content creator on Instagram. She is married with four children, and thinks of herself as "mostly a stay-at-home mom. However, I also do content creation on the side, which keeps me busy enough."[287] Though she now lives in Utah her family moved around quite a bit while she was growing up. "My mom raised me as a single mom until I was eight," she explained. "In El Salvador she was one of the early members, her family is one of the early members of the church where she grew up. Then she moved to the States to have me."[288] They lived in San Francisco, California until she was nine, when her mother married her stepfather, who she considers to be her dad. He moved their family to Chicago, where he attended graduate school, and then to New Jersey. For the next several years they moved frequently for his work, but she has fond memories of that time, "we had a very strong church family, and a lot of friends that were in the ward my parents were involved with, there was like a minority of members who were Spanish speaking. And so my parents were very involved in having regular family meetings together with them. I definitely always felt like it was a strong community. Definitely one that I kept thinking like, I hope someday I can emulate this, like I hope someday my kids can have this."[289]

[287] Karim Jones, Interview with the author, September 15, 2022.
[288] Jones.
[289] Jones.

Throughout her life she has struggled to find where she fit. “I think I have a unique kind of background, because I've never really fit into a box. I lived in New Jersey in a very wealthy, affluent area, my dad worked on Wall Street. I had everything I needed and more growing up. So I never really fit in with like, the other Latina girls in my school, right? But I wasn't white. They would say things like, oh, but you're not like them. And I'm like, oh, I am though.”[290] Her mother was from El Salvador, as was her birth father, and Karim was born in the United States. The wards they attended in San Francisco and Chicago had more Spanish speaking members, and she did not feel as out of place. In New Jersey she began to feel the double citizenship so common for non-White people in primarily White spaces. “I feel like I come at it from a different perspective because it's sometimes like people, even now, like people will say things and it's like they forget. And I don't know if it's like the way I look or the way I dress or the way I talk. I mean, I don't have an answer for that.”[291]

For Karim, the church has been a constant, a source of help, companionship, and built in family. In each new city they were able to connect with the local ward and have a built-in community, although increasingly she was finding the culture of each ward varied widely. This continued into adulthood, as she spent several years moving frequently as her husband completed his PhD and postdoctoral positions. She met Chris while they were both attending BYU. She was a freshman, and he had recently returned from his mission. “My dad gave me two rules before I came out to college,” she said. “One of them was: don't go into any caves. And it was because there had just been a death, I want to say even maybe two, from people going into like

[290] Jones.
[291] Jones.

spelunking in caves. So the first rule was don't go into any caves. And the second was do not date a returned missionary. And I fully intended to follow both rules."[292] She did avoid the caves.

After graduating they moved to Virginia in order for Chris to obtain his PhD. Their experiences with the LDS community in Virginia were not quite as positive. "The first week I was there I needed a ride somewhere, to the airport, and someone gave me a ride, like, so welcoming, the southern, charming kind. But one day someone described, they're like, oh, you're a come here. And I'm like, I don't know what a come here is. They're like, well, if you're from here, if you lived here, you're from here. But if you're not from here, you're a come here. And it wasn't nice. Like it wasn't a nice way of saying it. And that's kinda how it felt while we were there."[293] Though they lived in Virginia for seven years, she never really felt like they could put down roots. Ultimately, they left Virginia for Pennsylvania, and then settled in Utah, where they live now. These transitional periods helped her to realize the importance of shared values beyond just religion. In Utah she has been able to once again cultivate a close church family. "I would say very much there is a strong community where we are," she said. "We kind of had to find it and make it. I feel so fortunate that I have a few friends and their kids who have kids around my kids ages. And we all kind of believe the same things, which it truly is miraculous. I don't know how it happened."[294]

Jesse Espinosa: Digital Nomad

Jesse is a Mormon YouTuber and Instagram influencer, but she did not grow up in what she considers to be a typical Mormon family. "I would not consider my family the very like

[292] Jones.
[293] Jones.
[294] Jones.

picture perfect Mormon family," she said. Her mother had been born in Utah and raised nominally Mormon but fell away from it when she moved to California. She married a non-member and had Jesse's older brother before getting divorced. Not long after that she met the man who would be her second husband and Jesse's father. As Jesse explains it, "my dad never had religion in his life. He had been through two marriages prior. So when my parents got together, they had, well, my mom got pregnant with me first and then decided to get married, which is very untraditional. And so a few years after I was born my mom started going back to church just because she wanted kind of more family values in the home. And she was already familiar with that church, with the LDS church."[295] Her father also converted, and they have been active members ever since. She grew up in Redding, California,[296] a rural, medium sized city approximately two hours north of Sacramento. She explained that while this area does not have the same level of LDS presence as somewhere like Utah or Idaho, "I would say we're a very strong denomination in my area alone, which is kind of an area that probably has about 140,000 people with like, the main city, and then like the sub-cities around it. There are two stake centers, which means that there's typically I think like six full wards that meet, so I don't know the full math on that. But that's several thousand members that would be in the area, which is very substantial."[297]

Redding is home to Shasta Bible college, Simpson University which is a private liberal arts college affiliated with the Christian Missionary Alliance, and the Bethel School of

[295] Jesse Espinosa, Interview with the author, September 14, 2022.
[296] In the interview Jesse and I spoke at length about this area of Northern California, because it is a small town and also where I grew up. There may be occasional references to this region which she does not explain or elaborate on, knowing that she was speaking to someone familiar with it. In those instances I will add any necessary context.
[297] Espinosa.

Supernatural Ministry.[298] Growing up Jesse attended a private Baptist high school in Redding called Liberty. Her parents wanted her to attend a religious school, and Liberty was the only option. As a result, Jesse often felt alienated from her classmates. “I very much tried to kind of blend with the other kids,” she said. “Like, we prayed all the time at school, and so like I would start my prayers Dear Jesus, like the other kids did. Because I didn't–I was like, oh, Dear Heavenly Father, that sounds weird. Like, I don't want them to think I'm weird.”[299] Liberty was and is a fairly conservative Baptist school with Evangelical leanings, and she was one of only a few students who followed a different faith tradition. Many Evangelicals do not consider members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be Christian, and there were several instances where Jesse felt that othering. “We had Bible class every day, and I had a particular teacher literally segregate us by going and standing in the corner–this sounds so funny today, but like God, 10 years ago...he was like, okay, everyone who believes in the Bible and just the Bible goes down in that corner. And that was like the majority of the class. That was like 25 of the kids, that one that corner, and then everybody who believes in the Bible and another book, go stand in that corner.” She was not the only one singled out, but she felt the spotlight keenly. “So I walk over to my corner with, there was a Sikh kid, so we were over there. And then it was like, if you believe in just another book, there was no one over there. And if you believe in nothing, there was kind of one atheist kid, that he was over there. I'm not sure about his story, but it was very interesting. But yeah, and I remember being like, wow, this is really lonely. And this is kind of awkward.”[300] She can now reflect back on these experiences and recognize the

[298] Bethel Church is a highly influential Pentecostal church with a global presence. They have a headquarters in Redding, and their non-accredited school/seminary offers intensive courses in ministry and Biblical studies for residential students.
[299] Espinosa.
[300] Espinosa.

dynamics at play, but remembers feeling upset at the time. When she graduated she decided that she would attend college in Utah.

She attended Brigham Young University-Idaho for a year, and then left to serve her mission in Peru. After her eighteen months of service were completed she came back to Redding, where she reconnected with the man who she would shortly marry. He also was just returned. After getting married she finished her education at Utah Valley University, graduating with a degree in Communication and Media Studies. Jesse has been successful as a content creator in part because she is highly motivated, something which is evident in other areas of her life as well. "It's really funny," she said. "So whether it be right or wrong, I take a lot of pride in the fact that I have very much followed a plan. It's definitely kind of the steps that not only does the church and the religion kind of present, but also kind of society as a whole, like, you graduate high school, you go to college, and you get married, like those are kind of the steps. I feel like the timeline is just a little bit more rushed when you are a member of the church. So I was married at twenty-one, I graduated college when I was 24, I served a mission at 19."[301] Her plan has led to a career in social media (both in front of and behind the camera), and has afforded her the option to become a digital nomad. When we spoke they were living in Mexico, and over the last few years had stayed in many other locations around the world.

Maryruth Dilling: It's All in the Gut

Maryruth had to make her own way to religion. Growing up she would attend sometimes with her maternal grandmother, "when I was a child, I went to one of those nondenominational Pentecostal type churches with–mainly with my grandmother. My mother and father rarely

[301] Espinosa.

attended church. They would go through little periods of time, they would go for a short bit, but nothing consistently."[302] As an adult she slowly stopped attending. Her husband was not really religious, although he was willing to attend with her. Her first pregnancy was the catalyst which prompted her to find a new church. "I'm like, this child is going to be raised in church, no ifs, ands, or buts about it," she recalls telling her husband. "I don't care what you say, this is what is going to be happening. And she was about six months old, when I was puttin' my foot down."[303] They received several invitations to attend a Seventh Day Adventist Church, and though she was initially hesitant, "The first time [we were invited] I asked my grandmother about it, you know, the one that took me to church all the time, and she said, oh, stay away from those people. And so I tossed it. This time, I called and I asked questions. And I started going, and that was in the spring of 1984. And I joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church at that time, and I have remained in that church since."[304]

Now, as the mother to four adult children and grandmother to ten grandchildren, she is still passionate about her denomination, and glad that she was able to raise her children Adventist. "What I like best is that you know exactly the beliefs that are taught," she said. "And you know where they're found throughout the Bible. There's none of the traditions of men mixed in. It is- I can, every one of my beliefs, I can pick up this Bible. And I can prove it from Genesis to Revelation over and over and over. And that is why I still attend this church. And that's what I like about it."[305] Like many Seventh Day Adventists, Maryruth believes that we are fast approaching the end of the world and the second incarnation of Jesus Christ, which colors her view of the world. "I mean, it's not- everything is not perfect," she said. "I mean, the time we

[302] Maryruth Dilling, Interview with the author, February 15, 2022.
[303] Dilling.
[304] Dilling.
[305] Dilling.

live in, we know- we know that, you know, this is all going to be over soon. And- we see signs of that. And so there are challenges, but we have a special purpose, and if we focus on that purpose, then God continues to lead us."[306] She has made it her mission, in whatever time the world has left, to "educate, challenge and encourage people on their path to improve mental and physical wellness as they make lifestyle changes"[307] through her blog Kindling Dreams and her series of devotionals.

Maryruth calls herself a natural health professional, and uses her blog to share information about natural remedies. "The thing is," she said, "we are not- our physical health is linked to our spiritual and mental health, okay? So, if we are sick physically, it negatively affects our mental wellness, and our spiritual wellness."[308] Her particular brand of natural health and healing seeks to address sickness in each of these three areas. I will quote at length here:

> Most of our immune system's in the gut, most of your neurotransmitters are made in the gut. Okay, so neurotransmitters are what you need for a healthy brain, and mental wellness. Your spiritual frontal–the will is in the frontal lobe. So it's all linked. And if we have brain fog because of what we're eating, then we're not going to be able to comprehend when we read the Bible. We are not even–I mean, when I, in my brain fog days, I had trouble even praying, because I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't remember what I was saying. And my mind would just drift off and then come back five minutes later, oh, yeah, I was praying, you know? So our spiritual health is linked to mental and physical health. So as I–when I work with people, I address the whole body. And I teach that it all blends. It's like a three-legged stool, okay? If one of those stools are short,

[306] Dilling.
[307] Dilling.
[308] Dilling.

shorter than the others, you're going to wobble and you're not going to be very stable, health-wise: mentally, physically, spiritually. It doesn't work.[309]

Sarah: Uneasy Egalitarian

Sarah[310] had a plan. She did a bachelor's degree in English, and then moved abroad to teach English as a second language while also doing mission work. She had grown up in an Evangelical/Pentecostal church and felt called to serve. "I think when I was growing up, I didn't see any difference between men and women in the church because the church I grew up in, I regularly saw women preaching."[311] It is not uncommon for both men and women to preach or serve as pastors in many Pentecostal denominations. It was not until she got to college (Sarah attended a conservative Christian university) that she first encountered pushback against women in ministry. "And so there I learned, or I realized, I guess, that there are a lot of different perspectives on women in the church, in ministry [...] And then I guess I had to learn that well, there's actually a lot of–I don't know, what I would call misogyny, but what others would call complementarianism, or just biblical womanhood or something."[312] This was a culture shock for Sarah. She had felt, previous to these experiences, that complementarianism was confined to the home and family structure. "I think I sort of had this idea growing up that it was more in the family, like the idea that women should honor their husbands, that the husband is the head of the family. And I did have that understanding. But I didn't realize it was also part of church ministry and everything until I–well, I guess, had more experience with different church denominations."[313]

[309] Dilling.
[310] Sarah has chosen to be identified by a pseudonym.
[311] Sarah, Interview with the author, January 26, 2022.
[312] Sarah.
[313] Sarah.

Ultimately, she did still decide to follow through on her plan, and she took a job teaching English overseas. It was during this time that she met and married her husband, also an American living abroad. But she was still struggling with her understanding of gender roles within Christianity. “I've kind of learned that there's also egalitarianism and that was a difficult thing that I had to think through when I started dating my husband,” she said. “Because we had different ideas about complementarianism and egalitarianism. And I think we both had this idea of complementarianism, where the wife is kind of subservient or submissive, at least, to the husband. And I was kind of rebelling against that, because I was like, but I'm an equal person.”[314]

It took many long conversations for Sarah and her husband to find some, albeit uneasy, common ground. “And I think we had a lot of conversations about that when we were dating, and also since we've been married. And we kind of came to the conclusion that it doesn't really matter what you call it, or the name that you give to it. Because especially in marriage, like what the Bible teaches is that each person should serve one another, and each person should submit to one another. So that's kind of the conclusion we came to and that's, that's where we are now. But I would consider myself an egalitarian.”[315]

Life on Display

What is public, and what is private? The women featured here must make daily negotiations about what they share and what they do not. They have built their audience, but now must deal with the parasocial relationships that come from being a lifestyle influencer. What

[314] Sarah.
[315] Sarah.

does it mean to share your life with the public? What, if anything, do you owe your audience? In this section we will hear from Karim and Jesse, both of whom have had to address these questions of separate spheres.

Karim: Big Believer in Boundaries

Karim initially started using Instagram as a way to document her children's lives. Growing up with a single mom in San Francisco, "cameras, purchasing film, getting it developed, like these things weren't happening. I have one photo album, and it's a ragged old photo album of pictures from my childhood up until I was eight. And most of them are like pictures collected from other people that they gave to us that I was like, in the corner of this picture."[316] She wanted her children to have a full record of their lives, to be able to look back and see themselves. "I have this, like, insatiable hunger to document everything," she said. "And even though I've stopped trying to do it when my kids were like, oh, I hate this. Like, I just I want them to have it. I don't want them to feel like they're posing. I don't want to feel like that. But I just want them to be able to have this. So that's what started me on Instagram."[317]

She is a skilled photographer with an eye for composition, but as is common for female content creators, she defers when speaking about her abilities, "I started, like, dipping my toes in trying photography. And I mean, I would never call myself a photographer. And Chris is like 'Karim, you can call yourself a photographer', I guess like, I just, I play it down."[318] She refers to what she does as "taking pretty pictures" which downplays the skill required to build a successful lifestyle account on Instagram, where the competition for followers is fierce. It was

[316] Jones.
[317] Jones.
[318] Jones.

not long before she started getting offers for brand partnerships. Monetization on Instagram is most commonly in the form of sponsored posts or content, where a company or brand will reach out to a creator and build what they call partnerships. The creator will feature the company or product in a set number of posts and will be compensated either with free products or direct pay. These partnerships are one of the main ways that creators and influencers are able to monetize their accounts. Karim has done several such partnerships, but the first one sticks out in her memory. "I'll never forget, my very first thing I did was for this headband company," she said. "And Chris goes, you know this is your first of many, right? And I was like, no. And he's like, no, this is just the beginning. I was like, no, it's not. So I took it, I took these pictures of this headband and, then it's just like, it's all history from there."[319]

She gets many offers, but only accepts a small portion, choosing very carefully which brands she wants to partner with, "it's always been really important for me to pick things that were, you know, very authentic, that would flow well with our family. There's been times where I hadn't done that and just been for the money, and afterwards felt like, that didn't feel good. That didn't feel like me."[320] Some offers are easy to decline, such as when wine or coffee companies reach out,[321] but other decisions have been trickier. "There was an exception I made once, and I actually feel good about it, because I needed to do some research about it." In general she will only partner with a company or brand if she either uses that product or could see herself using it, and it fits with her lifestyle and ethics. In this case, she had to take a step back and consider some broader implications. "At first I was like, no, I cannot do this. I haven't shopped there for years, on purpose. But then I started thinking about, like, who the people are that shopped there. And I

[319] Jones.
[320] Jones.
[321] Both wine and coffee are prohibited by the Word of Wisdom, dietary rules for LDS members.

saw my mom, I saw my young, single mom shopping there. And I thought okay, okay, yeah. And now like, it totally changed my mind set on this company."[322] Choices like this have helped her to decide what she wants her platform to be as she has moved beyond simply creating a record of her family life. She now has to consider the message that she is sending with her posts and partnerships, and consequently what that says about her beliefs. She strives to maintain an account which accurately represents her life, even if some of the edges are smoothed off. "For me it's really important for people on social media to know like, what you see is what you get," she said. "There's not Instagram Karim and real-life Karim. There's–I'm all one person."[323]

In the early days of her account Karim posted frequently about her family and her children, but as her account has grown in popularity, she has had to reconsider what she is willing to share. "I've tried to, I think, in the past few years, be more careful about what I share about my kids, their feelings, or things that they're going through," she said, particularly as her children have gotten a little bit older. She now makes it a practice to share what she is going to post with her older children, and make sure that they feel comfortable being featured. This change was prompted by discussions with her children and by a disturbing trend that she began to see with some of her posts. " I'll look at analytics of things," she said, "and sometimes I'll see things get saved a bunch of times, and I'm like, why is this saved? And it'll be like a picture of my daughter. And there's been times where there's been accounts that have popped up that have pictures of my kids that are like these roleplaying accounts. So I definitely–it's maybe changed how I take pictures and how I share them, as well."[324]

[322] Jones.
[323] Jones.
[324] Jones.

On Instagram there is a contingent of users who will download and save pictures from other accounts like Karim's, usually of children, and then use them to create new accounts where they will roleplay as the child. They will interact with other roleplay accounts, creating in-depth scenarios which, according to Karim, often turn sexual. She has had to deal with multiple accounts roleplaying as her children. "You can report it [to Instagram]," she said. "They haven't always made it the easiest, but they're getting better. The last time it happened to me was a few, several years ago, I had to prove that she was my daughter. So I had to like take a picture of her passport and send it to Instagram to prove that she was my daughter."[325] Situations like this have caused her to make clear delineations between her content and her family. "I'm a big believer of boundaries. Big believer of boundaries, both online and in real life," she said. "Do I worry that there's pictures floating around the internet of my kids? Yeah. That's the scary thing is like, and I–things that I worry about, and I'm like, it's like they don't belong to me anymore. So definitely something to think about."[326]

Karim's story exemplifies the dual role of the online content creator: producer and product. The identity production which she was doing had an unintended audience. When one participates in social media, particularly as an influencer, the viewer is always an unknown element. Karim caters her content primarily to other women who share many of her demographics, but the nature of the internet means that things are never fully private. As Poletti and Rak point out, "We can ask what the 'products' of identity are and whether they are part of late capitalist circulations of goods, and we can find out who produces and who consumes certain kinds of identities."[327] Unlike the women from the previous chapters influencers like Karim and

[325] Jones.
[326] Jones.
[327] Poletti and Rak, 10.

Jesse are the primary product on their accounts. While both will do sponsored content and brand partnerships their lives are the draw for their audience.

Jesse: That South Park Girl on YouTube

In 2017 Jesse had just returned from her missionary service, gotten married, and was looking for the next chapter in her life. Like many in her age group (she describes herself as half Millennial, half Generation Z), she grew up watching YouTube and following her favorite content creators. Now that she was back from her mission, she picked up where she had left off. While on a road trip from Utah to California she was listening to some videos as if they were podcasts, and she got an idea. "On this road trip it dawned on me, like, how funny that there's no LDS YouTubers, that would be so cool. I would love it if someone made videos about modest fashion or like Sister missionary help. Like, there's so much to talk about on that, and there's no one doing it. And I'm like, why don't I do that?"[328] She started her channel, originally called "A Millennial Mormon," later that year. She chose to rebrand as "Sunday Jess" in 2018 after President Nelson announced that members of the church should stop using the name Mormon. Her videos focused on advice for sister missionaries from someone who had been there. She gave tips about what to pack, how to dress, what to do to prepare, and she also gave more general advice aimed at teenage girls, framed as advice from an older sister, but from an LDS perspective. She uploaded at least one video a week for almost five years, and in 2022 had over ten thousand followers.

Her biggest profile bump came from an unexpected place. "The video that really took my channel to like having viral potential, and when I got the surge of subscribers, I made a Mormon

[328] Espinosa.

reacts to South Park episode about Mormons."[329] Reaction videos are a popular genre on YouTube and will often feature someone experiencing an unfamiliar piece of media and capturing their reactions in real time. So-called reaction videos have a high potential to go viral, and the genre has become popular enough that mainstream media outlets like *Esquire* and *Wired* have started to release their own series. In 2016 a copyright dispute between two YouTubers, Hosseinzadeh v. Klein, was heard by the US District Court. This resulted in the first legal definition of the react genre. As legal scholar Gretchen Casey explains, "[the Court] described the 'reaction videos' as 'a large genre of YouTube videos . . . [that] vary widely in terms of purpose, structure, and the extent to which they rely on potentially copyrighted material.' According to the Hosseinzadeh opinion, '[s]ome reaction videos. . .intersperse short segments of another's work with criticism and commentary, while others are more akin to a group viewing session without commentary.'"[330]

Jesse saw the potential niche for a Mormon girl in the react genre, and in 2017 she released the video "A Mormon Reacts to South Park Episode About Mormons." To this day it remains her most viewed video. "I think that video has like 700,000 views or some crazy thing like that," she said. "And every day still, it's been five, four years since I posted it, like 7000 people watch that video a day. It blows my mind. Yeah, so I get to be known as the South Park girl on YouTube."[331] The creators of the television show *South Park,* Trey Parker and Matt Stone, grew up in communities with a large Mormon presence, and have produced several works

[329] Espinosa.
[330] Gretchen L. Casey. *Courts React: Popularity of YouTube's Reaction Video Genre Sparks New Discussion on Fair Use Defense*. 5 Tex. A&M J. Prop. L. 601 (2019).
[331] Espinosa.

which either use the faith as a setting (like their popular Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*) or lampoon it, as in the episode which Jesse reacted to.[332]

YouTube requires creators to hit a certain viewer and subscriber threshold before they can become a YouTube partner and get revenue from ads, and the success of her reaction video allowed Jesse to begin to monetize her channel. From there she did cross promotions on Facebook and Instagram, building distinct followings on each platform. Currently she is most active on Instagram, but that success was enabled by her YouTube following. Monetization gave Jesse a view behind the scenes of content creation, and she has now built a secondary career working with companies to help them connect with influencers. "Even now when my own personal brand isn't my main focus of my life right now or my career, I still get emails from different businesses wanting to work together but 85% of them, it makes zero sense."[333] According to Jesse, many companies employ a scattershot approach, sending out emails to any creator above a certain threshold, which resulted in her getting offers from vape manufacturers and lingerie companies among others, which were in direct conflict with her beliefs. Now that she knows the business, she has been able to build several successful partnerships.

Over the last several years, as she has transitioned away from YouTube, Jesse has been reconsidering what it means to be a Mormon woman with a public platform. She is known as a modest fashion influencer and has found a niche for herself on Instagram posting about modesty and fashion. But as she gets older, her views about modesty have started to evolve. "Five years ago, I would have probably given you the church's standard like all being modest means I don't wear shirts that show my shoulders, I cover my belly, I wear things to my knees. Like that's it. I

[332] These two are not mutually exclusive, of course, as *Book of Mormon* has sparked controversy for its depiction of LDS doctrine and beliefs. Similarly, one of their first films, *Orgazmo*, features a main character who is a Mormon Missionary.
[333] Espinosa.

feel like modesty encompasses so much more [...] Like I believe that the Lord wants his people to be different. And that's a way to do that."[334] However, this expanding understanding of modesty in her personal life is not always translated to her content. "I'm very aware of what other people think," she said. "Like, right now, for example, in my drafts, my Instagram reels, I am filming what I wore this week in Mexico. And every day, like, I filmed a video clip of my outfit, and it's like, okay, there was a day, I think three days ago, where I had like, really short shorts on and a T shirt, because we were going on a hike or something, I don't know, maybe a long walk. And I'm like, I'm not gonna post this because first of all, it doesn't fit within my niche of modest fashion. People are like, what the heck, where does this come from? Like, it's not gonna make sense. And then I also don't want people thinking like oh, that's what she's wearing?"[335]

As a professional content creator who built her brand around her faith, Jesse is constantly balancing what her viewers expect, and what content will do well, with her own evolving views. She knows that she has to present in a particular way in order to maintain her following because she has been on the other side as well. "There's been points in my life as a creator, an online creator, where I've been very judgmental towards other girls, especially other LDS creators, where I'm like, oh, my gosh, I know she's not wearing her garments with that. And that sounds terrible. Like, that's so weird. Like, that is someone's underwear."[336] She is keenly aware of the double-edged sword, which is the parasocial relationship between creator and viewer, and how quickly that can turn. One thing which has helped her to maintain this dual presentation is to put herself in the shoes of her followers. She asks herself, "what did people sign up for? Like when

[334] Espinosa.
[335] Espinosa.
[336] Espinosa.

they follow me on Instagram, if they're not my family friends they're some strange person that I don't know that just came to me for modest fashion, for sister missionary stuff, for church stuff, just following another member. I just think about it from that perspective, like what did they– what did they come here for? Like, does this fall in line with like, I call it buckets of content, when I'm talking about it from a professional standpoint [...] So like, if it's not in those buckets, it doesn't go on your feed."[337]

The Religious Body

Each of the women in this chapter have based their content, to some extent, on the body. Karim and Jesse frequently post about fashion, and have had to navigate modesty on a visual medium which is built around objectification of the female body. In this section we will hear from Karim about her experiences as a woman of color in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and how racist microaggressions have changed the content that she creates.

We will also hear from Maryruth and Sarah, both of whom have found their niches in Christian health. Maryruth incorporates natural health with Adventist theology to create an embodied religious doctrine, and Sarah utilizes SEO to find the best way to reach a wide audience with her version of Christian mindfulness and meditation.

Karim: Room for Error

Karim remembers very clearly the first time, as an adult, that she was confronted by casual racism in the church, "the first time I ever felt like something was off was actually in a BYU ward. We had just been married not that long ago, and we were having a midweek activity

[337] Espinosa.

for all the women, and they were talking about where they would like to live someday. One woman was saying," she paused here to add a clarification, "and we were young, so chances are she's changed her mind. And I really hope we've all grown."[338] Even though she is recounting a painful memory, she wanted to be charitable. She continued, "but she was saying how her husband lived outside. He was like from California, lived outside somewhere, I don't know if it was like inner city, I don't know.[339] But basically, she said, I don't want to live there, because I don't want my kids to grow up with those types of kids. And she had mentioned that he was like one of the few white kids at school, and I just sat there."[340] She was used to being one of the few people of color at such events, but the casual racism of a fellow member, which was not called out by anyone present, was distressing. "And I remember thinking, oh, those are my kids she's talking about. And I remember going home and just crying thinking people don't want to go to school with my kids. And I didn't even have kids yet. But I already felt sad for my kids that I didn't have."[341] She has since encountered many variations on this theme while living in Utah, often from people who think they are being complimentary. I will quote at length here:

> I feel like the strangest things I've heard from members of the church are they like, especially White members of the Church, they love to comment on the color of my skin and the color of my kid's skin. And it's always very well intentioned. Like they'll say things like, oh, your kids have such beautiful skin, but they'll lead with that instead of like, hey, what are your kids' names? Or we're, I mean, it's always like, oh my gosh, your kids have such beautiful skin. I mean, I could count, I'd be a millionaire.

[338] Jones.
[339] "Outside" in this context means not in Utah or the intermountain West.
[340] Jones.
[341] Jones.

> And I remember sitting in the mother's lounge one day, I was kind of fed up, kind of fed up with it. And this mom comes in and she goes oh, your baby has the most beautiful skin. My baby is just well, we're so white. We're just pink. She didn't say pink. She said, we're just so white. And I wanted to be like, I would never go up to someone and be like, your baby is so pink, or why is your baby so white? Like, I would just never do that. And so I think–and it's always members of the church. Like, I can't think of times where it's been not members of the church. It's almost like they try to overcompensate, saying like, I don't have a problem with race because I'm complimenting you on your skin. And I'm even telling you I'm jealous of your skin, so that really means I don't have a problem with race.[342]

According to W. Paul Reeve, in the nineteenth century, as they were fighting for statehood and full American citizenship, the Mormon people had to make strategic decisions in order to become acceptably White. As Reeve explains it, "This was a battle that required them to assert their whiteness in an effort to distinguish themselves from other marginalized racial groups. National racial segregation marred the era of Mormon integration into the American mainstream and left its mark upon Mormonism as well. This period of racial transition for Mormons spanned the first half of the new century."[343] During this assimilationist period the political climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America was such that the Mormon people, when presented with an unexpected ally in President Theodore Roosevelt, dedicated themselves to both his Republican platform and his crusade against what he called "race suicide,"[344] the dilution of White American blood through immigration and declining birth

[342] Jones.
[343] Reeve, 251.
[344] Reeve, 247.

rates. If they could be seen as acceptably White they could be a model for the type of robust American families that he was calling for. Thus began a campaign of assimilation and acceptance which moved the Mormons from the shadowy margins of White America closer to its picket fenced heart.

Through the first half of the twentieth century Mormon leaders quietly curtailed missions work among people of color,[345] and slowly the church's own history of (often uneasy) integration was replaced with what Reeve calls "a new story […] of uncomplicated Whiteness."[346] Becoming White in American meant embracing the inherent racism of American society. For a religious sect to move from being viewed as dangerous to benign requires some level of cultural assimilation, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints took several strategic actions to smooth that transition, which included enforcing a restriction of the priesthood to only White members, which lasted until 1978.

The church was so successful in this assimilation to Whiteness that it came to be a primary association in the minds of outsiders. By the 1970's Mormonism, which had once been associated with sexual deviance and the fear of racial dilution, was now seen as nearly synonymous with Middle Class Whiteness. Even after the priesthood ban was lifted the culture of the church, as Karim's experience shows, continues to be permeated by racism and classism.[347] It can be difficult, for members and non-members, to untangle what is official doctrine and what is church culture, particularly when it comes to the trappings of Whiteness. The doctrine of racial redemption, first articulated by Joseph Smith, in which people of color

[345] Reeve, 253.
[346] Reeve, 255.
[347] In fairness, that is not an isolated phenomenon, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints no longer restricts proselytizing on the basis of race, nor do they segregate congregations.

could be physically adopted through baptism into the family of Abraham which would result in not only salvation but also bestow the believer with "what early Mormons believed was the Abrahamic covenant's distinguishing physical characteristic—white skin,"[348] has fallen out of favor. However, there still exists a call to cultural and social Whiteness as the ideal for members of the church. The life of the church, its leadership, headquarters, and cultural center in Utah still dictate what is acceptably Mormon, and that Mormon legibility continues to evolve in tandem with the political, racial, and cultural identity of Utah and America at large.

For Karim, these frequent experiences have made her hyper-aware of how members of the church interact with her family, and that she remains on the boundaries. As a content creator, she is sharing parts of herself and her life. But Instagram is no longer a place where she can share indiscriminately, and that has changed her relationship to the platform, and to social media in general. "Here's the thing," she said. "Instagram is a thing. It's not good. It's not bad. It's a thing. Social media? It's a thing. It's not bad. It's not good. It's just a thing. People like to say, oh, social media is bad, or all these different things. Social media is doing this and this and that. It's like, it's not, because it's a thing."[349] Now, when she receives comments about her body, or criticism for portraying an idealized version of herself, she no longer feels the need to justify her decisions about what she chooses to share. "I shouldn't have to prove it to you, because I'm not a robot. I'm not a robot. I'm a person just like you are. I have hard days. I have good days. I have messes, I have all these things [...] I think a lot of people think I have it together. I don't, news flash. But like I think people think I just have it together and you know, I shouldn't like put myself down

[348] Stuart, Joseph R. "'A More Powerful Effect upon the Body': Early Mormonism's Theory of Racial Redemption and American Religious Theories of Race." *Church History* 87, no. 3 (September 2018): 773.
[349] Jones.

like, I would say 80% I have it together, the other 20% like I think there's always got to be room for error. All right? So I'm Karim Jones: room for error."[350]

Maryruth: Germ Theory is a Lie

Maryruth has a few topics that she calls her broken records, things that she repeats regularly to her followers. "One of my broken records is that germ theory is a lie, okay? Our whole medical system is built on the germ theory, okay? Even Pasteur said it was a lie at his deathbed."[351] As a natural health advocate, Maryruth has developed or endorsed many alternative theories for healthy living. She subscribes to a version of terrain theory, a scientific theory which claims that the composition of the body (its terrain) is what will cause good or ill health, and that dietary changes can build a bodily terrain that is inhospitable to illness.[352] For over thirty-five years Maryruth has been preaching about natural remedies and germ theory denial. In addition to her blog she runs multiple Facebook groups with titles like "Using Food to Heal" and "Natural Mental Wellness." These groups are where she finds her biggest audience.

Maryruth's brand of natural health is distinct from many others because of her aforementioned tripod or stool approach. She teaches that physical health has a direct spiritual impact. "I truly believe that restored health, could–God promises that if we follow his laws, he will not put any of the diseases that are on the Egyptians, the heathens, okay, because the Egyptians represent heathens. So this is not just the moral law of the 10 commandments, but it's also his health laws," she explains further, "He gives us health laws, you know, nutrition, exercise, water, sunshine, temperance, air, rest, and trust in divine power. And so when we

[350] Jones.
[351] Dilling.
[352] See Benjamin Malo et al., "'If I'm a Naturopath, It's Because I Trust Nature above Everything Else': Canadian Naturopaths' Construction of Vaccination as a Risk Object," *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health* 3 (June 1, 2023): 100203, for more information about germ theory denial and natural medicine.

follow those concepts, along with walking in obedience, then our body for one thing, it does what it's supposed to do, and it heals. But not only that, we heal spiritually and emotionally. And so it's all linked together. And so the closer we follow God's law, the more we are restored in health, because God is seeking to restore us to his image that was marred when sin entered."[353] This connection between physical and spiritual health bears a striking resemblance to the New Thought tradition originating in the nineteenth century. New Thought combined elements of the spiritualist revivals of the nineteenth century with the doctrine of mind cure[354] and health reform movements to create a new embodied theology. In brief, New Thought was a movement which promoted a mind over matter perspective on embodied religion in which correct spiritual and mental practices could produce bodies which were healthy and perfectible. The inverse was also true; a body which was unhealthy (sick, overweight, or in some way deemed unfit) was a sign of spiritual un-fitness and could have a negative impact on one's spiritual life.[355] New Thought often included dietary restrictions and physical exercises as well as suggestions for clothing, hygiene, and sexual activity.[356]

It is helpful here to return to Grosz to examine the ways in which natural health as practiced by Maryruth creates a naturalized body, the ultimate goal of which is to produce compliant bodies, bodies which are moldable and inscribable. Grosz adapts Jacques Lacan's theory of the body as a mobius strip,[357] and that social inscriptions are constantly shaping and reorienting the body. While natural health discourse, in the style of New Thought, offers

[353] Dilling.
[354] Mind cure is a doctrine most famously associated with Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Scientists. In brief, according to mind cure doctrine, one can be in control of one's body and health through proper mindfulness and spiritual attunement.
[355] For further discussion of New Thought please see chapter two, "Sculptors of Our Own Exterior: New Thought Physiques" in *Born Again Bodies*.
[356] Griffith, 91.
[357] A mobius strip is a non-orientable surface with one continuous edge.

strategies to return to a pre-discursive, natural body through diet and lifestyle changes, Grosz would argue that, rather than a passive pre-cultural body which can receive animation she argues that there is no "real" body that exists outside of cultural inscription, that bodies are constituted by cultural inscriptions and representations. Grosz rejects a "mind over matter" approach, instead arguing that bodies are not chambered, not separable, there is no mind or body independent of each other. In rejecting the dualism of mind and body we can better understand Maryruth's ideology. Maryruth believes that bodies must be perfected to be of spiritual use. As she explained it, "I mean, if we eat junk? How can God's Spirit dwell in us in a dirty polluted body? Romans 12:1 and 2 says, 'I beseech you, therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice.' When you look at the sacrificial system, they only brought the very, very best animals–the animal could have no blemish. So we are to take care of our bodies in the best way possible, so we can be of service to God. When we're sick, we cannot fulfill God's purpose for us. We can't, because we're sick. So we have no energy to do anything outside of basic survival. But if we take care of our body, as God wants us to, then we have the ability and the energy to do what God wants us to do- to fulfill our purpose that God has given us."[358] Though she would not use these terms, Maryruth is arguing for an embodied spirituality which rejects the dualism of mind (or spirit) and body and instead sees the body as integral to spiritual development. For Maryruth bodies are moldable, fixable, and perfectible. She sees it as her mission to share this knowledge, and takes every opportunity she can to do so, which is what leads her to blogging and social media.

She speaks of this calling in the same way that she speaks about the impending apocalypse. "I will not argue with anyone, I will not debate," she said, referring to her social

[358] Dilling.

media groups. “But I am a straight shooter. And I know some people find that offensive. And I don't mean to be offensive, but, you know, we're running out of time. And you know, lives are at stake. So if people don't agree with me, and I don't expect people to agree with me–what I want to do, my goal is to get them searching, get them reading themselves, and not just taking what is the common narrative.”[359] This is a frequent refrain in her work, that one must reject or look past common knowledge or understanding in order to find the truth, which has often been purposely obscured by those in power such as the medical establishment, the United States Government, or Satan. “But one thing that I try to reiterate over and over and over again, is that you know, God never forces, even in matters of worship. Anything forced is of Satan, okay? And that's very important to remember, in this time we live in with mandates enforcing everything. God never forces so anything forced is not of God. That is Satanic in origin. And that is something that if I could drill in one truth to somebody's head is that God never forces, and force is always Satanic in nature.”[360]

Sarah: Mental Health, Mindfulness, and SEO

After graduating from college Sarah took a job teaching English as a second language in order to also facilitate doing missionary work overseas. The reality of what that service entailed was not quite what she expected. “When I was teaching English I was just–I was really just busy and overwhelmed with how much work I had. And you know, it was getting stressful. And it got to a point where I was just completely burned out. And I was like, I can't do this anymore. The expectations, the standards, the work, the grading, everything. So, I decided to resign. And I left

[359] Dilling.
[360] Dilling.

my job."[361] She resigned her position in 2019, shortly before the pandemic. The combination of lockdowns, isolation, and burnout took a toll on her mental health. "I was dealing with a lot of stress, and it was really affecting my health," she said. "So I started going to counseling. And when I started going to counseling, I was learning how to manage my mental health and deal with stress, because I guess it was mostly stress and anxiety, because I was having a lot of like, anxious thoughts about what am I doing with my life, like, I don't know, just questioning everything. And my counselor was really able to help me kind of work through these things."[362]

Sarah, who had always loved to write, decided to start a blog where she could share some of the tools for managing anxiety that she was learning in therapy, but with an added Christian perspective. "It's interesting, because I didn't realize when I started that there are a lot of people in that boat especially, who have a similar story to me–people who were in counseling or therapy, and maybe they, their therapist, encouraged them to meditate or to try mindfulness. And–but they're Christians. So I think Christians have a weird thing about mindfulness. And so like, that's the people who are coming to my blog, a lot of people trying to find a Christian perspective on mindfulness and mental health."[363] In Sarah's experience many Christians feel uncomfortable with things like meditation or mindfulness activities. One of her main topics has been helping other Christians to adapt these tools to a Christian practice. "The question I get asked most frequently is probably how do you practice mindfulness as a Christian?" she said. "And I think that is the answer I'm trying to give with my blog. But I still get people sending me messages or emails with questions similar to that. Like just how is mindfulness possible for a Christian or like, how do you reconcile it with the Eastern religion side?"[364]

[361] Sarah.
[362] Sarah.
[363] Sarah.
[364] Sarah.

Sarah is part of a larger movement among influencers to adopt and adapt self-help language and tools. Andrea Jain, an Associate Professor at Indiana University, has been studying the Christianization of meditation and yoga. She explains that many Christian practitioners, like Sarah, are adapting these practices by removing South Asian elements and replacing them with Christian elements.[365] This works to both divorce these practices from their association to other religions (primarily Hinduism and Buddhism) and also to make them marketable to Christian consumers, who are more likely to accept them if they come packaged in Christian language. Sarah has gotten negative reactions from Christians who view meditation in particular as inextricably tied to "Eastern" religion, but through SEO she has been able to find an audience looking for her brand of mindfulness.

From the beginning she knew that she wanted to be able to monetize her blog, and so she got to work doing research. "I started out just watching a lot of YouTube videos about how to start a blog. And like how to buy a domain name and how to, like get web hosting, because I had to learn all of that, just from scratch."[366] She was doing this on her own until she discovered some Christian blogging networks, like the one run by LeeAnn as described in chapter two. "I think for a while, I was kind of trying to just do it all on my own. I was thinking, oh, I don't need anybody's help."[367] But she found the process to be slow going. Finding a mentor changed everything. "I joined her Facebook group," she explained, "most Christian bloggers are women. So I think joining the Facebook groups was really helpful, because I started connecting with other people. You know, at the beginning, I thought I could just do it all on my own. But I think once I started meeting other people, and realizing that they could support me, and that I could

[365] Jain, Andrea. "Can Yoga Be Christian?" *The Conversation*. Last modified June 21, 2017. Accessed May 26, 2023. http://theconversation.com/can-yoga-be-christian-78730.
[366] Sarah.
[367] Sarah.

support them, and we could collaborate and do things together. I think that was really amazing."[368]

Through these networks Sarah learned about SEO, and set out to master it. She knew that she wanted to write about mental health from a Christian perspective, but she also needed to be able to monetize her blog, and that meant getting her posts in front of the largest audience possible. "I guess the biggest consideration that I always start with is SEO, or Search Engine Optimization," she said. "I'm always thinking about what people are searching for on Google, and thinking about how I can answer those questions with my blog posts. So I do a lot of keyword research and keywords, meaning what people type when they search Google, like what they're typing in the search bar. And I try to base my blog posts on those, like the top keywords. But also, I think about topics that are related to what I write about, obviously, so I have to kind of put the pieces of the puzzle together, like how to answer this question people are searching, and also how to relate it to kind of what I know, and my expertise. So I think yeah, once I choose a topic, then I do some research on what other people have written. What kinds of other articles are appearing on page one of Google? How can I compete with them, and how can I write a better article than theirs, you know?"[369]

Conclusion

"Lifestyle" is a broad category which encompasses fashion, parenting, travel, food, and health, among others. But ultimately lifestyle content is about selling an ideal. Kristine Haglund argues that the tradition of lay preaching in Mormonism has led to a modern religion which is invested in praxis, and that theological innovation happens among the laity, as does popular

[368] Sarah.
[369] Sarah.

doctrinal interpretation. With Mormon influencers like Karim and Jesse we can see this working out through the ways in which they interpret religious doctrine, particularly those regarding gender and home life, on the public stage. As women who have incorporated their faith into their personal brand, they must daily negotiate between the image they project and their internal life. Butler, like Grosz, asserts that there is no pre-discursive body, that bodies are brought into existence through discourse and inscription. They are both public and private entities, fundamentally a social phenomenon. There is no "true" inner core gendered identity, but rather "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause."[370] As Butler states, gender is only ever made up of those things which are said to be its results, meaning that a body, and particularly a gendered body, is a public act. The performance is then read, from the surface inward, as evidence for an eternal, stable, or legible identity. Karim and Jesse have both made difficult decisions about inclusion and exclusion as faithful women in the public eye. What they choose to share, and what they choose to conceal, contributes to the public perception of what it means to be a Mormon woman.

Neither Maryruth nor Sarah have made themselves central to their brand, choosing instead to create lifestyle blogs which focus on different elements of health and faith. Both are seeking to create stable and legible bodies. In different ways they are each engaging in what Michel Foucault called bio-power, the power to regulate even the minutest details of life and behavior through technologies of health and pathology. Power is heavily invested in constructing and creating stable and legible bodies to function as subjects. Butler utilizes Foucault's theories

[370] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

of the relation of power to knowledge to uncover the ways in which political ideologies and legal structures have colluded to construct “true” legible bodies, which is helpful for understanding health influencers like Maryruth and Sarah. Both women are incorporating religion with bio-power to market the idea that one can mold or change one's body (and one's mind) to be more: more healthy, more spiritual, and more right.

Chapter 4: Writing While Feminist

Introduction

"I mean, there is a very strong performative aspect to Mormon spirituality," Lisa Butterworth and I spoke several times through video calls, and each time I was struck by her knack for cutting to the heart of an issue. "Because we have such a strong emphasis on, like, community, belonging in community means being the same, being like everybody else. Difference isn't really valued."[371] Lisa was explaining to me how she navigated her faith community and attending church while simultaneously writing for and maintaining her blog, *Feminist Mormon Housewives*. From her perspective there was a lot of value in knowing the system, understanding which boundaries could be pushed and which to stay away from, at least for the time being. For example, "if you wear a blue shirt to church, you're definitely going to hear about it because you're not wearing a white shirt and tie. Or if your skirt is too short, or if you have an extra pair of earrings, right? Like, there's definitely a very strong conformity message. And that's how you belong, and that leads a lot of people to become very performative in their spirituality because that's how you get social capital and belonging, you know?"[372] Lisa understood that she could get away with certain acts of rebellion as long as she also maintained her expected performance. She could write blogs about feminism or sexism as long as she also said (and wore) the correct things at church. Fitting in gave her social cover for when she wanted to ask difficult questions.

Lisa was aware of her performance, what she needed to do in order to be legible as a good Mormon woman, and how far she could push those boundaries before it became dangerous.

[371] Butterworth.
[372] Butterworth.

For many women, properly doing one's gender in this way is an act of survival. Legible religious femininity brings with it community acceptance, social capital, and helps to maintain in-group status and familial relationships. Stepping outside of those boundaries, causing gender trouble, leaves one open to potential ostracism or even expulsion or excommunication. Each of the four women in this chapter have had to tread this dangerous path. For some the main challenge came from wrestling to make a new embodied presentation outside of the bounds of purity culture, others struggled to balance familial obligations and expectations against public activism. But all of them had to contend with what it means to be not just a religious woman, but to be legibly read as one within a religious community.

I will primarily be utilizing the interviews of four women in this chapter, although there were many who could fit here. I have chosen these four because their experiences speak to issues shared by many Mormon and Evangelical feminists; each of these women have navigated the difficult waters of a religious upbringing which left them unsatisfied with their position as a woman within their religious community, and have gone through some version of a feminist awakening which led to deconstructing those gendered norms. This was not without risk, and they all have tales to tell about encounters with religious authorities, discussing difficult topics with family, and ultimately finding community online. In the following section I will briefly introduce each of the four women whose stories we will hear, starting with their familial and religious background in order to provide important context for both who they are, where they come from, and how that has shaped what it means, for them, to be a woman in their religious traditions. Each story will demonstrate the precarity of Mormon and Evangelical feminists, and how the choice to maintain or subvert gender norms will have a direct impact upon their ability to remain within their religious communities.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Mormon feminism did not begin with the bloggernacle or the invention of the internet. Within the Latter-day Saint tradition early practices provided quite a bit of room for women to reimagine their role in society. In the early days of the Women's Relief Society Joseph Smith issued a revelation promising to make the Relief Society "a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day, as in Paul's day."[373]. There was a sense that the world was wide open for men and women, and that important change was always right around the corner. The Relief Society, first commissioned by Joseph Smith in 1842, provided an official structure for women to organize not just to support charitable causes, but also to discuss official and unofficial church doctrine. Emma Smith, who was named the first Relief Society president, utilized her position to discuss rumors of plural marriage, even reading aloud from a letter, written by Joseph, condemning adultery.[374] Emma used her position of authority as both the (first) wife of Joseph Smith and the president of this newly formed society to wield both soft and hard power, hard power to influence public opinion and to soft power to pressure Joseph and other leaders about doctrine.[375]

Women participated in community building efforts, helping to fund temple building, and were also tasked in many instances with holding the community together when men were absent (such as the march of the legion from Kirtland, OH to Independence, MO, or when men were away serving multi-year missions).In addition, there were more female doctors in 1860s Utah than any other place in America at that time, and women in Utah gained the vote earlier than the rest of the nation (although they did lose it before gaining it back with the 19th Amendment).

[373] Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, xvi.
[374] Ulrich, 113.
[375] Unknown to Emma at the time, but six of the original twenty founders of the Relief Society were plural wives to Joseph Smith, and three others were plural wives to other male members.

Women in Utah allied with early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton to agitate for the vote, and were often involved in political action on both the local and national level.[376]

In the time shortly after the assassination of Joseph Smith, when Brigham Young was consolidating power within the LDS Church, conflicts with Emma Smith, the widow of Joseph Smith,, led to him disbanding the society and going so far as to deny Joseph's sanction of it, saying "If you see females huddling together veto the concern, and if they say Joseph started it tell them it is a damned lie for I know he never encouraged it."[377] It was revived, with a more limited scope, in 1867 in Utah, and continues to be a space for women's organizing and leadership within the church. Eliza R. Snow, herself a future Relief Society President, kept the minutes of the original society, which included Joseph's revelation. Eliza held on to her minutes book, despite having to give up so many things as she traveled Illinois and ultimately on to Utah. She preserved the record of that revelation when it was otherwise forgotten. In Utah, when the church elders began collecting Joseph's revelations, she presented it to them: an official church record. At the time they took the record book from her, and recorded a version of the revelation which altered the wording. Her original record was not found until many decades later. But it is because of Eliza, and her writing, that we have Joseph's promise to the women of the Church.[378]

Moving into the modern era, much has changed for Mormon women. While they are still encouraged to marry young, Mormon women now use contraceptives at comparable rates to non-Mormon women.[379] Through the mid-20th century there was a renewed rise in Mormon Feminism, particularly in the 1970s. It was largely academic in nature, and used academic tools to uncover the lived experiences and stories of Mormon women, often utilizing their writing

[376] Ulrich, xii.
[377] Ulrich, 127.
[378] Ulrich, 309.
[379] Mauss, 191.

(journals, letters, etc.) to recover these narratives. In her essay "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency" Catherine A. Brekus claims that the field of Mormon Women's History, as it is now conceived, can be attributed to this group of female scholars in the 1970's who bucked the trends of the (at the time) current field of Mormon History to center women's narratives and experiences using primary sources like letters and journals which had long been overlooked by other scholars. Claudia Lauper Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and their contemporaries revolutionized not only the academic study of Mormonism but also Mormon feminist activism.[380] This same group of women came together to found the magazine the Exponent II, modeled after The Women's Exponent, a women's magazine in early Utah. Several women interviewed for this project write for "The Exponent," which is the blog associated with this magazine.

Even with this groundbreaking work, Brekus argues that scholars and readers of Mormon history "have also found it difficult to imagine women as central characters in their narratives."[381] Because most church histories have been androcentric, and because the work that women do is often not preserved in the historical record, it continues to be difficult to piece together a history of Mormon women's activism and agency.

Mainstream Mormonism is still complementarian. Women have not been granted the priesthood, and women's healing and anointing the sick is no longer sanctioned. The role of "mother" is still seen as one of the primary roles for women, particularly after the 1995 Proclamation on the Family.[382] However, this oversimplifies the complexity of lived faith. As Claudia Bushman explains it, "Using our agency we can choose the type of Mormon we wish to

[380] Brekus, 20.
[381] Brekus, 22.
[382] Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism*, 37.

be: we can choose to be oppressed or liberated by the demands that are offered to us. We are free to determine our relative virtue or vice. We can choose to try to do everything, or to pick and choose from among all the injunctions we receive. As a practical matter, we already choose our level of obedience to the commandments and teachings. We can't obey them all with equal intensity. We all have our favorites."[383] LDS and Evangelical feminists work out their faith day by day, navigating through church cultures which emphasize the paradox of doctrine and personal revelation.

Women navigating Evangelicalism and Feminism face similar hurdles. The late Rachel Held Evans was one of the preeminent voices in Evangelical (and what now would be called "exvangelical") feminism, particularly online. In a blog post from 2012 titled "Confessions of an Accidental Feminist" Evans demonstrates her adaptability as a writer by utilizing the casual tone and style common to Evangelical women bloggers she walks the reader through her feminist journey. Evangelical women's writing often walks a tightrope between being conversational and intimate, and informal and dialectical preaching. In this post she nimbly bounces between these styles, demonstrating what Emily Suzanne Johnson calls deferred significance in order to make herself less threatening to potentially hostile readers. She starts by responding to unnamed criticism and distinguishing herself from other types of feminists, saying that "if these bloggers actually knew me, they would know that I'm more goofy than angry, more hopeful than bitter, and far too disorganized to lead a movement. If they knew me, they would know that I don't fit into their distorted stereotype of what a feminist looks like, that I don't hate men or burn bras or crave power, that I—like most feminists—simply believe that women are human and should be

[383] Bushman, Claudia "Agency in the Lives of Contemporary LDS Women," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* eds. Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 265.

treated as such."[384] By leading with traditionally feminine (and thus non-threatening) traits she is able to head off common anti-feminist stereotypes and situate herself squarely in the camp of the so-called "regular woman."

She continues this non-threatening identification and confessional tone by saying "Truth be told, I feel a bit out of my depth when I speak with 'real feminists,' the kind who have actually studied feminist theory, who have read deeply and broadly about issues related to gender equality."[385] She needs to make the distinction here between "real feminists," those that others might identify with the scary characteristics she lists in the above paragraph, and herself, a novice. This characterization plays into the suspicion of academia and secular knowledge common among Evangelicals while signaling to the reader that she is like them, someone who does not need intermediaries, she has her own ways of knowing, as demonstrated in the next paragraph when she says, "I didn't learn to be a feminist from Margaret Atwood or Simone de Beauvoir. I learned to be a feminist from Jesus."[386] Her subtle allusion to a *sola scriptura* doctrine that does not require thinkers, theorists, or theologians works well to signal to Evangelical readers that she is like them.

Evans, who passed away suddenly in 2019, became a standard bearer for Evangelical women trying to reconcile their faith with their feminism. She began blogging in 2007 and by the time of her death had published four books, written for multiple major media outlets, and was a fixture on social media platforms like Twitter. By sharing her journey from conservative Christian to feminist she illuminated a path for other women to follow. In a post titled "5 Reasons I am Glad I was Raised Evangelical" the reader gets a glimpse into the work that she

[384] Held Evans, Rachel. "Confessions of an Accidental Feminist." *Rachel Held Evans*. Last modified August 29, 2012. https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/accidental-feminist.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid.

was doing, colloquially, to not throw the baby out with the bath water. She highlights things about Evangelicalism that she values, like the emphasis on scripture reading and developing an intimate personal relationship with God. "It's often said that Evangelicalism is characterized by a personal commitment to faith, and this was certainly true of my experience," she continues, "And I think it was because my faith was so personal, so deeply important to me, that I couldn't just let it go the moment I started having questions and doubts."[387]

In modern deconstruction or Exvangelical circles it is uncommon to find an author working to quilt together their Evangelical past with their Exvangelical present in the way that Evans is doing here. She maintained multiple such dual identifications, and throughout her career championed the work being done by other female bloggers who were also sitting astride the fence between blogging and social media and more so-called "serious" writing. Meghan Crozier explained to me just how significant Evans was for Evangelical women, "A lot of people connected over Rachel Held Evans on Twitter, and in her books, and she–I wouldn't say used the word faith deconstruction, maybe she did."[388] Whether or not she used that term, she was one of the first prominent online personalities to document that process. As Meghan explains, "a lot of people would say, like, 10 years ago, they were deconstructing their faith, but they didn't have that word for it, right? Or there wasn't this online community."[389] Evans, among others, created a template for building a supportive online community in which one could question, and even possibly abandon, Evangelicalism.

Bloggers like Evans belong to the tradition of Evangelical feminism in America, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Evangelical feminism as a distinct movement from the

[387] Held Evans, Rachel. "5 Reasons I'm Glad I Was Raised Evangelical." *Rachel Held Evans*. Last modified November 27, 2013. https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/5-reasons-glad-evangelical.
[388] Crozier.
[389] Crozier.

history of Feminism in America more broadly. Many early feminists, like the aforementioned Elizabeth Cady Stanton, melded their feminist activism with their Protestant Christian faith. Thus it is helpful to distinguish the Evangelical movement from other branches of Protestantism[390] when discussing Evangelical feminism. The term "Mainline" for protestant denominations began to appear in the 1960s[391] to distinguish established denominations like the Lutherans, Presbyterians, or Episcopalians from Evangelical, Fundamentalist, and Pentecostal churches. Evangelical feminism as an established ideology comes out of and responds to the Evangelical movement as it is traditionally identified: a Protestant Christian movement arising out of the fundamentalist/modernist debates of the early twentieth century with an emphasis on personal and confessional faith.

Thus Evangelical feminism must address elements of Evangelical Protestantism which are not as relevant to other feminist (even Christian feminist) movements. Pamela Cochran chronicles the history of this movement in her book Evangelical Feminism: A History, and situates its origin in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[392] It was at this time that women like Nancy Hardesty, a professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, began writing about women's liberation from an Evangelical perspective, grounded in Biblical exegesis. Just as Held Evans said that she learned to be feminist from Jesus Christ, Evangelical feminism roots itself within the Bible, thus remaining within an Evangelical framework which emphasizes the primacy of scripture and divine inspiration for its interpretation.

As the Evangelical movement at large was moving towards an alignment with establishment Conservative politics through the efforts of prominent figures like Jerry Falwell

[390] Please see the introduction for further discussion on this topic.
[391] Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical*, 52.
[392] Cochran, 11.

Evangelical feminists were attempting to shift it toward anti-war, progressive, and liberationist political causes. Cochran puts forward the theory that this struggle revolved around the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy, which is the belief that the Bible as a complete text is without error or fault. She argues that Evangelical's debates about Biblical inerrancy "served the purpose of delineating boundaries between themselves and American Protestant liberals, on the one hand, and their fundamentalist ancestors, on the other."[393] Evangelical feminism as a movement is born, at least in part, out of this identity crisis. If the Bible is the ultimate authority, a core Evangelical belief, feminists and other progressives had to show that not only did the Bible speak to modern social problems, but that it offered progressive answers.

To remain within an Evangelical framework meant working within the bounds of biblical inerrancy. Early Evangelical feminists were largely operating within a middle and upper class, white, often academic paradigm, and utilized a hermeneutical approach to interrogate how the biblical text has been traditionally interpreted, and through which interlocutors, in order to present their reading of the text not as an alternative or radical interpretation but rather as a move to get back to the true historical context. This approach fits within the Evangelical belief of biblical inerrancy, because it allowed feminists to critique not the text itself but rather the way that the text had been misinterpreted and utilized by men. Evangelical feminists (sometimes called biblical feminists) emphasize verses like Galatians 3:28 which says (taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible), "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." as evidence for an egalitarian faith.[394]

[393] Cochran, 18.
[394] Sowinska, 171.

Over time, as many of the tenets of second wave feminism have become less radical and have achieved cultural acceptance Sarah Diefendorf says that mainstream Evangelicals have struggled to find their footing after establishing opposition to feminism as a key identifier of (particularly conservative) Evangelicalism, she makes the claim that "for Evangelicals, second-wave feminism was understood as hostile to Evangelical life and values,"[395] but notes that this understanding of second-wave feminism did not necessarily reflect the reality of the movement but rather the amalgamated image presented by leading figures like Jerry Falwell as a threat to so-called traditional Christian values. This perception of feminism as secular, anti-Christian, and "specifically promoting a form of selfishness that detracts from the important focus on the family"[396] has persisted within Evangelical discourse long past the point when most second-wave feminist ideals were considered radical.

Christel Manning, in her interviews with conservative Evangelical women, found that many of them embraced second-wave feminist goals as they related to women's ability to work outside the home, maintain their own bank accounts or lines of credit, or escape from situations of abuse.[397] As these principles have gained mainstream acceptance and been adopted into the fabric of everyday life in America the image of the scary feminist who is anti-Christian and anti-family, has not necessarily faded from Evangelical minds, but has instead come to represent a host of other "secular" cultural issues such as changing social norms around gender and sexuality. The character of the scary feminist thus becomes the placeholder for what Diefendorf describes as "a bundled set of issues to which Evangelicals are opposed, and this imagined other helps define and set the terms and symbolic boundaries for their current debates."[398] This straw

[395] Diefendorf, 1008.
[396] Ibid.
[397] Manning, 85.
[398] Diefendorf, 1004.

feminist is largely divorced from current feminist theory or activism. The angry feminist has become a trope, a meme, and the image is so persistent that most Evangelical feminists have to overcome this internalized anti-feminist perception as they embark upon their own feminist journeys.

Introductions

Lisa Butterworth: Couldn't we at least get typecast?

Lisa Butterworth did not initially intend to start a movement. She began reading other Mormon blogs during a time when she was questioning her own faith, "I was just lonely and needed to have a lot of conversations that I didn't have people in my life that wanted to have. And, you know, when I first discovered blogs, I was like, oh, maybe. And every once in a while, these man-run blogs would talk about something I was interested in, but for the most part I was just like, oh, nobody cares. Where's the good conversations?"[399] When we met, using online video chat, she had just gotten home from her job as a marriage and family therapist, where she specializes in working with women regarding issues of sex and sexuality. She grew up in a Mormon family, the youngest of eight children, and her mother strongly encouraged her to attend college, "it never was even a question to me whether I would go to school or not, neither of my sisters did. In fact, quite a few of my brothers didn't either. Both of my parents—my mother graduated from college when I was six or seven, and she became a teacher. And that's what she pressured me to become, she wanted all of her daughters to become teachers, because that was a

[399] Lisa Butterworth, in conversation with the author, November 19, 2021.

very acceptable profession for a Mormon woman, because you're still nurturing children and your school hours are the same as your children."[400]

She obtained her bachelor's degree and worked for a few years as a special education teacher but left the profession after a few years to stay at home with her children, having gotten married while she was still in school. Throughout the interview she spoke often of her mother's internal struggles with the gendered expectations of their faith. When Lisa was getting married, she received a tearful phone call from her mother, "she was thrilled that I was going to be married in the temple to a good returned missionary. But she also called me on the phone one day and cried because she didn't want me to drop out of college. And she was just sure I was going to because she had struggled through eight children to, you know, collect all of her classes and finally graduate when I was six or seven years old [...] and she didn't want me to struggle like that."[401] It was not a completely unfounded concern, as many of Lisa's friends and roommates dropped out of college after getting married, but she was determined to finish her degree. She recalls brushing off her mother's concerns at the time. "But I just kind of rolled my eyes because here's my mom crying because she's sure I'm going to drop out of college and that wasn't even on the radar for me, I was not gonna drop out."[402] Lisa returned to school to obtain her master's degree about ten years ago, when her children were in elementary school, and has since become a certified marriage and family therapist. But there was a period before that, starting in 2004, where much of her energy was focused on her blog "Feminist Mormon Housewives."

[400] Butterworth.
[401] Butterworth.
[402] Butterworth.

Feminist Mormon Housewives or FMH was one of the most influential blogs in the Mormon bloggernacle, and it started because Lisa had questions, and the male bloggers she was reading did not seem to have answers. She had been struggling with her faith since she left home to go to college, and as she explains it, "the conversations I wanted to have just weren't coming up."[403] The proliferation of internet access made possible that the types of conversations that she was interested in having, but she could not find a platform that was consistently meeting that need, particularly because she was interested in Mormon feminism. After participating in comments and forums she decided to take the plunge, "[I] tentatively was like, well, maybe I'll just write the things and have the conversations, and maybe a few people—like in my mind, it really was just like, maybe just a few of the people that comment over there will come over here, and there'll be a few of us, and we can have all these conversations that are built up in my head."[404] Her first post on FMH, from August 18, 2004, sets the mood right from the outset. It is a humorous rant about the Evangelical Christian video series Veggie Tales, and how there are no good female characters. This topic provides an excellent introduction to the premise and tone of the blog; it addresses a feminist issue with a piece of Christian media aimed at children, making it something that many other readers who fit at least two of the three categories in the blog title would be familiar with. "Even characters that would normally be women are played by men," she wrote. "The elementary school teacher who teaches Bumbly Burg that rumors can be dangerous, a man. Aren't something like 95% of elementary school teachers women? Couldn't we at least get type cast?"[405] Lisa's writing style is incisive and funny, and she invites her readers in with this shared experience of everyday sexism. Though she has stepped away from FMH and

[403] Butterworth.
[404] Butterworth.
[405] Butterworth, Lisa "Veggie Tales Bugs Me – Feminist Mormon Housewives," https://www.feministmormonhousewives.org/2004/08/veggie-tales-bugs-me/.

from blogging in general for almost two decades she was one of the key voices in popular Mormon feminism. She enjoys playing with those anachronisms: feminist and Mormon and a housewife, purposefully defying strict categorization so that she could speak to each as a voice on the fringes. Too religious for mainstream feminists, too feminist for most Mormons, she had to create an other space online, outside of the boundaries of feminism, mommy blogs, or orthodox Mormonism.

April Young Bennett: On a Mission

April Young Bennett knew from a young age that she had a calling, "one of my earliest memories of primary, of our church's children's program, is when I was seven that they had a primary program where they brought in a returned missionary to talk to us about her mission."[406] She recalls being shocked, "she was a she, which was surprising to me. Because until that point, I didn't know that women could go on missions, because everyone I had ever seen who was a returned missionary was a man. And so this was the first time I had ever seen that women go on missions, and that it was a thing women could do."[407] April grew up in a faithful Mormon family in and around the Salt Lake area of Utah. Church was often the center of their lives both religiously and socially. Some of her earliest memories are of social events held in the church buildings, talent shows and plays where her mother was able to share her love of the theater. She recalls fondly participating in roadshows, where "every congregation would put on a show of some sort, it was usually something that they wrote themselves." Her mother would often be involved with planning and directing their performances, which meant that she almost always got to take part. "They were short, like an hour long, 45 minutes long. And then you join up in the

[406] April Young Bennett, in conversation with the author, December 13, 2021.
[407] Young Bennett.

church gym, where there's always a stage, and perform your show for the other wards in the broader area. And they perform yours for you. It was sort of like a festival of plays that were, you know, low quality but fun to put on and put together."[408] For April and her family the LDS church was a nexus around which their day-to-day life revolved. They attended every Sunday, and would regularly have large gatherings of her extended family for family home evenings, a dedicated time for Mormon families to spend quality time together. Immediate families do this once a week, and her extended family would get together once a month throughout her childhood for fellowship and a religious lesson. As she remembers it, "I have hundreds of cousins, so it'd be a big gathering once a month with all of them where we'd have like a church-ish kind of lesson and then play with cousins," these monthly gatherings, while nominally religious in purpose, were a time for play and fun, something that is common in her early memories of the church, and which left a strong impression. "I remember that a lot. I know I went to church ever since birth, every week. But those are my earliest memories, and they're not as religious necessarily."[409]

When she reached the age of twenty-one, she had an important decision to make. At the time women had to wait until the age of twenty-one to serve a mission, whereas men could serve starting at nineteen. April was in college, but she had not forgotten the calling she felt at the age of seven. As she explains it, "If you're a guy, they just, they would just push you out the door. Go, go. But for women it was supposed to be like your own spiritual decision. You were supposed to pray about it, make a decision."[410] She felt very keenly the difference between how male and female missionaries were treated, and that experience would stick with her.

[408] Young Bennett.
[409] Young Bennett.
[410] Young Bennett.

Nevertheless she served an eighteen-month mission[411] in the Dominican Republic, where she was forced to reckon with the history of racist policies within the LDS Church. While the Dominican Republic is ethnically diverse, it is a post-colonial nation and a majority of Dominicans are descended from African slaves forcefully transported by French and Spanish colonizers.[412] The Church was still gaining a foothold in the DR, because as April explained to me, "they actually wouldn't send missionaries there when they had that ban in place for Blacks in the priesthood that went till '78."[413] When she served her mission in 1997 she was confronted with this racist legacy in a way that she could not ignore. She recalls learning at the time that "there were certain countries that were predominantly Black, where they intentionally did not send missionaries because they didn't want to start up congregations, because they didn't want to ordain Black men to the priesthood."[414] April returned to Utah to finish college, and it would still be several years before she embarked upon what she sees as her feminist awakening, but these experiences of witnessing inequality left an indelible impression on her, and added to a growing pile of questions to which she had not found satisfactory answers.

She felt a growing discontent for many years, but it was not until 2011 that she began engaging with online communities who shared some of her questions and concerns. The impetus to find these communities originally came from her husband. As she tells it, "I didn't have anyone to talk to this about except for my husband, who sympathized, but he was getting tired. I could tell it was wearing him out with all of my concerns."[415] He suggested that she reach out to

[411] In addition to the age difference there is a difference in length served for male and female missionaries. In general men will serve for twenty-four months whereas women serve for eighteen.
[412] According to the US State Department as of 2017 approximately 73% of Dominicans considered themselves to be of mixed ethnicity, 11% claiming African heritage, and 16% claiming European Heritage. https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/dominicanrepublic/66141.htm
[413] Young Bennett.
[414] Young Bennett.
[415] Young Bennett.

her bishop, but the idea gave her some qualms. “I do not want to talk to a male priesthood leader about my concerns about male priesthood,” she said. “And he's like, okay, that makes sense.”[416] However he did have another suggestion. “[H]e worked at a hospital, and there was a chaplain at the hospital, who happened to be a member of our faith and a woman. And so he suggested that I talked to her.”[417] She was initially surprised, as she had never met a Mormon woman who was doing that kind of religious work before, skirting the bounds of priesthood authority. They connected, and April was introduced for the first time to the feminist blog The Exponent, where she would become a regular contributor. It was through The Exponent that she became a leading figure in the Ordain Women movement.

Elle K: Feminist Past and Future

Elle cannot remember a time when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and her family’s heritage within that Church, did not play an important role in her life. “I come from a very devout Mormon family,” she said, when asked about her religious background, “I had handcart pioneer ancestors on both sides. So we are Mormon for several generations [...] I also had a relative who was at the Haun's Mill Massacre, which was in Missouri. So that was, you know, a couple of decades or so before the handcarts. But we had some family miracle stories that were passed down, and that pioneer heritage was always really important to us.”[418] Elle grew up in California before moving to Southern Utah, where her family lived for most of her adolescence. Her family were active members of the Church, and like many who come from families who have belonged to the Church for multiple generations, this pioneer heritage played

[416] Young Bennett.
[417] Young Bennett.
[418] Elle K, in discussion with the author, December 7, 2021.

an important role in forming her identity. In our conversation I commented that these stories often follow a particular pattern: an ancestor, either in Europe or North America, would have a conversion experience after encountering a missionary and would make a dramatic decision to leave their current life to join up with the young Church. “That was my family's story too, on both my mom's and dad's side of the family, early in church history,” she said. “They were converts in England. And they left everything that they knew to follow their new faith to America, and that was always really inspiring. And then as I got older it also feels like a lot of pressure.”[419]

These family stories take on mythic status to become what are known within Mormon circles as faith-promoting stories, stories which offer a lesson to learn, example to follow, or exemplify a gospel principle. In a 1978 piece for the youth magazine *New Era*, member of the Council of the Twelve Bruce McConkie emphasized the importance of faith-promoting stories found in scripture, but also encouraged his readers to search out and tell their own stories, saying, “We should make every effort to show that the same things are happening in the lives of the Saints today as transpired among the faithful of old. Unless our religion is a living thing that changes the lives of people in whose nostrils the breath of life is now inhaled, it has no saving power. Unless we enjoy the same gifts and work the same miracles that marked the lives of those who have gone before, we are not the Lord’s people.”[420] Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are enjoined to seek out these stories in scripture, family history, and their own lives and for many, like Elle and her family, familial history fulfills this purpose. However, as Elle explains, with these stories comes both expectations and pressure. As she grew older, she

[419] Elle K.
[420] McConkie, Bruce R. “The How and Why of Faith-Promoting Stories.” https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/new-era/1978/07/the-how-and-why-of-faith-promoting-stories.

began to feel the implicit pressure of this heritage, of standing at the end of a long line of ancestors who sacrificed so much for their faith, and who lived lives of incredible hardship as a result. In our interview she reflected on this division, saying "they worked so hard, you know, for everything. And I, even as much as I admired them, I always felt a little disconnected from them, just because my life and experiences were so different."[421]

Throughout her time in the Primary program and Young Women[422] she remembers many periods of push and pull between her faith and a growing awareness of gender-based injustice, "I would every couple years, you know, I was kind of in this cycle where I'd be okay for a while, and I'd feel really great about being a woman in the church, and then I would enter this period of angst and anger."[423] She was fascinated by Church history and during times of angst would throw herself into studying it with the hope that she would find satisfactory answers to her growing list of uncomfortable questions. These alternating periods of angst and contentment continued throughout high school and college. Elle attended Brigham Young University, and says that it was never a question that she would pursue higher education. Her mother, who herself had an advanced degree, had always stressed the importance of education.

Mormon men and women are encouraged, through both official Church messaging and cultural norms, to obtain an education. In a talk given during the General Relief Society Meeting of General Conference in 2007 then President Thomas Monson articulated several points about the importance of education for women. First, women need to pursue spiritual education and enlightenment so that they can provide guidance and protection to their children in the face of, as

[421] Elle K.
[422] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has several programs for young people to participate in. Primary is mixed gender and is meant for elementary aged children. From the ages of eleven to seventeen male and female children are split into two groups based upon their gender: Young Women and Young Men.
[423] Elle K.

he put it, “messages portrayed on television, in movies, and in other media,” which are “very often in direct opposition to that which we want our children to embrace and hold dear.”[424] It is the role of parents (and this talk is aimed at mothers) to counter that influence, but in order to do so women must themselves have a firm knowledge of scripture and a well-developed faith. Second, women must be prepared, at any time, for potential disaster. A practical education is a necessary backup for a faithful woman, like a store of canned goods, held against an uncertain future. President Monson perpetuates the mythmaking of the Pioneer Spirit when he tells his audience that, in addition to spiritual knowledge, “secular learning is also essential. Often the future is unknown; therefore, it behooves us to prepare for uncertainties. Statistics reveal that at some time, because of the illness or death of a husband or because of economic necessity, you may find yourself in the role of financial provider. Some of you already occupy that role. I urge you to pursue your education—if you are not already doing so or have not done so—that you might be prepared to provide if circumstances necessitate such.”[425] In this talk President Monson does extol the virtues of education for personal edification, but it is grounded in practicalities, both spiritual and secular. Faithful women should pursue an education against an uncertain future, as a means of survival if they are forced out of their (implied) primary role as a stay-at-home mother.

One could argue that this mindset, that education is an important tool for survival, is related to the injunction that members of the Church maintain food stores and prepare for disaster; one must always be ready for the worst to happen, and should make preparations against that possible future. Perhaps this is a lasting result of the unstable early years of the Church in

[424] Monson, Thomas S. “Three Goals to Guide You.” 2007. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/general-conference/2007/10/three-goals-to-guide-you.
[425] Ibid.

the Nineteenth Century when Saints could be, and often were, driven from their homes at any moment. The impetus to survive, and to utilize all possible legitimate tools available, has, in the way of a faith-promoting story, come to represent what is often called Pioneer Spirit, the perceived gumption and resourcefulness to make do and thrive under less than ideal conditions. This distinctly American image of the resourceful pioneer is ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint media and storytelling. Elle recalls devouring as a teenager the book series *The Work and the Glory*, a fictionalized account of a Mormon pioneer family. This and other faith-promoting stories perpetuate the mythmaking of the pioneer, which is such an important part of identity creation for Latter-day Saints.

Thus Elle knew she would get an education but increasingly, in that period of angst, she chafed at the limiting expectations for women within the Church. She recalls coming home from high school after a particularly frustrating day, when these frustrations finally came to a head. "I came home, and I talked to my mom, and I was so angry. And I said, 'what's even the point of me going to a university or getting a master's degree or getting a doctorate degree, if I'm just gonna stay at home with my kids anyway, like, if I'm not allowed to use it, or I'm not supposed to pursue a career? Like, why should I go even though with this thing that I wanted so much?'"[426] Elle loved (and still loves) learning, she had a strong desire to pursue higher education, but remembers feeling intense anger and despair at the messaging which told her that she could get an education but should not hope to use it, "I just had this dissonance between: sure girls you can go to school, but your number one priority is to get married and have a family."[427] She vented these frustrations to her mother, but did not anticipate that this would strike a nerve. Her mother had an advanced degree, but had opted to work sporadically and part-time throughout Elle's life,

[426] Elle K.
[427] Elle K.

choosing instead to be a stay-at-home mom. When Elle vented about this to her mother she was not prepared for the response, "it was one of the only times that I remember my mom getting emotional, and she basically said, so are you saying that you think that I've wasted my life? And, you know, that really took me aback."[428] This response gave her pause. "And I thought, and I said, no, I mean, you know, this is your life, what you've chosen for your life. But I remember that she felt very attacked by what I was saying. So clearly, it struck something in her as well."[429] This interaction had a lasting impact on Elle as she went on to college and graduate school, and to marriage and motherhood herself. She continued to struggle with the gender politics of her church, and in 2017, after maintaining her own blog for a number of years and becoming increasingly interested in Mormon Feminism, she began writing for The Exponent, and has since become a regular contributor.

Meghan Crozier: Pursuing Deconstruction

Though she lives in Portland now, when she was growing up in the Midwest, the Evangelical Free church that she attended with her family was a nexus for Meghan Crozier's life. "[M]y parents were very involved. I was very involved. I had one sister growing up, we were very involved. And then when I got to middle school, high school, the youth group was a huge part of my life and my social group. And I was a student leader."[430] Youth group in particular became an important part of her spiritual and social life. She recalls the thrill of finally being old enough, once she started middle school, to join her sister for weekly activities, " it was kind of the cornerstone of my week."[431] For many Evangelical churches a strong youth program is key

[428] Elle K.
[429] Elle K.
[430] Meghan Crozier, in conversation with the author, December 29, 2021.
[431] Crozier.

for growing the congregation as well as building denominational loyalty in a crowded marketplace.[432] Youth programs will often include multiple weekly events geared toward building a social group for young Christians, as was the case in Meghan's church. "So we would have, if I remember right, we would have Sunday nights and Tuesday nights, and Tuesday nights were, you know, more quote unquote seeker friendly, where we would bring friends and it was fun, and there were games and a little less, maybe, teaching. And then Sunday nights were a little bit more serious, where there'd be worship, there would be maybe a mini sermon."[433] To be "seeker friendly" would mean that, as Meghan alluded to, leaders would de-emphasize Bible study and preaching and would instead plan activities such as concerts or games which they believed would appeal to a broader audience as a way of "getting kids in the door." Here she describes what a typical Tuesday night would look like for her group, "I think this was around 1996-1997, and so the youth group movement was a lot of, you know, we would be playing massive auditorium games, have a ropes course, play mud volleyball, and there would be sometimes secular music to pull people in, and then, you know, it just was about the numbers and having a lot of fun and getting in. I mean, we probably had 60 to 100 kids on a Tuesday night."[434] Once they began attending such events regularly they would be invited to other church activities at which there would be more of a focus on ministry and Bible study. By her sophomore year of high school Meghan was fully invested in her youth group, and was invited to join their leadership team.

Although she became a youth leader, in hindsight Meghan recalls that there were not opportunities for women to advance further in leadership within her church. There were no

[432] Chang-Ho C. Ji and Tevita Tameifuna, "Youth Pastor, Youth Ministry, and Youth Attitude Toward the Church," *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 3 (2011): 306.
[433] Crozier.
[434] Crozier.

female pastors or elders, and no adult women holding leadership positions, although at the time this did not seem strange to her, as it was the norm for all of the Evangelical churches in her area. It was only many years later that she began to question these discrepancies. As a youth Meghan was invested in maintaining her status within her church, she recalls that "when I was in youth group and I was in high school, I got a lot of praise and attention for doing everything right and following all the rules."[435] Following the rules meant not questioning the church hierarchy and staying within the bounds of expected behavior for a young Christian woman. Meghan received positive reinforcement from the adults around her when she performed obedience well, but this set a dangerous precedent. "[W]hen I was 14 to 15, I had a close friendship with a youth leader that was 18. I've written about that before,"[436] she is quick to explain, "I—nothing happened, we weren't dating, but I would say it was verging on inappropriate in just the sense that as a youth leader he would give me a ride home and drive me around a lot extra and we developed a close friendship. And then later, four years later, we ended up dating and almost getting married, when I was 18 and he was 22."[437] While data on such relationships is hard to come by, there is a culture within Evangelical churches which can normalize grooming or even sexual assault. A 2018 report by The Washington Post pulls together available data as well as first person accounts, but the diffuse nature of Evangelicalism, as it does not have any centralized hierarchy, makes data collection particularly difficult. As we know, most sexual violence or grooming goes unreported,[438] and that holds true within Evangelical spaces as well. There is no comprehensive

[435] Crozier.
[436] Crozier.
[437] Crozier.
[438] Joshua Pease. "The Epidemic of Denial about Sexual Abuse in the Evangelical Church." Washington Post, May 31, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/05/31/feature/the-epidemic-of-denial-about-sexual-abuse-in-the-evangelical-church/.

reporting or data collection on this topic, and even if a church belongs to a denomination (which is not true of many Evangelical churches) denominations do not necessarily keep comprehensive records of reports.[439] Anecdotally, relationships like the one that Meghan had with her youth leader are not uncommon. Over the last few years Meghan has been processing through the belief system which led to this relationship, and said "looking back, I did not realize the inappropriateness of the power dynamic in that relationship until only very recently."[440]

Meghan cites the prevalence of purity culture as a driving force in how she understood her role as a Christian woman, "thinking about how I was raised," she said, "and not even raised, I mean I've talked to my parents about this, it was not even my parents that handed me a copy of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. I mean, their bottom line was abstinence, right? And that was the church."[441] *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was a popular book written by Joshua Harris and published by Multnomah Books, a Christian publisher, in 1997 when Harris was twenty-one. In it he talks about the trials of modern dating and offers some alternative options: most notably a modern version of courtship. This book remained ubiquitous among Evangelical youth for almost twenty years, and Harris' arguments for curtailed romance which included saving your first kiss for your wedding day, became the model for an abundance of self-help literature aimed at Evangelical young women. Meghan devoured this literature throughout high school and college, using it as a roadmap to keep her doing the right things, "I read books like *Lady in Waiting*, *Passion and Purity*, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. And I did that, I waited."[442] This literature taught that young women needed to wait to be pursued by the man that would become their husband, and that if they cultivated the correct feminine attributes (which included strengthening their relationship

[439] Ibid.
[440] Crozier.
[441] Crozier.
[442] Crozier.

with God) then a Godly man would choose them. This rhetoric places women in a passive role while ostensibly telling them that they are being active in choosing to wait, choosing to let themselves be pursued. Evangelical women are taught that they must cultivate, they must perform a properly feminine identity and faith in order to be deemed worthy of romantic love, which in a patriarchal culture which places heavy importance on being a wife and a mother means that the stakes for performing incorrectly can be dire.

In college Meghan began to feel the stress of not fitting into that particular mold. "I read these books, and I really soaked in a lot."[443] Books like *Lady in Waiting* by Elizabeth Elliot encouraged readers to cultivate godly virtues while they waited to be pursued, and even suggested going on a dating fast, advice that Meghan took during her junior year of college. She continued to receive positive affirmation for her choices, and recalls specifically seeking guidance about dating, "And then I had mentors that I would take my ideas to. And I had one mentor that wrote on a piece of paper: You are pursuable. And I hung that in my dorm. And I really just, that was what I held on to: okay, I am pursuable. And that was kind of my mantra."[444] Increasingly Meghan felt her worth being wrapped up in whether or not she was worthy for a spiritual leader to pursue her, and looking back she can see how harmful that perspective was for her psyche. "And why I hung up my identity on whether or not I was being pursued by a quote unquote spiritual leader, that was a harmful, damaging way to perceive my own identity at that time," she said, "and it took me years to unpack that and to really realize what happened there [...] that's the first thing that clicked for me when I was like, all right, women are really silenced

[443] Crozier.
[444] Crozier.

in a lot of ways. And that was just, I mean, I wasn't even talking about in church. This was just, you know, the culture of it."[445]

Meghan now considers herself an *exvangelical*, and is active in many different online communities dedicated to those who are going through the process of deconstructing their faith. When I asked about this process, she explained that "faith deconstruction is kind of just this process of, I would say, questioning the things that you believed your whole life and wondering how you—looking at them from a critical perspective and wondering what you still believe. Now, when I first started the process, I was like, okay, that feels like a heavy term where I want to make sure that I'm not going to lose my faith."[446] Apps like Clubhouse and Twitter helped her to connect with other people who were also going through deconstruction, and provided a community that she could not find locally. "There's just a community of people that have connected over these doubts and evolving beliefs and starting to find, like, harmful things and learning that maybe the things you've believed your whole life, you know, aren't necessarily the things you believe now," she explained. "And so I would say that that process is a process of deconstruction."[447]

Feminist Awakenings and Men, Women, and Different Roles

Women have long used writing to work out religion as it must be lived day to day. For much of history women were denied the right to participate in theological discourses, and had no seat at the table when councils convened, or edicts were written. But women have always been full participants in the living of religion, and have used their writing as a means of reflecting on

[445] Crozier.
[446] Crozier.
[447] Crozier.

and shaping traditions. For many feminists, writing online allows them to work out their religion in a way that they do not feel comfortable doing in person. They can talk about their faith, and their doubts, they can question or explore particular theological points, and they can discuss what it means to live out the doctrines of their church with people who have gone through similar experiences. For most of the women interviewed for this project, there was not a singular moment which caused their feminist awakening. It was a series of small events which piled up over time until they reached a critical mass. At that point anything can set off the avalanche.

Meghan: Looking for a Leader

For Meghan, after years of discontent and feeling as if she would never be able to achieve her goal of marrying a strong spiritual leader, she had a period when she stepped away from the church. For two years she, in her words "traded purity culture for what I would say was hookup culture,"[448] but eventually she made her way back. She had met and started dating her husband during those two years, and though he wasn't a Christian at the time she brought him with her when she started attending church. He followed her lead and converted, and while she was happy she still felt lingering doubt. "Looking back, I would say I was the spiritual leader in our family for a long time. And I never would have, at the time, I never would have said that."[449] She had not shaken the part of her that wanted to be pursued, and she remembers at the time, "I lamented 'Oh, I didn't marry the spiritual leader that I had envisioned in college.'"[450] Even though she had felt uncomfortable with the passive role ascribed to Evangelical women when it came to dating the internal programing, the long-term, repetitive performance of idealized femininity, made her

[448] Crozier.
[449] Crozier.
[450] Crozier.

question her spiritual role. However, her perspective began to shift as they looked for a new church to attend in Portland, "And now looking back, I'm like, oh, no, wait, hold on, I was the spiritual leader. And that is an empowering shift in my mind."[451]

Church for Meghan and her husband meant a built-in community, just as her youth group in high school had functioned to fulfill both her social and spiritual needs. As they moved around, from the Midwest to the pacific northwest, she would find a church in which they could develop friendships and feel a part of the community. They mostly attended Evangelical churches similar to the one in which she had grown up, but everything changed for her in 2016. In the aftermath of the presidential election, she began to feel increasingly uncomfortable in Evangelical circles. "In my brain, I was like, clearly, everyone sees the racism and the misogyny and just the corruption and all of these things," she thought. "And then I would talk, I would go to small group, and there was like, silence. And then the stories or the things that people would say in defense of him, I was like, hold on, this is not—hold on. And I sat with that."[452] The election of Donald Trump forced her to face some uncomfortable truths about Evangelicalism in general and her church community in particular. According to Thomas Kidd, 81% of self-identified white Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump.[453] While Kidd attempts to make a distinction between what he calls practicing and self-identified Evangelicals in order to perhaps explain away what he sees as an uncomfortable "historically peculiar"[454] aberration, it is without question that a majority of white Americans who would identify themselves with the Evangelical movement voted for Donald Trump in 2016. This realization tipped the balance for Meghan, and things began to fall apart.

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[451] Crozier.
[452] Crozier.
[453] Kidd, 145.
[454] Kidd, 2.

During the early days of the pandemic Meghan felt called to begin writing a memoir, from college to COVID. She was writing in the model of inspirational literature aimed at Evangelical women, "the root of it was in college I had prayed for an hour a day for a couple years, and I had my old prayer journals. And I started to trace arcs of prayer throughout the course of my life that led me kind of where I was as a bilingual elementary teacher in the Pacific Northwest, married to who I was married to, and so it was this, like, this journey that wrapped up neatly with a little bow at the end, like, and this is where I'm at, this is how God was with me this whole time."[455] There is a pattern to this type of spiritual memoir which goes from faith to crisis and ultimately resolves in faith renewed, and Meghan crafted her book to follow that pattern. But at the same time her issues with the church were coming to a head. I will quote at length from her interview here:

> I started to dig into different things. And I started to realize—I just had this awakening where I started to realize how harmful some of the things coming out of the church were. And I would say the first moment of unraveling, our pastor did a huge series on race. And I would say that the actual series on race was very good [...] But when he talked about Black Lives Matter, he would pull out and he would say, I just want to be very clear that the language in the Black Lives Matter movement talks about disrupting the nuclear family structure and that's not what we're about. We do not, you know, and so he was very clear that when it came to sexuality, he wanted to make that distinction. And so I dug into that, because I was like, why does this make me feel a little bit uncomfortable? And what I did was I dug up a sermon series that the same pastor had preached to his former church in Rochester, New York. And it was a four-part series that he had

[455] Crozier.

> preached in 2015, and during the time that he preached that series it was when the Supreme Court ruled that same sex marriage would become legal. And that's when I had clarity for the very first time of what the Evangelical church was asking of the queer community, and that's when I learned that they were saying you have three choices, you can live into your queer identity, and that's not God's plan for you. And so you're just living in sin. Number two, you could live celibate for life. Or number three, you could force yourself into a heterosexual marriage, and just, that's what you got, you know? And that was the first time, and that's when I dug in and started to realize hold on, this is not okay. And even though I don't identify as queer, I just started to kind of wake up to how people around me had been treated historically in the Evangelical church, and then it, everything kind of shifted from there.[456]

At this point she had begun blogging, and was building a platform online in order to eventually be able to market her book. But the content on her blog, *The Pursuing Life*, began to shift. "So it initially started as like Bible verses and what God was doing in my life,"[457] which is fairly standard fare for Evangelical blogs run by women. But after this realization she felt called to change what she was writing and posting, "as things shifted, I wrote in a blog post called 'God and LGBTQ', and I wrote a blog post called 'Deal Breakers', and I wrote one called 'Leaving my Church'. And so it was no longer, you know, a picture of a sunrise with a Bible verse or worship lyrics. It was rainbows with, like, political things that I was saying."[458] As she stopped attending her local church she began participating even more in online communities where she could discuss her changing political views and commune with others going through this process

[456] Crozier.
[457] Crozier.
[458] Crozier.

of deconstruction. Through those communities she has formed new bonds, and started a podcast with a fellow exvangelical. She has even participated in virtual panel discussions with Joshua Harris, who himself is going through a deconstruction process, and has publicly apologized for harm caused by his book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.[459]

Elle: Injustice and Exclusion

Growing up Elle was always aware that, as a girl, she was treated differently. "You know," she said, "most of my experiences, my formative experiences, [involve] understanding that the world and the church were different for me because I was female."[460] She recalls in particular a time in Primary when this distinction came into sharp relief, "my teacher said boys and girls, raise your hand if you have ever passed the sacrament tray. And I—my heart just clenched, like I kind of freaked out because I thought, I'm a girl. I'm not allowed to pass the sacrament tray, but I looked around and everyone else was raising their hand and I kind of felt dumb. So I raised my hand too."[461] She vividly recalls the feeling of confusion and panic, as passing around the sacrament tray is a job that is reserved for members of the priesthood, which she knew she would never be. "And later I realized [...] she just meant like, pass it to the person sitting next to you down the row. And so that moment of panic is very clear to me in my memory, that one, I didn't have the same opportunities as the boys did, and two, that I wasn't really allowed to acknowledge it or talk about it."[462] She felt a distinct yearning to be able to participate more fully in the rituals and offices of her faith, while still knowing that she would never be able to do so. "So even from a young age I just, I remember that. That feeling

[459] "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" https://joshharris.com/i-kissed-dating-goodbye/
[460] Elle K.
[461] Elle K.
[462] Elle K.

that it was—that there was a discrepancy, but it was taboo."[463] Elle describes herself as a deeply religious child, and the fact that she was barred from certain aspects of religious life due to her gender was deeply painful for her, particularly when others who she deemed to be less serious or deserving, were able to partake in them. At the age of twelve male and female youth leave primary and are separated into the Young Women and Young Men programs. It is also at this age that young men in the LDS Church can receive their ordination into the priesthood. Updates to the official Church Handbook in 2020 softened the gender exclusive language regarding the exercising of priesthood authority, saying in the introduction that, "God grants authority and power to His sons and daughters on earth to help carry out this work."[464] However, further in, when it elaborates on the specific roles and authority granted to those who hold the priesthood, women remain excluded, "Worthy male Church members receive priesthood authority through priesthood conferral and ordination to priesthood offices. All Church members can exercise delegated authority as they are set apart or assigned to assist in accomplishing God's work."[465] Here we see that men are the protagonists, the actors, whereas all others are consigned to secondary authority, or reflected power. Elle knew that she would never gain primary authority, and further she knew that she could not appear to want it.

This is another standout memory for Elle, as she saw her male classmates graduate to a role that she desperately wanted, "at least a couple of the boys who were in my ward, were also in my classes at school," and she does not remember them with particular fondness. "[T]hey were very, you know, perverted little 12-year-old boys. And I was so angry."[466] She

[463] Elle K.
[464] "Priesthood Principles," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints General Handbook. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/manual/general-handbook/3-priesthood-principles.
[465] Ibid.
[466] Elle K.

felt this injustice keenly. Not only was she excluded at that moment, but she always would be. "And I don't remember ever telling anybody this at the time. But I was so angry that these boys who were crass and mean and irresponsible were getting this thing that I wanted so much. And I knew that I would take it more seriously, that it would mean more to me, and that I would be better at it than them. And, you know, [I was] a very humble, obviously, 12-year-old girl, but it was really upsetting to me that it didn't mean anything to them. And yet they got this opportunity. And I was excluded."[467] It is interesting to note that she did not feel comfortable voicing these feelings, even to her family or other members of her class. She knew, even at that young age, that somehow this was not something that she was supposed to feel, that it was, as quoted above, taboo for her to acknowledge this discrepancy. Even at the age of twelve she was aware of the optics that she must inhabit in order to remain within the bounds of acceptable femininity. The nature of these gendered expectations means that they are not necessarily stated explicitly, but are absorbed both consciously and unconsciously. Elle explained that she did not remember much explicit messaging regarding gender roles from her early life, but rather she recalls this series of experiences which, in addition to the examples she saw around her, reinforced that she had a tightly restricted role as a woman in the Church.

This perhaps demonstrates the perception that the roles for women and men within the LDS Church are and have always been distinct with regards to priesthood authority, but that is not necessarily the case. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recounts a story from the diary of Wilford Woodruff, an early Church leader, wherein he and his wife Phebe were inducted into The Quorum of the Anointed in Nauvoo, the first known priesthood group to also include women.[468] This select group participated in some of the first endowments authorized by

[467] Elle K.
[468] Ulrich, *House Full of Females*, 108.

Joseph Smith, and his wife Emma was the first woman initiated. While there remains scholarly debate around Joseph's ultimate intentions when he said to the first Relief Society that he would "make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day,"[469] multiple accounts from this period and later record instances of women performing actions which have otherwise been seen as the purview of the priesthood. It was not uncommon for women to take part in washing, anointing, and healing of the sick, particularly in Kirtland and Nauvoo,[470] and according to Linda K. Newell, Eliza R. Snow understood these acts to be possible as a result of the authority granted to women because of their endowment.[471] These practices continued during the trek from Illinois to Utah, and Ulrich recounts many stories of women manifesting spiritual gifts such as healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues while staying at the Winter Quarters in 1847 and 1848.[472] As Cory Crawford explains it, ultimately priesthood within the LDS Church centers around agency, which he defines as, "the power to act: to govern, preside, direct, create, administer, and so on."[473] Priesthood holders have primary agency as actors, as subjects, whereas those who do not hold the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood are denied this primary agency and can only act with secondary or reflected agency, even when occupying roles of leadership such as Relief Society President.

<u>April: Hitting the Ceiling</u>

April Young Bennett recalls a similar experience of dissonance at the age of twelve.

[469] See Devery S. Anderson's article "The Anointed Quorum: 1842-1845" in *The Journal of Mormon History* for a more in-depth discussion.
[470] Linda K. Newell, "A gift given, a gift taken" in *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*. ed. D. Michael Quinn, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2021, 101.
[471] Newell, 105.
[472] For more on this see chapter 7 in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book *A House Full of Females*.
[473] Crawford, Cory. "The Struggle for Female Authority in Biblical and Mormon Theology." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 48, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 7.

"When you're twelve," she explained, "as a Mormon that's when all the boys are ordained to the priesthood and they start doing important priesthood tasks at church, particularly passing the sacrament. That's a big one. Church just cannot go on without them because they are needed to pass a sacrament. And on the other hand, girls, when they're twelve, get nothing and have no important tasks."[474] Much like Elle, April was unimpressed with her male classmates who would soon receive priesthood endowments. "So the boys in my Sunday school class, they were just awful, awful, awful children." She has vivid memories of that year, and how difficult her group was. "They were always like throwing spit balls and pulling their chairs out from under the girls' seat so we'd fall down, and they'd copycat like, if you answered the question from the teacher, they'd copycat you in this high, stupid voice. They were just awful. They were awful, awful, awful."[475] The fact that these male classmates, who she saw as so immature, would soon be able to join the priesthood was galling to her, both then and now, it was especially difficult for her to understand why, as she put it, "that anyone capable of any sort of reverence or holiness in our in my Sunday school class was not selected to be God's priesthood, whereas these complete hooligans and bullies were."[476] She recalls feeling cheated, and not understanding why virtues which were nominally valued by the Church were given so little credence in this situation. April, and the other girls in her class, had followed the rules, both explicit and implicit, but were still shut out of this aspect of their faith. It was an important eye-opener for her. For the first time she noticed that there was a ceiling for women in the Church, and no amount of good behavior would allow her to bypass it.

There were several such epochs for April, such as when she was passed over for

[474] Young Bennett.
[475] Young Bennett.
[476] Young Bennett.

leadership roles while on her mission in favor of younger male missionaries, but another that she felt was particularly emblematic of gender disparities happened shortly after she had her third child. “Okay, so here's the thing that happened at that time. And I don't want you to overanalyze this as if this is why, because literally my own congregational leaders over analyzed and thought this was why, okay?” She was quick to caution me. “It's just an example of a thing that happened.”[477] No single event caused her to recognize this inequality, but rather it was a series of things, built up over a lifetime, and this was simply one of them. But it was one of the first times that she spoke up to authority. It started in 2011, because she had a new baby. “They have nursing rooms in the church, and usually they're quite nice.” She explained, “In my church, it was not nice. It was a closet. And it was a closet with one chair that was right next to the changing table, because it was tiny, and the closet, and you could lock it. And so there were like, you know, many, many women at the church at a time who had babies, but only one can be in there at a time. And it stunk, because you were right next to the changing table, there was no ventilation, so it was not a nice place.”[478] Because of the emphasis on marriage and family there are often many women within a ward who will have infants at the same time, as was the case here. Normally there would be spaces for women who needed to feed their babies or who needed a place to change diapers, but April grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of suitable accommodations, and decided to speak up. “I tried to talk to my ecclesiastical leaders about switching to a different room, one that would accommodate multiple women,”[479] so she set up multiple meetings but seemed to get nowhere. “I tried to talk to my leaders about this. And it was insane how nowhere I got with this very simple, easy

[477] Young Bennett.
[478] Young Bennett.
[479] Young Bennett.

request."[480] Even the Relief Society leadership could not address the issue, as they did not have the authority to reassign rooms. Many were sympathetic to her request, but seemed unable to move things forward. I'm going to quote her story at length, here:

> So I went straight to the bishop, and he did not help me. He just kind of acted like I was complaining about nothing. And then he was released, and a different bishop came in, so I went to that bishop. And that bishop was nicer about it but still didn't do anything. And I wrote occasional reminder letters, like I sent an email to my complete bishopric on Mother's Day, you know what will be a great Mother's Day gift for mothers? A mother's room that doesn't stink and that fits mothers in it, more than one as, you know, like, and they couldn't. And I was just getting nowhere with this. And it was like I had to go through this all-male hierarchy just to get this very female request dealt with and they weren't listening or understanding. And meanwhile, my baby was getting bigger and bigger and bigger. So I sent them like a step-by-step process for how to do this. Like, just hang a paper on it that says this room is now a mother's room, if you were using this for your classroom talk to your bishop, they'll assign you a different room. Like, it's not that hard. So I was giving them step by step instructions on how to do this, they finally did do it. And by that time, my baby was a year old. And they did eventually take care of this. And the mother's room is actually very nice. I thought I would never use it, but it turned out I had a fourth baby. So I did use it, it was great. And so it was sort of like—we talk in our church about how faith is like a seed, and you plant the seed and see if it'll grow. So because it got to a point where people were saying, like, other women were saying things to me, like I think you

[480] Young Bennett.

> should just do a protest, you should do a march there, because they were frustrated too. And I was the only one who was trying to do anything about it. And I sort of took it as like a trial of faith. I'm like, well, I'm gonna see if it's true that a male hierarchy, an all-male priesthood, can take care of a very genuinely female concern. If I just do the normal methods of asking nicely, then let's see if that works. It does not work. You know, I planted the seed, it was a bad seed. That's what we would say, that was a bad seed, that did not work, that it wasn't true that it's okay to have this all-male hierarchy over very female concerns. It didn't work at all. But that was just an example of something that I was going through at the time. Obviously, it was just one of the most obvious things that I did at the time. But lots of things were bothering me about this all-male hierarchy.[481]

This process brought into relief an important lesson for April: all-male leadership, no matter how well meaning, would never be able to fully serve the needs of women. The mother's room is not her origin story, it did not cause her to become an activist, it was simply one more example, on a long list of other examples, illustrating for her that no matter how well she behaved, or how she worked to fulfill the gendered expectations of her faith, without female priesthood she would never be able to fully participate in the restoration.

Activism

Lisa: Power Hungry Women

Lisa Butterworth founded *Feminist Mormon Housewives* in 2005 because she needed a place to work through her growing discomfort with the LDS Church. It has grown into a

[481] Young Bennett.

community which gives space for women to construct new gendered identities using the pre-existing context of the LDS faith. “when I started FMH, and I was trying to—I think I was trying to write about my experiences, I definitely was kind of mindful of writing about topics that wouldn't get me into much trouble, because I was still active at church and I was still participating, and I was still engaged. And, you know, I didn't want to—I have vague memories of the ‘September Six’[482] who were excommunicated, they were excommunicated about the time that I went off to college. And I had a vague memory of my mom saying something about, oh, well, those power-hungry women. You know, bad, bad, bad.”[483] Her initial forays into blogging were emotionally fraught as she tried to simultaneously toe the line of orthodoxy while still exploring questions of gender and equality, always haunted by the specter of Church discipline.

FMH, in both its blog form and in its Facebook group, was a place for women to connect for discussion, but also for activism, as Lisa remembers it, “it was still in that backlash after that September Six, and there was really just nothing out there talking about the priesthood or women like, it was a very taboo topic.”[484] There was still a lot of interest in women’s ordination in feminist circles, and it was inevitable that FMH would get caught up in it, in spite of Lisa’s reservations. “And I think that I–I mean, it's been a minute, going on at least 10 years, 15 years back now. I think, on some level, I don't know if I was consciously deciding not to talk about it. But I think on some level, I knew that it would be a line that if I crossed it, I'd get in trouble. And so I didn't cross that line. I'm sure I was aware of that line on some level. But I didn't. I didn't

[482] The “September 6” were six members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were excommunicated (two were disfellowshipped) in September of 1993. Their story made national news because those being disciplined had publicly written or engaged in scholarly discussion about controversial topics such as Heavenly Mother, and had in many cases criticized the Church leadership or questioned historical narratives. There were three women and three men: Lavina Fielding Anderson, Maxine Hanks, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, Michael Quinn, Paul Toscano, and Avraham Gileadi.
[483] Butterworth.
[484] Butterworth.

want to get in trouble. I didn't want to create drama, drama, drama in my family."[485] Lisa was toeing a dangerous line as a woman who was simultaneously speaking publicly about feminist issues while trying to maintain her status as a member in good standing of the LDS Church. Her memories of the September Six, and her hard-won intuition which helped her navigate the gender politics of her Church while maintaining relationships with her faithful family, caused her to be cautious around the topic of female priesthood. Ultimately, despite her reservations, Lisa, and FMH, entered into that conversation. She explained to me her change in thinking, saying, "at that point, I think the thing that made sense to me, was that, like, on a very practical level, I completely acknowledge that there needs to be priesthood equality in the church in order for there to be pragmatic equality in the church. Like on a very pragmatic level, I think it has to happen if there's ever going to be any kind of equality of the church."[486]

In 2012 online discussion turned to offline activism. Bloggers from Feminist Mormon Housewives took an unofficial survey about temple practices, after noting that there was great variance in the way that menstruating women and girls were allowed to participate. They called around to different wards and asked if menstruating women could participate in baptismal ordinances. They found that the practice was inconsistent, and no clear rationale could be found. They presented these findings to the Church hierarchy, prompting the Church spokesman to issue a statement that official policy was for full participation, even during menstruation.

That outcome was relatively positive, but the same cannot be said for the Ordain Women movement, which began as an online community who argued for granting the priesthood to all members, not just men. As Lisa recalls it, "we had built this whole community. So when the people who were interested in having that discussion, *Ordain Women*, came along, we had

[485] Butterworth.
[486] Butterworth.

created a community that they, you know, then sort of organized within."[487] They requested admission to a priesthood- only session at the General Conference, which was denied. Later they decided to web stream the session for anyone who wished to watch it, but only priesthood holders were allowed to attend in person. The next year, 2014, one of the group's founders, Kate Kelly, was excommunicated from the Church.

April: Tattling to Your Parents

April Young Bennett was one of the original organizers of Ordain Women, which started about two years after she began blogging for The Exponent, "that's when the Ordain Women movement began. And I was one of the early organizers of that."[488] What started as online activism soon crossed over into other aspects of her life. "And because I do happen to live in Salt Lake City where there was a lot of local news about it [...] And while other people, other organizers could do telephone interviews for print media or radio, when it came to TV interviews, they needed a face who was actually present here. And that was me. I mean, that ended up being me, because here I am. So I was, all of a sudden, I was on TV a lot, responding to questions about this."[489] April quickly became one of the faces of the group, which meant that people from her everyday life, her offline life, were now seeing this part of her. Up until that point, although she had not hidden her writing, she had been posting only using her first name, which was a way to keep some distance between those two realities. But from that point forward she has proudly written under her full name, although it has created some unintended consequences: people started calling her parents. "I was thirty-six years old at the time, which is

[487] Butterworth.
[488] Young Bennett.
[489] Young Bennett.

not a young'un," when she started appearing on TV. "And a bunch of people called me parents, like old neighbors were calling my parents, distant relatives, just everyone was pestering my parents, nobody called me. Well, very few people called me. But many, many, many people were hassling my parents; you've got to do something about your daughter, I saw her on the news doing this, I saw this blog post she wrote, you know, and they were just getting bombarded with people calling and wanting them to intervene in some way."[490] She recounts this now with laughter, but it is indicative of the proscribed role women are expected to occupy. In speaking out publicly about women's ordination April was choosing to cause gender trouble, she was breaking the implicit contract, mutually agreed upon, to present a united front to the outside world. Thus she needed to be reined in and reminded of her chain of authority. This caused tension within her family. "It was kind of tense with my parents at the beginning," she remembers. "I went on Facebook and was like, okay, if you have ever called my parents: stop, I'm thirty-six. Call me. Come talk to me. If you have a concern about me, do not bother my parents. They're old and it's not their problem. Like, leave them alone. And so I think that helped, actually people did start talking to me and I didn't much care for what they had to say, but at least they weren't pestering my parents anymore, which was good."[491] Unfortunately the same could not be said of her local religious leaders.

[490] Young Bennett.
[491] Young Bennett.

Religious Authority

April: It's not this one thing, it's the whole system

"My Bishop called me in to talk about it," April recalls, "and he–being called in by the bishop is bad. One does not want that."[492] At the local level the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practices lay ministry, meaning that leaders are chosen from the congregation and are not professional or full-time ministers. Higher offices such as that of the First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, or the Quorum of the Seventy, are considered to be full time ministry. A member of one of these groups will leave their previous employment in order to dedicate themselves to full-time ministry. These full-time ministers are selected from the members of the Church rather than a dedicated clergy. All active members will receive a calling, or a specific assignment for service, which could be things like a Primary class or visiting with those who are unable to attend services as a home teacher. These callings are generally assigned by one's Bishop, and have a varied length for their tenure. Local leadership is considered part-time and is unpaid, meaning that a Stake President or Bishop will continue with their current employment but will take on additional service within the Church, estimated to be between fifteen and thirty hours a week, and a Bishop will generally serve for five years,[493] after which time they will return to regular membership. Bishops oversee a ward, whereas a Stake President is in charge of an entire stake, which is made up of several wards.

Many of the Latter-day Saint women who I interviewed stressed to me the importance of maintaining a good relationship with one's Bishop and Stake President. These local leaders could

[492] Young Bennett.
[493] "Lay Leadership: Volunteer Ministry of the Church." *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Newsroom*, n.d. http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormon-lay-ministry.

provide either support and cover or they could potentially censure a member, which could lead to further disciplinary actions. It was the latter that April feared when she got the call to go in to see her Bishop. Luckily, at least this first time, it went well. "[I]t didn't go terribly, because he said that he had talked with the stake president [...] And he, the stake president, said, well, this is free speech. I don't want to curtail her free speech. She hasn't done anything that's actually morally wrong, so she should not be in trouble."[494] Her Bishop had concerns about her writing and her activism, but for the time being she was not going to face further consequences. For April and other religious women like her, a proper performance of femininity must be legible, meaning it is easily readable at a glance, but not necessarily visible. At this point April had been blogging for a while, but by being interviewed on TV (and beginning to write under her full name) she had become a potential target for unwanted attention from Church authorities. If one of the traits for legibility is obedience or amiability, dissent and complaint put one outside of those boundaries like a weed in a flower bed: too visible and dangerous. Despite the fact that she was still attending church regularly, still performing her calling, and still hitting other markers of acceptable femininity, April had become too visible, and now her Bishop was looking, "he brought it right back to: was this because it took so long to get the mothers rooms?" She scoffs. "They always want a simple one thing, you know, when it's like, no, it's everything. It's not this one thing. It's the whole system, the whole patriarchal system. It's not one example of one thing."[495] This first meeting, though awkward, did not seem to have lasting consequences. However things changed when a new Stake President was called.

April had been active with Ordain Women for some time, and had become, as she put it, a bit of a minor celebrity in Salt Lake City, which came to a head when her new Stake President

[494] Young Bennett.
[495] Young Bennett.

took over. “He was unusually powerful for a Stake President; he had previously served as speaker of the House in the Utah legislature, and his wife was the general Relief Society first counselor [...] And so he kind of made it his quest to do something about me. And it was a problem for a while.”[496] April’s growing visibility made her a problem, and she was going to get pruned. Stake Presidents and Bishops manage their respective congregations. They assign callings, counsel members, and do general administration. They are also in charge of issuing Temple Recommends. Temples play a vital role for Latter-day Saints. It is within a Temple that they receive ordinances like baptism, endowment, or marriage sealing, among others. These rituals are necessary for members to be able to fully partake of their faith. For example, a Temple ceremony is necessary in order to be sealed to one’s spouse for time and eternity, making it a celestial marriage. To attend the Temple a church member needs to pass their Temple Recommend interview, and be issued a Temple Recommend by their Bishop. This interview will normally consist of a short series of questions meant to assess a member’s worthiness to enter the Temple and partake in sacred rites, and so questions focus on matters of faith, affirming doctrine, and obeying Church rules about things like obeying the Word of Wisdom. There are other questions, however, which leave more room for interpretation. A Bishop can ask, for example, “Do you support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” or “Do you follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ in your private and public behavior with members of your family and others?”[497] Questions like these open the door for a Bishop or other leader to interrogate a member regarding their political affiliation or, perhaps, their feminist activism.

[496] Young Bennett.
[497] Newsroom. “Church Updates Temple Recommend Interview Questions.” *Ensign*, January 2020. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/ensign/2020/01/aus-eng-local-pages/local-news-002.

Shortly after her new Stake President took office April's brother became engaged to be married, and was going to be married in the Temple. In order to attend a wedding in the Temple you need an active Temple Recommend, so April set up a meeting with her Bishop. It was at this point, from her perspective, that they saw an opportunity to curtail her activities, "they tried to kind of weasel out of it, just not give me the Temple Recommend and not be clear about why not. Even though I knew why, like they tried to make other reasons."[498] Because April needed to go through these two men to be able to attend her brother's wedding, she had very few options. Still, she fought back, "when I first came in to get the Temple Recommend, he asked me if I paid tithing, which is odd, because they ask you that once a year, and that's not the time. It was already covered."[499] Here April's attention to her performance served her in good stead. She had performed the actions necessary to maintain her status as a good Mormon woman. She had paid her tithe, she had fulfilled her calling, and thus these avenues of attack were closed. "But I said yes. And he said, I checked, I don't have any records of your tithe. But he didn't have any records of my tithing because I hadn't paid it through the local ward, I paid it online. And so I showed him that, and then he kind of had this panicked look like oh no, now what do I do? Because I can't deny on the basis of this. It's clear that she's got it."[500] Because April occupied a perilous position as a dissenter, maintaining these role markers provide her some level of protection. They would not be able to deny her Recommend on a technicality, or so she thought. Despite attending church every week in order to serve her calling in the nursery, there had been a short period, 3 consecutive Sundays, when she had skipped the first hour of church, only attending the second two. A fellow member of Ordain Women had been excommunicated, and April was dealing with

[498] Young Bennett.
[499] Young Bennett.
[500] Young Bennett.

her rage and grief, and did not feel comfortable attending the sacrament meeting, but still attended for the last two hours. It was on this basis, three hours of missed church over the course of a year, that her Bishop denied her Recommend. She appealed his decision to the Stake President, "and he told me the real reason, which we all knew, was because of Ordain Women that they didn't want to give me the Temple Recommend. And he said that he would give me my Recommend in exchange for a long list of things they wanted me to do that would shut me up and make me stop talking in public about issues with patriarchy in the church, a long list."[501]

April was faced with an impossible decision: if she did not agree to these terms she would be barred from attending her brother's wedding or participating in any other Temple activities. She managed to negotiate the list down to just two items: she would take down any and all blog posts relating to priesthood or ordination and keep them down for the duration of this Recommend, and she would resign from the board of Ordain Women. They had wanted her to delete all of her blog posts but settled for just these, and April came up with a plan. "I mean, these were old blog posts. They'd been written a long time ago; people weren't looking at them anymore anyway. Because you know, the internet, it's got like a three-day cycle, and then everyone's forgotten everything, right? So nobody was looking at these anymore anyhow. And my thinking was, if you censor them, they're going to sound so interesting to people they're going to find them in internet archives, and they're just going to pull them up again, and everyone's going to read them who hadn't read them before. So it's going to be fine."[502] She kept her word and took down each post, but she did not do it quietly. She wrote a detailed blog for The Exponent explaining what she was doing and why, and as she predicted this brought renewed interest, and national attention, to her writing.

[501] Young Bennett.
[502] Young Bennett.

Elle: Swift Backlash

Elle shared a similar experience of suddenly becoming too visible to church leadership. She did not consider herself to be an activist, "I had not been a member of Ordain Women. They made me pretty uncomfortable."[503] But she was interested in their methods and their message, and followed them closely. In doing so, she found herself drawn into the debate. "I was horrified at the way that they were treated by both the general leadership of the church and also the things that I heard people in my own ward saying about them. So I had started, you know, defending them a little bit."[504] She wrote what she thought of as a benign post on her personal blog after Kate Kelly was excommunicated, expressing sympathy and sadness, and shared it to her own Facebook page. The response was soon overwhelming. "I had so many comments of people who were either derisive or derisive or mean, or who were concerned, I think that was probably the big one. I had a lot of people who were concerned. And I was honestly shocked. I wasn't expecting that kind of backlash for something that I saw as being so benign. And actually, the next Sunday, I happened to be meeting to renew my Temple Recommend."[505] Because she had not made any calls for action regarding women's ordination, or even expressed her own views regarding the priesthood, Elle did not foresee this level of backlash. The week before she had asked a friend of her husband, who was a member of the Bishopric, to perform her interview so that she could renew her Recommend, and he had agreed to come get her the following Sunday during Sunday School. He came to fetch her as promised, but instead of performing the interview himself he took her to see the Bishop. She remembers the meeting too well, "I went into the bishop's office, and he sat there behind his enormous desk with a big picture of Jesus behind his

[503] Elle K.
[504] Elle K.
[505] Elle K.

shoulder. And I sat on a chair that was placed in front of the desk in the middle of the room. So I felt very small and exposed. And he started out by saying, someone sent me your blog post. And I felt so blindsided, because I thought I was there to be interviewed for my Temple Recommend and just answer the questions."[506] Elle felt both unprepared and under threat. I will quote from her interview at length here:

> And he said, I read through it in depth three or four times. And I just started crying because I felt so violated and afraid. Because here was this man who, no matter what I said at this point, could decide that I wasn't worthy to go to the temple, no matter what I thought, because of this thing that I had written. And he monologued for probably twenty minutes about his thoughts about the things that I had written. And he said, he started talking about other things that I hadn't written about and giving his own opinions on why we don't talk about Heavenly Mother or, you know, whatever. I remember he said we don't talk about Heavenly Mother because he said, well, you know, if you were out with your husband, and somebody started saying really mean things about you, don't you think that your husband would have something to say about that? Or would, you know, would want to protect you? And I said, well, maybe, but I would feel the same thing if we were out and somebody started saying mean things to him. And he just kind of trampled right over that and told me that Heavenly Father wanted to protect Heavenly Mother because she was so special, and that's why we weren't allowed to talk about her. Now, again, I had not written anything about Heavenly mother in my blog posts, nor had I ever spoken to this man about feminist theology, but he felt that he could unload all of his personal apologetics onto me. So I'm sure, I don't know what he thought, I'm sure he thought I was

[506] Elle K.

> crying because I felt guilty or because I was feeling the spirit because he was so inspired to talk to me about these things or because I don't know, like, maybe because I was struggling so much. Maybe bishops just get people who burst into tears all the time in their offices.
>
> But I felt just so violated, because I didn't mind if people read through what I wrote three or four times, that's why I published it in a public space. But for somebody who has the authority to determine my worthiness in God's stead, to say that, like he was combing through it to look for whether I was dangerous or not, it was a very traumatizing experience. And at the end of his ramblings, he said, well, I don't see anything in there that would prevent you from answering the Temple Recommend questions. So we went ahead and did the Temple Recommend interview and I answered all the questions, and I got back at the very end of Sunday school class, I'd been in there for an hour. My husband was like, where were you? I said, I'm gonna have to talk to you about it later. But after that, I swore to myself that never again would I put myself in the position of speaking to a man alone in his fancy church office without having someone else there with me, or without knowing exactly what the conversation was going to consist of, and I, I've stuck to that.

Elle's Bishop utilized his position of religious authority, just as April's did, to intimidate, threaten, and abuse her. According to the official Church handbook, "The bishop holds the priesthood keys to lead the work of the Church in the ward."[507] Within Latter-day Saint doctrine someone (a man) with the authority to wield priesthood keys can "control access to the blessings

[507] "6. The Bishopric." *General Handbook: Serving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/manual/general-handbook/6.

and ordinances of the priesthood."[508] It is a special authority, conferred by Jesus Christ, to access the power of God in order to administer over one's jurisdiction. Thus a Bishop is considered not just an authority but an emissary of the First Presidency and of God. Bishops are the spiritual leaders of their wards, and are authorized to receive revelation on its behalf, also "A bishop is a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. He is true to his covenants. He is loyal to his wife and family. He sets an example of righteousness for his family, the ward, and the community."[509] This special authority and implied righteousness makes situations such as April's and Elle's particularly painful, in that it comes from a man speaking with this authority, having obtained this authority because he is considered righteous. If this righteous, faithful disciple condemns your sincerely held belief in feminism and equality, what place can you have in the community of faith?

April, Lisa, Meghan, and Elle's encounters with religious authority were similar to those recounted by many other women interviewed for this project from both religious traditions, a striking commonality that was shared across both religious and political lines. As we have seen in previous chapters, it is not only egalitarian, feminist, or liberal women who encounter hostility or censure from religious authorities within their traditional Church structures. Women like Rachel in chapter 1 and LeeAnn in chapter 2, both of whom would consider themselves traditional or conservative leaning, shared similar stories. From this we can conclude that such antagonism or antipathy cannot be attributed solely to feminism, or at least not to proclaimed feminism on the part of individual women. One could certainly argue that the specter of feminism influences these encounters, and also that even women who would not consider

[508] "Priesthood Keys." *New Era: The Monthly Youth Magazine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, May 2012. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/new-era/2012/05/priesthood-keys.
[509] "6. The Bishopric." *General Handbook: Serving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*.

themselves to be feminists have been influenced by feminist activism and ideology. However, as the discussion above of the first Relief Society demonstrates, there is historic precedence for such encounters.

How then can we understand the power dynamics at play in these run-ins with authority? Returning to Foucault's framing of the dual structures of knowledge and power provides one lens for understanding here. Because knowledge and power are mutually supporting structures, power produces, and then uses, our desires to "find" and create knowledge, which can then be used to find more efficient techniques for control and surveillance. As discussed in previous chapters, the internet provided new technologies which enabled new technologies of the self for users. However, it also created new structures for power and surveillance. If we understand power as something which circulates among a society rather than existing only as a top down hierarchy we can see that communities are still self-policing, and relations of power exist in and between everyone, every point of a social body, and these each have their own configurations of control. Power is never erased, even if it changes form, and the internet is a panopticon wherein one never knows who is watching (or reading) one's content. Any content shared on the internet, even if it is shared privately between trusted parties, can become known publicly. Elle's writing was shared with her bishop by a member of her congregation, which led to their confrontation. The social body of the Church is invested in maintaining the naturalized gender hierarchy. In Elle's example we can see how power and surveillance circulates through a community to reinforce existing structures.

Conclusion

Each of the women featured in this chapter recounted in their interviews a growing feeling that something was wrong, that the world was not as it ought to be, long before they

began to identify as feminists. Feminist as an identifier carries a negative connotation for many in these two religious groups, which is a hurdle that each of these four women had to overcome. For each of them the feminist awakening was a gradual process, the seeds having been planted when they were young. This reorientation was made possible through the support of other women, usually in online communities, who were going through or had gone through the same process. Often these online spaces were the only place where they could discuss their doubts without fear of reprisal.

However, being feminist in public as a religious woman can come with significant risk. Lisa, Elle, and April all reported backlash from their local religious authority, sometimes including threats of disfellowship. For Meghan, the risk came not from religious authority but from her interpersonal relationships. Her writing has put strain on her relationships with her family and with friends who do not agree with her feminist stances, and can become defensive. Lisa, April, Elle, and Meghan have each chosen a difficult path, holding in tension their faith and ties to their religious community and their belief that justice, equality, and a better world are worth fighting for.

Epilogue and Conclusion

Epilogue: Why They Stay, Why They Leave

Colleen McDannell in her book *Sister Saints: Mormon women since the end of polygamy*, observes that "In the American imagination, Mormon women still have not left the nineteenth century."[510] The public perception of women in both the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Evangelical Christianity is colored by media portrayals which position women in these traditions as the Other twice over: first as members of a so-called "weird" religion, and second as either victims or, as blogger Heather Sundahl put it when interviewed for this project, handmaidens of the patriarchy. Each of the women interviewed for this project is doing the work of constituting both their own gender and the public understanding of what it means to be a woman in their respective religious traditions. We have heard from both those who choose to break from expected gender performance as well as those who choose to uphold it. Phenomenologically such acts must be understood as both the things that create meaning as well as the things through which meaning is performed or enacted.[511] Thus these performative acts of gender serve both to create and then reinforce gendered identity. Gender gains meaning through its expression. What constitutes these different types of performances? Butler compares daily gender performance to an actor on a stage, where everything is chosen specifically to telegraph something about the character to the audience. If, for these content creators, the world is their audience, what choices are they making, and what do they want to say about their characters?

Each of the women featured in the previous chapters has wrestled with these questions. Through the interview process we discussed dual identities, and building boundaries between

[510] McDannell, xi.
[511] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 521.

public and private. Many explained their nuanced faith, with more questions and negotiations than they were comfortable sharing in their public work, lest they lose followers or cause them distress. But what happens when that system breaks down? When the questions start to overwhelm the belief? Jana Riess noted that religious disaffiliation is a growing trend among Generation X and Millennials, with the rates of those identifying as "nones," meaning that they have no religious affiliation, higher than with any previous generation.[512] According to Pew Research religious affiliation in the United States of America has declined significantly since they began tracking it in 2007, with those identifying as "none" climbing from 16% in 2007 to 29% in 2022. In that same timeframe the percentage of those who identified as Christian fell from 78% to 63%.[513] While we can see some general trends among the "nones"[514] there is no overarching category to which they all belong. With this growing demographic shift it is valuable to look at the stories of those who have chosen to disaffiliate with their religion. Including these women can provide insight into why people choose to leave their religion, and the varied paths that bring them to that decision.

As an addendum to the previous chapters we will meet three women, each of whom went through a public faith crisis and made the choice to deconstruct their faith, and work through that process in front of their followers. One was a very prominent lifestyle blogger who saw her empire collapse when she lost her faith, one was a questioning feminist who ultimately found a completely different faith tradition, and one was a conservative scholar who was a proud handmaiden of the patriarchy before having a feminist awakening. Each of their stories exists in

[512] Riess, 6.
[513] "Modeling the Future of Religion in America." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (September 13, 2022) https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/
[514] Riess notes that disaffiliated Mormons are more likely to be male with divorced parents, and generally lean liberal politically.

parallel to a previous chapter or chapters. The women discussed in the preceding chapters have demonstrated the many and varied ways that women reconcile their faith in a changing world. In comparing them with those who have left we can see even more clearly the double-edged sword of this public performance of religious femininity.

Rachel Kessler: The Female Patriarchy

"I basically finished my dissertation on a dare," Rachel said. "I was gonna drop out of my PhD after I finished my comps.[515] And I went to my dissertation advisor in like February, and told him I was dropping out because I was gonna go to seminary and he was like, it's February now, you won't go to seminary until September. Why don't you write a dissertation between now and then? And I didn't–I don't recommend it. It was not a particularly good dissertation. But it existed. And then I started seminary."[516] Rachel Kessler is an Episcopal Priest in the Diocese of Ohio; she is also the campus chaplain at Kenyon College and a popular content creator on TikTok. Like the women featured in Chapter 1, she uses her platform to work out her own experiences growing up Evangelical and, like Rachel Schmoyer, to talk about some of the hard things in Christianity.

Rachel is a pastor's kid. Her father is a Southern Baptist minister who became a United States Navy Chaplain when Rachel was five. Growing up on a military base was a surprisingly ecumenical experience for her, and now that her father has retired from the Navy, she is observing a stark contrast in him. "I think the military was a moderating influence," she said. "And I think leaving the military, my dad has become very radicalized. Because he doesn't have to work with people, right? Because like–so my dad's a Baptist pastor, but as a Southern Baptist

[515] Comps is slang for comprehensive exams, a series of exams administered to PhD students before they begin writing their dissertation.
[516] Rachel Kessler, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2023.

chaplain in the Navy. So there was a certain degree of having to work with people of other faith traditions and going to like the Protestant chapel on base where I hung out with Methodists [...] I think since he's retired, he doesn't have that. And it's–there's more of an echo chamber."[517]

Though she attended church services on the base, her parents always made sure to connect with a local Baptist church so that Rachel and her brother would not stray too far from their roots. Like many Evangelical Christians who grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s, youth group was a big part of her life, though she always felt that she did not quite fit in. "Youth group was huge," she said. "I mean, we were there on Wednesday nights. We were there on the weekends, we were there for lock-ins. We were–we did all the things and the mission trips and the camps. And yes, absolutely, it is true that it was a huge part of my life. It was also true that I did not fit into it at all, quite apart from any theology, or ideology or anything like that. I was just a nerd."[518] She parlayed her interests into ministry opportunities. Between the ages of fourteen and seventeen she went on several mission trips with Awe Star Ministries, an Evangelical parachurch organization which specializes in short term overseas mission trips for teens. Rachel participated in their drama ministry, doing short plays and other Christian-centered entertainment.

Rachel always knew that she was going to go to college and have a career, even though she knew that she could not have a career in ministry. "When you're in those environments," she said, "those like really high-pressure youth group environments, there's so much pressure to go into ministry and then if you're a woman you feel that pressure, but there's not really the same outlets for it, right? Because you can basically like, you can be a children's pastor, you can be a

[517] Kessler.
[518] Kessler.

missionary, or you can be a pastor's wife. And none of those were going to be my vibe."[519] She attended Kenyon College in Ohio, where she now coincidentally serves as campus chaplain. She studied literature and decided to pursue a career in the academy. At Kenyon she began attending an Episcopal Church, but still very much considered herself a Baptist, and she retained her conservative beliefs. "My friends used to call me the female patriarchy in college," she said. "As in: we're always talking about the male patriarchy, is there a female patriarchy? Yes, it's Rachel."[520] Like Aubrey and Heather, Rachel struggled to fit herself into the roles ascribed to her by her religious tradition, even though she sincerely believed that she was supposed to. She found herself making strange compromises to make things fit. "I think for me, I never really conceived of getting married or having kids. Because I think in some ways, my family was like, a generation behind in feminism, and they were like, okay, we all know Rachel is this like, brainy nerdy, you know, I was voted Most Likely to Succeed in high school, right? Like, they all knew that I was going to go do stuff."[521] She felt she had to make a choice: if she wanted a career, to do stuff, she could not also be a wife and mother. It was alright for her to pursue those other things as long as she did not take on those traditionally feminine roles. She could not imagine getting to do both.

After college Rachel was accepted into a graduate program at the University of Toronto. She made it through a master's degree and the coursework and comprehensive exams for her PhD, but found that her passion was lagging. At that same time she had begun attending another Episcopal church near the college. "My way of dealing with being burnt out in graduate school was to just get more and more involved in church," she said. "And then I eventually decided,

[519] Kessler.
[520] Kessler.
[521] Kessler.

okay, this is the tradition that I feel at home in, and I want to be confirmed. And I think for me, it just became a different way of directing the same impulse; like this impulse I have of wanting to be a teacher or wanting to, you know, have those types of relationships with people isn't feeling fulfilled in academia, it is feeling fulfilled the deeper I go in this other realm."[522] She was convinced by her academic advisor to finish her dissertation instead of dropping out like she wanted to, but she was still determined to leave academia to pursue ordination.

At this time she still did not identify as a feminist, despite taking the still radical action of pursuing ordination as a woman. Rachel was still the female patriarchy. One event stands out in her memory. In seminary when she was still an acolyte, and a blind priest was performing the prayers before Mass. "There's a bit where the priest is like, I confess to God, and I confess to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned and blah, blah, blah," she recalled. "Anyway, after saying all the prayers he turned around, and he said, 'I said my brothers and sisters, but are there any sisters here today? I didn't hear anyone.' And one of the most notorious of the, like, anti-women's ordination faction went, 'Oh, well, Rachel is here, but she doesn't count.'"[523] Once again, it was clear to Rachel that if she wanted to pursue her calling, she could not also be feminine. To be allowed into male spaces of power required her to shed her femininity. Much like Rachel Schmoyers' experience with her daughter, it took becoming a parent for Rachel Kessler to recognize what she now sees as internalized misogyny. "When I had my daughter, I was more than happy to put her in boy clothes, and then I have a son and do I feel less comfortable putting my boy in girl's clothes, because we all as a society value women's things

[522] Kessler.
[523] Kessler.

less? But like fundamentally, is it just that we're conditioned as a society to hate everything that girls like? Yeah, so I've been on a journey."[524]

Rachel does now identify as a feminist, and no longer identifies as an Evangelical. Part of her content revolves around faith deconstruction and the exvangelical movement. Like Aubrey and Heather she uses her platform to offer a more nuanced perspective, attempting to build bridges between conservative Evangelicalism and progressive Christianity. Unlike both of them, however, she could not remain within her tradition. Evangelicalism, for Rachel, was too painful, and too damaging. She made a conscious decision to excise it from her life. Rachel has gained a following on TikTok in part because she speaks to common experiences among exvangelicals. "I spent every day of my childhood and adolescence and young adulthood fixated on going to hell, absolutely horrifically fixated on going to hell," she said. "And being afraid that I wasn't actually saved. And how many times can I say the sinner's prayer?"[525] Fear of Apocalypticism and obsessive thoughts about sin and hell are a common symptom of religious scrupulosity, a subtype of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder often marked by "Obsessions and compulsions containing religious themes, hypermorality, pathological doubt and worry about sin, and excessive religious behavior."[526] Recently several exvangelical influencers have opened up about their struggles with scrupulosity, and many, like Rachel, have made content deconstructing Evangelical doctrines about hell and the afterlife. Things broke for Rachel during her confirmation into the Episcopal Church. "My confirmation got delayed, because of when the bishop could actually come," she recalls. "And so it was a year or two after I had, like, done my

[524] Kessler.
[525] Kessler.
[526] Witzig, Theodore F., and C. Alec Pollard. "Obsessional Beliefs, Religious Beliefs, and Scrupulosity among Fundamental Protestant Christians." *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders* 2, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 331.

confirmation process that I finally actually got confirmed. I was in seminary, in fact, and I remember, like, the moment the bishop laid his hands on my head, I just wept and wept and wept and like, wept throughout, this snotty, gross–and it was because I was like, I am. I'm finally free. I am finally free of that."[527]

C. Jane Kendrick: Looking Behind the Curtain

Courtney Kendrick, known professionally as C. Jane Kendrick, grew up in a family that she says was socially, rather than doctrinally, Mormon. "When I look back at my family experience in being Mormon," she said, "it wasn't necessarily that we, you know, read scriptures together or talked about the doctrines of the church as much as we physically showed up and were there to fulfill callings or to show our faces in that world. It was just part of our community."[528] They lived in Provo, Utah, what she calls "ground zero for Mormonism," and it was always a part of her community and social life growing up. She is the sixth of nine children, and her parents were leaders in the community. "My parents were always on boards of charities, chairman's or, you know, they were booster club presidents, they were just always very active in our community," she said. "Both of my parents at some point in their lives have run for office and have held office and my dad was in the state house, and my mom was a city council member."[529] Watching her mother, who was ostensibly a stay-at-home mom, fulfilling these roles outside the home left an impression on Courtney. She knew that she would be a wife and a mom, and probably would stay home with her kids, but her perception of the possibilities that that might entail was quite broad. Even so, she keenly felt the gender imbalance within the

[527] Kessler.
[528] Courtney Kendrick, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2022.
[529] Kendrick.

church. “ I don't remember ever not seeing it. I mean, it was always just very, very clear that the men were given so much more privilege than the women,” she paused for a moment. “And I mean, I grew up believing that and wondering—and really, actually, this is very painful. Because I believed that God loved my brothers more than me.”[530]

The ceiling for what was possible for a Mormon woman, in Courtney’s view, was always concrete. Looking back now she can recognize the seeds of discontent that were planted in her as a young woman, but at the time she accepted that it all had to go together, and the limits would ultimately be worth it. Even now, with that hindsight, these memories are painful. “This is why it's so hard for me to talk about Mormonism and my family, because there's just so many contradictions,” she said. “And I'm sure that that's how all Mormon stories are, if you look at them long enough. But one of those contradictions was my mom wanting to be smart and educated, and having sort of a feminist awakening when I was a kid, but then also being with a man who was so patriarchal and so sexist and I would say misogynistic, and, you know, her trying to balance those things.”[531] Courtney’s mother exemplified a common dilemma for Mormon women: the church encourages education and provides women with opportunities to speak during testament meetings and hold certain leadership positions[532] while simultaneously encouraging them to get married and stay at home with their children. They are equipped with tools that they are then discouraged from putting to use, although she thinks that this is slowly changing. “I would say that that has evolved, because when I was really young, it was: girls don't go to college,” she said. “And then it evolved into: women need to go to college because what if their husband dies and then they don't have any skills. So then you need to go to college. And

[530] Kendrick.
[531] Kendrick.
[532] Although these are limited, and as previously discussed women cannot hold the priesthood.

then now it's evolved to: women need to go to college just because it teaches them how to think, and we need smart women to spread the gospel. So I've watched an evolution of that [...] All of this encouragement is to build up the kingdom of God. At the end of the day, it's never like women go to school just for your own independence, you know, your own independent development of self. It always comes back to: how can you bless the church with your education?"[533] Women were like adjectives, an addendum to the men in their lives, and to the work of the church. She had difficulty imagining a different future for herself, but though her mother did not identify as a feminist, she opened the door for Courtney to start exploring feminism. "I think I started really getting into feminism when I was in high school. Although I wouldn't have called it that either, I don't think anybody gave me any language for this," she said. She was elected girl's student body president[534] and decided to get other girls together so that they could all burn their bras in the homecoming bonfire. It was the start of a long journey. " And I would always say to my mom, well, what did you expect?" she said. "I mean, this came from you. And I still to this day say this. My liberalism and my feminism came from my mom, 100%. Whether she wants to admit it or not."[535]

Courtney decided after college that she wanted to serve a mission at the same time as her then boyfriend, and when she returned at 22 they were married. "It was an abusive, terrible relationship in the beginning," she said, and things quickly took a turn for the worse. Her husband was incredibly volatile, and the abuse continued to escalate. She knew that this was wrong, but did not feel like she had any options. "I actually think that my feminist ways made it kind of seem, well, let's see, how do I want to say this–it just felt to me like being an outspoken

[533] Kendrick.
[534] Her school had two positions: student body president and girl's student body president.
[535] Kendrick.

feminist in the society that I was in and the culture that I was in, and again, I would not have used the word feminist, but just the kind of person I was, made me feel grateful that any man would want to be married to me. So when I found one who seemed tough enough, and agile and clever enough to stick with me, I just thought, this is probably as good as it gets."[536] In her understanding of Mormon doctrine and the Plan of Salvation she felt that she must be attached to a husband, and divorce seemed unthinkable. Ultimately it was her parents who convinced her to leave, although, according to Courtney, "I was in it because that was what they showed was normal. And they got me out of it, because they were able to see it as abusive, but they wouldn't– I mean, they weren't willing to acknowledge that in their own marriage."[537]

Much like Jamee and Amberly, who we met in chapter two, Courtney started blogging to build up her audience as a steppingstone to other work. She started her blog in 2005, right at the beginning of the blogging boom. She wanted to write, and blogging had a low barrier for entry. As she explained it, "we were trying to get pregnant, and couldn't get pregnant. And I thought, well, this will be–I couldn't find anybody online in the early days of the internet who was talking about infertility. And I think in religious communities, where women's value is based on motherhood, it was just excruciatingly painful to be in this position. And so I think I thought, well, if I start writing about it, then it will take away some of the shame that I feel surrounding it. And also, it'll give me community. And so I started writing, because people in my community would say things like, oh, I'm so sorry, you should just enjoy it, enjoy not having kids, you know. And I was trying to say what my blog was called, *C. Jane Enjoy It*. And the whole point was to show people how much I was enjoying my life. I was enjoying our trips to Europe, or lovely date nights where we don't have to get a babysitter, whatever. But you still feel pain if

[536] Kendrick.
[537] Kendrick.

that's what you're trying to achieve, pregnancy or motherhood or whatever, you're still going to have pain."[538] Courtney is a gifted writer, and quickly mastered the friendly, funny, and engaging tone employed by many popular lifestyle bloggers. Much like the popular writers discussed in Chapter One, successful lifestyle bloggers, if they are religious, must strike a balance between approachability and authority. One must believe that they know what they are talking about without them appearing to be stuck up or rejecting gendered norms.

She gained followers steadily, but skyrocketed when her family experienced a personal tragedy. Her sister Stephanie, who is also a blogger, was in a plane crash with her husband which landed them in induced comas. Courtney took in their children and wrote about the experience. "I was giving interviews, and we're on the Today Show, and we were, I mean, it was new because blogging was new, and having your own blogging community and influencing was new, and all of it. So it just felt like it was a gigantic news story that was like the perfect storm in a way."[539] Courtney became one of the vanguards of the Mormon lifestyle blogging movement often called Mormon Mommy Blogs, a title that she hated. "The whole reason why I was blogging was because I liked to write, I wanted to be considered a writer," she said. "And men who were blogging were not being called daddies, right? You know, it's just–this tale is old as time. And I can't even tell you how many times I wrote, I was a columnist for the Deseret News for a while, and I wrote columns about it. And I wrote my own blog post about it, like, please stop calling me this. I may be a Mormon, I may be a mom. But I'm doing this because I'm a legitimate writer and I'm getting paid to write so like, give me this title."[540]

[538] Kendrick.
[539] Kendrick.
[540] Kendrick.

Like the content creators in Chapter Three, Courtney had to learn to navigate the tricky world of monetization and partnerships that comes with this level of success. “I've had full time jobs before, blogging was far more work than any full time job,” she explained. “You eat, sleep, and breathe blogging. And everything you do has to be turned into content. Your whole life is The Truman Show. Yeah, I have never worked harder than when I was a blogger. In fact, when I had my second baby, I had her at home. And my husband was working on a Father's Day post. It was a sponsored post for Father's Day. And it was like, he was cataloging his best gifts for dad, right? And I, he was working on that, and I started labor, and I have the baby, and then he was like, okay, I’m gonna go back down and finish that. And I remember just being like, yeah, you gotta go finish it. Like, that's how demanding that lifestyle was, there was no downtime ever.”[541] Maintaining the illusion of her idealized lifestyle became increasingly difficult, and began to cause friction within her family. She recalls that, “it was hard between me and my sister because my sister wanted to approach blogging much more like Martha Stewart, everything is beautiful and lovely sort of way. And I think I wanted to be a little bit more gritty or thought provoking. I wanted to push thought in and I wanted to tackle subjects that were kind of dangerous, I guess, for my community [..] And I wanted to present our family in a way that seemed like we were working through issues and, you know, things are not rosy, but I think a lot of my siblings really loved the way that my sister approached it because it made the whole system look really good; Mormonism and our family, marriage [...] So yeah, things kind of became complicated between siblings.”[542]

The facade was beginning to crack. With her popularity came a new, non-Mormon audience. “It opened up an audience to me that was non-Mormon for the first time in my life, she

[541] Kendrick.
[542] Kendrick.

said. “And people were challenging my thoughts and giving me things to think about, books to read, that had never before entered into my atmosphere. And when I would write things, I was challenged on them. And it really propelled me out into a world that I didn't, I wasn't prepared for, I guess I could say. I didn't realize that that's where my journey would lead.”[543] She was still wrestling with the issues of gender inequality that had troubled her since childhood, and she began to write about them. She was inundated with feedback, both positive and negative, but having her views challenged in this way gave her room to question them herself, and soon she was entering into a public faith crisis. “It was hell,” she said. And at this point in the interview she needed to explain her perspective on the church. “I believe that I was born into and raised in a cult. And it's super important for me to own that, because this story does not really make a whole lot of sense unless you see that, that the programming that I was given was so ingrained, and I really was taught these things in such a way that it was fear based. So I was taught these things in such a way that I would, I knew I would lose everything if I ever went against the church, or spoke out against the church, or even questioned the church.”[544] When Jamee in Chapter 2 or Karim in Chapter 3 struggled with their relationship to the church they too had to decide what to make public and what to keep private when, like Courtney, their personal branding includes their faith. One must imagine that her experience serves as a cautionary tale. They both chose to draw a curtain between public and private. Courtney went public. “It felt like it was the most honest thing to do,” she said, “and I felt like I owed my followers and friends and people who I had influenced to join the church or to look into Mormonism, I owed them. It just felt ethically that like, that was the ethical choice, was to be honest about it. I did it publicly, just

[543] Kendrick.
[544] Kendrick.

for my own sense of ethics. But I did not think it through. And it was, yeah, it was a disaster."[545] When she began to write about controversial issues such as women's ordination or feminism, she lost her calling in her ward. Soon her speaking engagements began to dry up, and she was no longer being invited to give paid talks to church groups. "The Mormons who are just so excited about you being on Oprah or, you know, showing the world how great Mormonism was, as soon as you start questioning things they were the most terrible, and Mormon women can be terrible bitches. I learned that the hard way, they were just awful to me. And it also made me think like, why would I want to be in a church with people who act like this?"[546] After that first crack things quickly spiraled out of control. Choosing to go public with her concerns and questions had felt like the ethical thing to do for Courtney, but the swift and violent[547] backlash staggered her. "I was losing followers and so I was losing income. And that was really hard economically for my family. And it was no small thing, really. And then yeah, your friends leave you and your family doesn't know what to do with you. And you really are–it's like you have to be born into a whole new life, because everything that you knew, and pledged loyalty to, and gave your money to, and your time, and your talents, is all gone. And it's all a lie. And it's not–it's not even real anymore. And so I don't know how much more I could have burned it down, but it was burned."[548]

Courtney, her husband, and her children left the church. She has not attended a service since 2016. She has continued to write, but her content has changed significantly. "I think I'm writing to myself when I was on the edge," she said. "And what did I want? What did I want someone to say to me? And what did I want? And like an older, wiser woman to come into my life like a maternal figure? What did I want her to say and do and point out? And how did I want

[545] Kendrick.
[546] Kendrick.
[547] At this time she received hate mail and even threats.
[548] Kendrick.

her to come across? And what are the words I wanted her to use? And how did I want her to show me that I was going to be okay? And that there was life on the other side."[549] She now approaches her writing, and influencer culture in general, with significant wariness. She has seen behind the curtain, and no longer feels obligated to maintain any illusions. "The other day I got a request from somebody, they want to be an influencer. And so they're going to school to hone-in their communication skills. And I just wanted to say like, the whole thing is smoke and mirrors, right? It's like saying I want to become a magician, is really what it is, which is fine. It has its place and I'm supportive of women who are getting their paycheck, and what suits them and their family. But I think we've got to call it what it is. And it really is a circus, or card tricks, or whatever. But if you're willing to do that, then go for it. But I just wish somebody would have told me ahead of time that most of it is fake, or do I want to say fake? Just most of it is a show, it's a performance."[550]

Katie Langston: Finding Feminism in a New Faith

The four women featured in the chapter on feminism shared several key characteristics. They had vivid memories of events from their childhood where they first began to notice inequality and unfairness within their faith tradition, they handled these doubts by becoming extra faithful, thinking that if they could do everything "right" it would resolve this discomfort, and they reached a breaking point which led to a feminist awakening, facilitated by their online community. From that point they diverged, some engaging in direct activism, others focusing on writing and content creation, and while they each had subsequent experiences which challenged their faith, each of them decided, at least nominally, to remain in their religious tradition. Katie

[549] Kendrick.
[550] Kendrick.

followed a similar trajectory, but when she reached her breaking point she found that her faith broke, too.

Katie grew up in a Mormon family in Utah. “I didn't associate with a lot of people who weren't Mormon,” she recalls. “I think they were probably there (laughs). I'm sure they were. But I didn't really know them. You know, we had one neighbor across the street that was not Mormon.”[551] Her parents are both converts who moved to Utah from the East Coast, and were quite strict in their faith, bordering on fundamentalist, according to Katie. She and her siblings could not play outside on Sunday and had strict limits on the media they could consume. When she was in third grade, they were all pulled from public school, and she was homeschooled until grade nine. “And the curriculum was this weird religious curriculum that they found that their friends gave them, that thought it was the end of the world and it was mixed up with weird far right things like the New World Order was a conspiracy and something, you know, the Constitution was gonna save us. And like, we shouldn't have to pay income tax, and all of it was mixed up together, right?” She laughs now at the memory. “The important historical epochs that we would learn about in homeschool were the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the founding of the United States of America. And that was history, right? Like our entire history curriculum was like, the year 4000 BC, God created the earth. And then in the book it was the New Testament, and then it was the Book of Mormon, and then it was America. And that is the trajectory of humanity.”[552] This curriculum combined right wing politics with conservative Mormon doctrine and apocalypticism, which contributed to Katie’s religious scrupulosity.

[551] Katie Langston, interview with the author, January 20, 2022.
[552] Langston.

Like Meghan, Lisa, April, and Elle[553] Katie, from a young age, had a sense that something was not quite right, that things were not quite fair, but she was unable to articulate why. As a child this caused her significant distress. “I had a ton of anxiety,” she said. “From my earliest memories I had pretty bad religious scrupulosity or obsessive-compulsive disorder. And so, you know, most of my time, if I wasn't playing as a kid, was spent worrying about religion and the state of my eternal soul, which didn't leave a lot of room for thinking about what I might be someday. I figured I was supposed to be a wife and mother. I wasn't really sure that I wanted to be. But I was also not sure if I was allowed to not want to be. So I just tried to avoid those thoughts.”[554]

She did all of the things that she knew she was supposed to. She attended college in Utah, close to home, and went on a mission partway through. When she met the man who would be her husband, she insisted that he get serious about his faith before they could date, which he did. They started dating in January, were engaged by April, and married in the temple by August. But she was unable to shake the doubts that had been piling up since childhood. “All throughout my whole life, all of the ways that I had gone out of my way and done everything that I possibly could to be a good Mormon, I still never ever, ever felt worthy.”[555] Like the other women in this category, she also had traumatic experiences with religious authority. “Mormons, you probably have heard about the worthiness interviews that they do, and like these processes where they like, bring you into a room and they ask you weird questions. And I'd had a few traumatic experiences with that where bishops asked really inappropriate questions, sexually graphic questions [...] So I had all this anxiety. I hated myself, I hated, my body was evil, my thoughts

[553] See Chapter 4.
[554] Langston.
[555] Langston.

were evil, everything was evil, I was evil. And I wasn't worthy. And I had this terrible OCD that was like, what if you're a monster? What if you're irredeemable?"[556] This worsening faith crisis led her to blogs like *Feminist Mormon Housewives*, where other people were talking about the same things that she had experienced. She began participating in comments sections and was then asked to become a contributor. "I started going to meetups and *Sunstone*," she said. "I started meeting people in person that I would see on the blog, you know, so then I met Jana Reiss at a thing, and I started talking with her. And next thing we knew we were doing a podcast with Dan Witherspoon about like, emerging church things in Mormonism and is there a connection, what kind of connection. And then, you know, I met the *Feminist Mormon Housewives* people at a retreat, and then again at *Sunstone*, and I started being friends with them. They thought I was really nice. So then they were like, hey, do you want to come blog with us? And I was like, sure. And so, you know, that's when I was a podcast guest a lot for Dan, and I was blogging at *Feminist Mormon Housewives*. And then the Facebook group thing really took off, right, and really replaced actually a lot of what the blogs used to do in terms of conversations, and I was a moderator and an active participant."[557]

Katie immersed herself in progressive Mormon spaces and began on a path to becoming a digital media specialist, but was still experiencing distress and religious anxiety. Her husband Lanie was ultimately the one to set her on the path towards faith deconstruction. "I was just beginning to open up, beginning to open up to this idea of grace. And then the thing that kind of sealed the deal was that I went to this lecture by a CS Lewis scholar named Jerry Root who was giving a lecture at Utah State and some, you know, campus Christian group had brought him in. He's a CS Lewis scholar and evangelism professor at Wheaton, which is a pretty conservative

[556] Langston.
[557] Langston.

school. But Lanie again, my husband, was like, this is pretty interesting. You should go."[558] She had been listening to conversations between professors at BYU and their Evangelical contemporaries, and was increasingly drawn toward protestant Christianity. The lecture by Jerry Root was a turning point. I will quote at length here:

> He just explained the gospel in a way that I had never heard it before. And he said, I'm a Christian because I know enough of my deficiencies to be devastated. And I couldn't live without the love of God and Jesus Christ. And I was devastated. I was hyper aware of my deficiencies. And I had never heard anyone just admit that they were deficient before because in Mormonism you don't do that, because you're trying to work, trying to do all you can, right? And you're trying to be worthy all the time. And so if you have deficiencies, you hide them, you don't express them, you don't name it out loud. And there was something about that, that broke me all the way open. And all of those experiences around that time, and I had just a profound sense of acceptance, of divine love and acceptance, that I didn't have. That the worthiness construct, the whole thing was just a bunch of BS. And I didn't have to, I didn't have to worry about that, that I was loved. And there was nothing that anything or anyone could do to change that. Ever. And so that really changed my life. And it also really messed me up.
>
> Because then I'm in this system, this religious system, that doesn't have that as its central teaching. That instead has its opposite as its kind of core control mechanism. And so I spent a decade trying to figure out if I had it wrong, or they had it wrong. So it's like, okay, this grace thing that I just experienced, like, this is real. And it's changed me. Now is the reason that I didn't feel this in Mormonism because of my problems? Like I got, I

[558] Langston.

started going to therapy at this time too, I started understanding what was going on with me, like, was it a me problem? Or was it a them problem? And it took me about 10 years to figure out, it was surely a them problem. It wasn't a me problem. It's not me, it's you.[559]

Katie's feminist awakening coincided with her faith deconstruction. As she participated in progressive Mormon online spaces, she also began to explore other faith communities. For the first time in her life she felt a calling, and went looking for a way to combine digital media and content creation with religious outreach. She applied for a program at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, where she found her spiritual home. She was baptized Lutheran in 2017, and in 2023 she was ordained within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Summary of Conclusions: Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint

"If gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of restraint."[560] These words open Judith Butler's book *Undoing Gender*, and have been a guiding question throughout this project: what does it mean to do one's gender, and what does it mean to do it within a scene of constraint? If doing gender is a play, how much can the actors improvise? Those times when we go off script are the moments when we create what Butler calls gender trouble; when we disturb or muddy the waters. To stick with the theater analogy, some are born knowing the script and stage directions, and embodying their assigned role comes easily. Others are forced into costumes which do not fit or shoes that pinch, and always have to be reminded of their lines.

[559] Langston.
[560] Butler, *Undoing Gender*. 1.

As I began this project it was my suspicion that even those who had naturalized their performance, who the world would put in the former category, often still thought of themselves like the latter. Gender is naturalized but not natural. As such, the regulating norms of gender must be implicit, as Butler says, "discernable most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce."[561] This means that the norms which regulate gender and gendered expression are knowable only in relation to an Other, always done with the viewer in mind, even if that viewer is imaginary (or the self). In this way we are all creators and consumers.

The women interviewed for this project were overwhelmingly aware of this dichotomy, between creator and consumer, and how they must curate their performance in order to make things work. By that I mean they were largely aware that they needed to "put on a show," to highlight and lowlight aspects of themselves in order to become successful content creators. Several, like Jesse Espinosa, make strategic choices about bodily presentation which do not necessarily align with her current viewpoints or lifestyle when posting on Instagram, because she is aware of what is necessary to make her legible to her audience. Bodies are social phenomena. Female content creators must style themselves in such a way as to be readable to their audience as a member of their religious community. For some, like Meghan Crozier and Rachel Kessler, a major step in separating from Evangelicalism includes both bodily changes like haircuts, tattoos, or piercings, and showing themselves differently, creating and sharing different bodily styles.

Whether the women interviewed here were seeking to align themselves with the norms ascribed to them or were trying to subvert them, they were aware of what was expected of them as women, and adjusted their performance accordingly. Judith Butler says that "The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable."[562] These terms (or

[561] Butler, 41.
[562] Butler, 2.

norms) reward adherence and punish dissidence. Adherence, for a Mormon or Evangelical content creator, means followers, brand partnerships, speaking engagements, and social capital. Dissidence, as we saw with the feminists featured above, is punished by loss of income, loss of followers, and even censure from religious authorities. These women, despite their different backgrounds and ideological positions, shared an understanding of these norms, and the ways in which their lives (and content) was governed by them. And even those who seek to fulfill these gendered expectations would often express discomfort or unease. In those moments lies the potential for making trouble. If, as Butler asserts, "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized,"[563] those mechanisms can be altered, subverted, or redirected. These moments of questioning, where one asks, "Can I do this? Am I doing it right?" reveal the stitches in the narrative of gender. If it were only internal, only natural, only inherent, one could not do it wrong. That those doubts exist, even for those who would espouse natural pre-discursive gender, creates space for calling those ideas to account. If we are in a constant act of doing and becoming our gender, it is possible to do it differently, to become something new. In the stories of these women we can see glimpses of what it could mean to do gender outside of these scenes of constraint.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have been working in concert with the Office of Special Collections at the Honnold Library to create an archive which will house these interviews, tentatively titled "Stories of Religion and Gender in America: An Oral History Archive." It is my hope that we can continue to expand the archive, collecting additional interviews and perhaps expanding to further religious

[563] Butler, 42.

traditions. Comparative work between these two traditions and other faith traditions such as Islam could prove fruitful. There is a growing number of Islamic influencers and content creators, particularly in the realms of fashion and beauty, and they could add important perspectives to this archive.

I have featured here only a portion of the material gathered for this project. I completed interviews with twenty-nine subjects, and have several more who have expressed interest in participating but were not able to be interviewed within the time-frame necessary for completion of this dissertation. As such, I intend to continue conducting interviews and will add them to the archive. One of the pitfalls of doing ethnographic work is that you are limited by your pool of respondents. Due to the nature of this type of research certain groups were well represented and others were not as prominent. I would like to continue conducting interviews, which will further add to the diversity of voices represented here. In particular I have been cultivating relationships with fashion, makeup, and beauty influencers, as that demographic is slightly underrepresented in the first round of interviews. With this wealth of data I hope to develop what I have written here into a manuscript which could be published as a monograph.

There have been several important books addressing different aspects of Evangelicalism and gender and Mormonism and gender over the last few years such as *Jesus and John Wayne* by Kristen Kobes du Mez, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* by Beth Allison Barr, *The Great Sex Rescue* by Sheila Gregorie, *Mormon Women at the Crossroads* by Caroline Kline, and *Sister Saints* by Colleen McDannell, to name only a few. This work can join this fast-growing field, but can also become a starting point for scholars interested in the intersection of feminist theory and these two religious traditions.

Over the last two years I have been awarded a podcast fellowship from the School of Arts and Humanities, and during that time I have worked on Fireside with Blair Hodges and This Global Latter-day Life with Caroline Kline. In the latter Caroline utilized oral histories collected from Latter-day Saint women from around the world. Working on this project expanded my conception of what I could do with my data and interviews, and I would like to take the skills I developed through that fellowship to explore those possibilities, which could include podcasts or other new media, expanding the collection with the Honnold Library to include multimedia elements linking different aspects of the interviews to expanded context, or utilizing them in curriculum development.

Appendix 1: Institutional Review Board and Other Forms

CGU Informed Consent Form

Claremont Graduate University	**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN *GENDER IN LATTER-DAY SAINT AND EVANGELICAL ONLINE SPACES*** (IRB # 4034)

You are invited to participate in a research project. Volunteering may or may not benefit you directly, but your participation would be a valuable addition to this project, and to increasing knowledge and understanding about the lived experience of religious women in America.

If you volunteer, you will receive a short questionnaire and potentially be contacted for a follow-up interview. This will take about 10-15 minutes initially of your time. Interviews will range from 20 minutes to 2 hours, depending upon type. Volunteering for this study involves no more risk than what a typical person experiences on a regular day. Your involvement is entirely up to you. You may withdraw at any time for any reason. Please continue reading for more information about the study.

STUDY LEADERSHIP: This research project is led by Kate Davis of the Claremont Graduate University, who is being supervised by Nicola Denzey-Lewis.

PURPOSE: I am conducting a study of religious women who are active in online spaces, particularly in creating content for platforms like blogs or Instagram. In particular I am interested in interviewing women associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and women associated with Evangelical churches or groups. I am interested in understanding your motivation for creating content online, and how it has impacted your life. I want to better understand women's religious thoughts and experiences generally, and also around issues of gender.

ELIGIBILITY: Participants will all be women who are online content creators who are associated with either the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or the Evangelical Christian movement. All participants will be over the age of 18.

PARTICIPATION: If you agree to participate it will include a few things: a short questionnaire (will take less than 15 minutes to complete), with a potential follow-up via an informal virtual chat where we can talk about the project and your answers (this will last approximately 20 to 30 minutes). You can choose to end your participation there. If you agree to participate in the full study, we will schedule a time for a longer oral history-style virtual interview, which will typically last between 1 and 2 hours.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION: The risks that you run by taking part in this study are minimal. Participants are informed ahead of time about the approximate length of interviews, and participation is fully voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION: There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation would be a valuable addition to this project, and to increasing knowledge and understanding about the lived experience of women in these two religious communities. Participants will have the

opportunity to discuss their work and potentially gain exposure through future publications of this research. This study will benefit me, as the researcher, by providing an archive of valuable data from which I can build my dissertation and potential future academic publications. This study is also intended to benefit the academic community in that it will provide a unique perspective on gendered identity in these religious communities. Scholars will also benefit from access to archived interviews.

COMPENSATION: You will not be directly compensated for participating in this study.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop or withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any particular question for any reason at any time without it being held against you. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your current or future connection with anyone at CGU.

CONFIDENTIALITY: As I will be recording, transcribing, and archiving our interviews, there are several options for protecting your privacy.

1. You can choose to be identified by your name or username in both published materials and archives.
2. You can have your interview archived with other similar interviews in the Oral History Project Archives at Claremont Graduate University, where your name can be withheld until 2040, at which time it would be reattached to your interview materials.
3. You can choose to be identified by a pseudonym in all publications, and your name will not be attached to your interview, and it will not be archived.

Please indicate which option you would prefer by initialing next to it:

Option 1: _____ Option 2:_____ Option 3:_____

ARCHIVING: The materials from this interview will be deposited with Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, a division of The Claremont Colleges, Inc. (Special Collections).

I acknowledge that Special Collections acquires oral history interviews with the intent of making them available to researchers for an ongoing or indefinite period of time. I understand that to accomplish this, the following items may be created from my interview:

- a preservation master copy and access copies of the recording
- reformatted copies of the recording that meet changing technological and archival standards ▪ an edited transcript and summary
- a photograph of me from the interview
- copies of any personal documents or additional photos I wish to share during the interview

I hereby give permission to Special Collections for any recordings and other materials made during this project to be used by researchers and the public for educational use (in seminars, workshops, conferences, or teaching), for broadcasting purposes, for publication (including internet publication) and for public performance, display, or exhibitions.

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING: Copyrights and rights of reproduction in and to these materials will be governed by United States copyright law. The Participant may transfer the work to the public domain, transfer the copyrights to Special Collections, or the Participant may retain the copyrights: (CHECK ONE)

____I hereby transfer this work to the public domain. I fully understand that this interview will not be copyrighted by me or Special Collections, but will be immediately placed in the public domain. This decision is intended to provide maximum usage by future researchers.

____I hereby transfer copyright to Special Collections, which grants me a non-exclusive license for the complete and unrestricted right to reproduce, publish, broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt the interview.

____I retain the copyright to this interview and grant a non-exclusive license to Special Collections, for distribution to the public for non-commercial, educational purposes, in formats and settings that include, but are not limited to, print and electronic publications, events and exhibitions, internet websites, classrooms, and online. Special Collections may direct patrons requesting to use the interview for commercial purposes or purposes not allowed under Fair Use (Section 107, Title 17, U.S. Copyright Code), to the following address:

_____
Name

_____
Street Address

_____
City, State, Zip code

RESTRICTIONS: I agree to the uses of these materials described above and I agree that researchers who meet the requirements set by Special Collections may have full access to these interviews except for any restrictions noted below.

Unless otherwise specified above, I place no restrictions on access to and use of the interview.

FURTHER INFORMATION: If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please contact Kate Davis at katedavisresearch@gmail.com. You may also contact Nicola Denzey-Lewis at Nicola.denzeylewis@cgu.edu. If you have any ethical concerns about this project or about your rights as a human subject in research, you may contact the CGU IRB at (909) 607-9406 or at irb@cgu.edu. A copy of this form will be given to you if you wish to keep it.

CONSENT: Your signature below means that you understand the information on this form, that someone has answered any and all questions you may have about this study, and you voluntarily agree to participate in it.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Printed Name of Participant _____

Question list as shared with participants

Oral History Interview Questions: We will not get through all of these in each interview. For each interview I will select around 15 questions from this list.

Part One: Background and Home Life

- What is your religious background? Was your family religious? Do you still belong to the same religious group? What has changed?
- What was special or fun about your family? What challenges did you face?
- What was a typical meal like at home?
- Are you married? If so, what is your family like now? What do you remember most about your wedding?
- Do you have children? What have been some of the best/worst things about being a parent?
- Overall, are there things you would have done differently in your life (big or small)? Did things go "according to plan"?

Part Two: Background Outside the Home

- What jobs have you had? Tell me about your first job.
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- What did your community look like outside of your family? Tell me about your neighborhood, etc.
- Did you attend college? How did you decide to go there? What were some of your successes/accomplishments? How about challenges or frustrations?
- What is your earliest memory of going to church?
- What is the racial makeup of your ward/church? How often are issues of race addressed?
- What role do you see issues of race and class playing in your ward/church, and in the larger faith movement?

Subcategory: Mormon: (several of these questions were inspired by Caroline Kline's work doing oral histories with Mormon women)

- How do you perceive women's role in the Church? What influences that understanding?
- Can you recall the first time you realized that men and women were seen differently?
- What has been your experience with Male Priesthood authority? How does this doctrine play out in your life (at home or church)?
- What are the church's teachings on mothers working for pay? Has this influenced your decision to work or not work for pay? Why or why not?
- What do you like best about the Church? What do you like least? What would you change about it if you could?

Subcategory: Evangelical:

- How do you perceive women's role in the Church? What influences that understanding?
- Can you recall the first time you realized that men and women were seen differently?

- What has been your experience with male headship? How does this doctrine play out in your life (at home or church)?
- Have you ever heard the terms complementarianism or egalitarianism? What do you understand those theories to mean?
- What are your church's teachings on mothers working for pay? Has this influenced your decision to work or not work for pay? Why or why not?
- Have you ever changed churches as an adult? What happened?
- What do you like best about the church you go to now? What do you like least? What would you change about it if you could?

Part Three: The World Online

- Why did you start creating online content?
- What does a regular day look like for you? What is your routine?
- `Walk me through how you create a post. (inspiration to execution)
- What is your favorite tool or piece of equipment? How did you start using it?
- What considerations go into what you decide to feature? Can you walk me through it?
- What "makes the cut" for a post? Is there anything that is off limits?
- Has posting/blogging impacted your family dynamics? Can you give me an example?
- Have you monetized your posts? What thinking went into the decision to monetize or not?
- How do you explain what you do when you meet someone for the first time?
- How would you classify yourself (i.e. stay at home mom, content creator, influencer, small business owner, etc.)? Do you feel comfortable with that title?
- Have you ever been classified in a way that you didn't like? What happened?
- What is your favorite thing that has happened because you started posting content? What was the most unexpected?
- Looking back to when you first started, how has your content changed? How have you changed?
- Who do you think is your primary audience? Why do you appeal to those groups specifically?
- What do you want me to know, as an outsider?

Subcategory: The Community

- How has all of this expanded or contracted your relationships? Have you met anyone through what you do?
- Do you participate in any groups or networks online? How did you get started? Why do you choose to participate?
- Do your online community and your "real life" community ever intersect?

Subcategory: "Mommy Blogs"

- What do you think of the term "mommy blogger"? Have you ever been called that?
- Do you feel it is an accurate label?
- What is your favorite feedback that you have ever gotten from a follower?
- What question do you get asked most frequently?

Subcategory: Fashion

- What do you love about fashion? What do you sometimes hate about it?
- Have you ever received negative responses about what you post? What happened?
- Has writing and posting about fashion changed the way that you think about your body?
- What is your favorite feedback that you have ever gotten from a follower?
- What question do you get asked most frequently?
- What do you understand "modesty" to mean? How does that interact with your work?

Subcategory: Feminism

- How do you see yourself within your religious community? What is your niche?
- Has this changed how you interact with others in your faith community? Can you give an example?
- Do you write under your own name? What lead you to that decision?
- Have you ever received negative responses about what you post? What happened?
- What is your favorite feedback that you have ever gotten from a follower?
- What question do you get asked most frequently?
- Tell me about your "feminist awakening." What changed for you?

Part Four: Those who have left

- Can you tell me about the decision to leave?
- How has your relationship to the church changed?
- What did you take with you (metaphorically) willingly or unwillingly?
- What do you miss most? What do you miss least?
- What role did your writing/posting play in this decision (if any)?
- Have you remained a part of your faith community in any aspects? What went into that choice?

Release Form for those who will also be archived as part of the Mormon Women's Oral History Project

Individual Release Agreement

The undersigned,_____(print name), enters into this Agreement with the LDS Mormon Studies Council, as Agent for the Howard W. Hunter Foundation, a California nonprofit corporation ("Producer"). I understand that the Producer is gathering a series of interviews with LDS women and creating transcriptions for deposit in historical archives and for use in historical programs and writings. I further understand that my words may be part of these productions. ("Product").

1. I grant the Producer and its designees the right to use my name and words as embodied in the Product, whether recorded, transcribed, or transferred to any other media, now known or later developed. This grant includes, without limitation, the right to edit, mix or duplicate and to use or re-use the Product in whole or part as the Producer may elect. The Producer or its designee shall have complete non-exclusive ownership of the Product in which I participate, including copyright interests, and I acknowledge that I have no interest or complete ownership in the Product or its copyright. The Producer will have the right to grant permission for passages of any length to be excerpted in other publications and programs.

2. I also grant the Producer and its designees the right to archive the Product, either in whole or in parts in historical archives that they may choose, either alone or with other products, for such use as it shall elect. This grant includes the right to use the Product for publicizing any such uses.

3. I also grant the producer and its designees the right to reproduce and broadcast the Product, and the right to webcast and/or stream, to publish or display the Product, either in whole or in parts, and either alone or with other products, in any other form of broadcast. This grant includes the right to use the Product for publicizing any such uses.

4. I confirm that I have the right to enter this Agreement, that I am not restricted by any commitments to third parties, and that the Producer has no financial commitment or obligations to me as a result of this Agreement. I hereby give all clearances, copyright and otherwise, for the use of my name and, words, embodied in the Product. I expressly release and indemnify the Producer and its officers, employees, agents and designees from any and all claims known and unknown (including, but not limited to, libel, slander and/or privacy claims), arising out of or in any way connected with the above granted uses and representations. The rights granted the producer herein are perpetual, worldwide, throughout the universe and in all forms of media.
I have read the foregoing and understand its terms and stipulations and agree to all of them:

Signed_____Date _____

_____
Producer

Transcript Template

Narrator
Interview Location Virtual
Date of Interview
Interviewer Kate Davis

Summary:

Keywords:
Note: Oral history transcripts are approximations of oral interviews. They cannot capture all the nuances of the exchange between narrator and interviewer. This transcript may have been lightly edited to remove some false starts and filler words. Additionally, some words may be misheard or lost during the transcription process. We encourage researchers to listen to the audio recording for a fuller approximation of the interview.

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Participant Interviews

Jamee Arthur, Interview with the author, December 8, 2021.

Lisa Butterworth, in conversation with the author, November 19, 2021.

Aubrey Chaves, interview with the author, January 13, 2022.

Meghan Crozier, in conversation with the author, December 29, 2021.

Maryruth Dilling, Interview with the author, February 15, 2022.

Jesse Espinosa, Interview with the author, September 14, 2022.

LeeAnn Fox, interview with the author, January 14, 2022.

Karim Jones, Interview with the author, September 15, 2022.

Courtney Kendrick, in conversation with the author, January 18, 2022.

Rachel Kessler, in conversation with the author, January 12, 2023.

Amberly Lambertsen, interview with the author, November 18, 2021.

Katie Langston, interview with the author, January 20, 2022.

Sarah, Interview with the author, January 26, 2022.

Rachel Schmoyer, interview with the author, January 28, 2022.

Heather Sundahl, interview with the author, November 9th, 2021.

Jessie Synan, interview with the author, January 12, 2022

April Young Bennett, in conversation with the author, December 13, 2021.