

Navigating Mormonism's Gendered Theology and Practice:  
Mormon Women in a Global Context

By  
Caroline Kline

Claremont Graduate University  
2018

© Copyright Caroline Kline, 2018  
All Rights Reserved

ProQuest Number: 10845479

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10845479

Published by ProQuest LLC (2018). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

## 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 Caroline Kline as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Patrick Mason, Chair  
Claremont Graduate University  
Professor of Religion  
Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies

Karen Jo Torjesen  
Claremont Graduate University  
Emeritus Professor of Religion  
Emeritus Margo L. Goldsmith Chair of Women's Studies in Religion

Joanna Brooks  
San Diego State University  
Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Gina Messina  
Ursuline College  
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

## Abstract

### Navigating Mormonism's Gendered Theology and Practice: Mormon Women in a Global Context

By  
Caroline Kline

Claremont Graduate University: 2018

In the field of women's studies in religion, scholars have often privileged interpretive paradigms focusing on questions of gender equality. This paradigm has been transformative in religious studies, revealing layers of androcentric assumptions, practices and theologies which ground many of the world's religious traditions. However, this paradigm of gender equality sometimes fails to consider the worldviews and experiences of traditional religious women who embrace patriarchal religion. This dissertation examines the perspectives, ethical priorities, and gendered navigations of traditional religious women of color within Mormonism, a family-centered and highly gendered American-born religion. Using primarily the method of oral history interviews, I analyze the complex agency Mormon women of color enact in Mexico, Botswana, and the U.S. as they adopt and adapt their Mormon faith to their particular contexts. The following questions drive this project: How do questions of gender register to women of color in the U.S. and global south? What ethical imperatives do women of color, global and American, emphasize as they live their Mormon lives? Where are the sites of tension and resonance as they adopt and adapt Mormonism to their contexts? How do women enact a complex agency as they navigate their sometimes-conflicting loyalties?

In this intersectional examination of the experiences of women of color navigating issues of gender, race, class, and culture within a Mormon context, I argue that the end toward

which these women often direct their agentive acts is not typically gender equality; rather, it is the establishment of healthy vitalizing connections with other people and the divine. Therefore, a better lens through which to interpret these women's lives and choices is the paradigm of non-oppressive connectedness. While non-oppressive connectedness encompasses elements of female empowerment and liberation, it is characterized by a broader moral focus on fostering positive and productive relationality in a variety of different realms. In this paradigm, gender inequality or gender complementarity are not primary moral evils or concerns. Oppression, violence, and alienation from both God and other humans were the states which these women were actively working against.

This ethical imperative of non-oppressive connectedness emerged as a connecting theme in the stories and voices of dozens of Mormon women of color, as they discussed how Mormonism successfully or less successfully satisfied this moral and relational orientation in their various cultural contexts. Women in Mexico, Botswana, and the U.S. often found spaces within Mormonism's patriarchal ecclesiastical and familial structure to achieve the spirituality, self-development and uplifting relationships that they wanted to center their lives. Mormonism's injunctions to men to be devoted, proactive, and kind within the family and church community gave many interviewed Mormon women means to create healthier marriages and more satisfying relationships. Mormonism was often a powerful tool in this quest to eliminate interpersonal oppression, but as oral histories in Botswana, Mexico, and the U.S., attest, this did not mean that questions about church leaders' "Americentric" emphases and positions of privilege were not raised when church injunctions clashed with certain local traditions and realities. As Mormon women carefully navigated their loyalties between chosen faith and sometimes conflicting personal or cultural values, they enacted a complex, creative, and thoughtful agency.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	1
Women’s Liberation, Gender Equality and Women’s Studies in Religion .....	5
Religious Women and Agency .....	8
Connectedness, Relationality, and an Ethic of Care .....	14
Mormonism.....	18
Gender and Mormonism .....	22
Global Mormon Studies.....	27
Project Description, Methods, and Methodology .....	30
Contributions.....	40
Discussion of Chapters .....	42
<b>Chapter Two: Navigating Gender, Negotiating Agency: Mexican Mormon     Women’s Experiences and Self-Constructions in Oral Narratives</b> .....	45
Agency, Authority, and Liberation .....	48
Obedience, Abuse, and Change .....	59
Agency, Economic Empowerment, and Male Domestication .....	71
Gender, Race and Mormonism: Intersectional Reflections on Limitations Possibilities ..	79
Conclusion .....	84
<b>Chapter Three: African Women Embracing an American-born Church: Mormonism,     Gender, and Cultural Tension in the LDS Church in Botswana</b> .....	86
Single Motherhood, Chastity, and Extended Family Structures in Botswana.....	97
Adoption .....	115
Bridewealth.....	123
Companionate Marriage.....	134
Conclusion: Mormonism and Women’s Empowerment.....	146
<b>Chapter Four: Resisting Oppression, Embracing Complexity: Mormon Women     of Color in the U.S. Navigating Race and Gender</b> .....	153
Privileging Freedom from Oppression Over Sameness-Equality.....	159
Privilege and Standpoint.....	172
Surviving and Thriving in the U.S. Mormon Church as a Woman of Color.....	187
Conclusion .....	196
<b>Chapter Five: Toward a Mormon Womanist Theology of Abundance: Insights from the     Margins of Mormonism</b> .....	198
American Women: Rejecting Scarcity, Embracing Abundance.....	202

Southern African Women: Sufficiency and Abundance Within.....	212
Mexican Women: An Abundance of Revelation .....	217
Developing a Mormon Womanist Theology of Abundance.....	223
Conclusion .....	234
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>Appendix A: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in Mexico .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Appendix B: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in Botswana .....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Appendix C: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in the U.S.A. ....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Appendix D: Demographic Information.....</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>253</b>

## Chapter One Introduction

I asked Hortensia, “Do you feel equal to men in the Mormon church?” It was my eighth day in Veracruz, Mexico, and I had just spent an hour asking this middle-aged woman about her childhood, the challenges she has overcome in her life, and the best and hardest parts of being a Mormon woman.<sup>1</sup> Through my colleague who was translating for us, I learned about her difficult marriage which ultimately ended in divorce and the way her adopted Mormon faith had sustained her in those difficult years of navigating her marriage.

Her brow furrowed a bit at my question. She looked perplexed. It was the same look a dozen other Mexican women had given me when I asked about their perspectives and experiences with gender equality in the Mormon church. She slowly said, “Si....,” her voice lilting up, as if she was asking a question.

I had noted from the beginning the discomfort that that question provoked in many of the women I interviewed. I felt a little bad that this question was unsettling, but I kept asking it of the women I met and interviewed, since women’s status and perspectives toward gender were central concerns of mine. It would take dozens more oral life history interviews with Mormon women in Mexico, Botswana, and the United States before I came to realize why this question was unsettling. It was unsettling because it led them to suspect that I was evaluating their lives and stories through a lens—that of gender equality—that did not fully reflect their own dominant moral concerns or paradigms.

They were right.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Mormon,” “Latter-day Saint,” and “LDS” interchangeably. In all these cases I am referring to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as opposed to fundamentalist Mormon religious groups or members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now known as the Community of Christ.

I had embarked on this project to explore the worldviews and navigations of Mormon women of color in the U.S and the global south with an utter commitment to listen to these women and honor their particular experiences, whatever they might be. As a tradition born in the U.S. in the nineteenth century and still predominantly directed at the highest levels by white male church leaders in the United States, Mormonism experienced significant membership growth in the global south in the latter half of the twentieth century. Filled with paradoxes and tensions, not the least of which revolve around race and gender, Mormonism has proven itself to be a vibrant new religious movement, requiring much of converts but also delivering a high level of satisfaction to many of its adherents. How and why women of color in Mexico, Botswana, and the U.S. adopted and adapted this American-born faith into their particular contexts and how issues of gender registered to them in their diverse positionalities were central questions of mine.

For the past several years as a graduate student, I had participated in the Claremont Mormon Women's Oral History Project, interviewing (mostly white) American women about their lives and experiences and seeing in these interviews the depth and complexity of women's various stories. Whether they were feminist Mormons, like myself, or more traditional women, their oral histories revealed thoughtful navigations of their gendered lives. Unlike some early feminist scholars who had ignored traditional religious women or depicted them as oppressed or suffering from false consciousness, I focused on women's agency—their resistance, their support, their creative propagation—as they consciously embedded themselves in a patriarchal system. Oral life histories, I had discovered, were useful vehicles for this kind of analysis, since they revealed the arc of a woman's life and the various ways she was actively working to create, change, support or push against various structures or systems in her life. Traditional religious women, I knew, might affirm complementarian gender roles, but they were not disempowered

victims.<sup>2</sup> I was a Mormon myself, a member of this unabashedly patriarchal church, and my lived experience told me that this kind of reduction was unfair.<sup>3</sup>

Despite my sincere commitment to respecting the worldviews of my informants, there was an inevitable tension between that commitment and the Western liberal feminist lens through which I view the world. As a feminist, I saw the ways certain structures, systems, and teachings subordinate women. I spent my graduate student career employing feminist theoretical, theological, and ethical lenses to various Mormon texts and practices. Balancing out my commitment to recognize the complexity and depth of the diverse worldviews, cultures, and social locations of Mormon women, alongside my commitment to critically analyze those systems that marginalize women was a difficult process. I eventually understood that my white middle-class American feminist positionality, so often grounded in questions of gender equality, revealed itself in a handful of questions I asked my informants.

This orientation toward questions of gender equality and emancipation has long framed the field of women's studies in religion, which emerged in the academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, over the course of two years gathering, transcribing, and analyzing over

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "traditional religious women" to describe women who unapologetically embrace patriarchal religions and work to further these religions' goals. Amy Hoyt uses this term similarly. Amy Hoyt, "Agency, Subjectivity and Essentialism with Traditional Religious Cultures: An Ethnographic Study of an American Latter-day Saint Community" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2007), 4. The term "complementarian" describes a worldview in which women have complementary but different roles in society. Proponents of complementarianism believe that women are ontologically equal but functionally different. In practice, complementarianism results in decision-making power accruing to males, as they take leadership roles in ecclesiastical, familial, or societal realms. Thus, complementarianism is a form of patriarchy and stands opposed to those advocating for gender egalitarianism. For a Christian understanding of complementarianism, see John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 31-59.

<sup>3</sup> Later in the chapter I discuss how patriarchy plays out in a specifically Mormon context, but in a general sense, I use the term patriarchy as sociologists do, to describe a "system in which power is secured in the hands of adult men." Michelle Meagher, "Patriarchy," in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, eds. George Ritzer and J. Michael Ryan (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 441.

seventy-five oral histories of Mormon women of color in the U.S., Botswana, and Mexico, I found that the paradigm of women's equality or emancipation—the paradigm that has dominated scholarly work on women and religion for decades—was not in itself a sufficient paradigm through which to evaluate these Mormon women's actions and choices. As Amy Hoyt argues in her ethnographic study of American Mormon women, feminist theory, which undergirds nearly every analysis of women in the field of religious studies, “enacts a potential foreclosure upon traditional religious women because it is culturally bound to American and European political notions.”<sup>4</sup> These political notions, she explains, are indelibly tied to the Western liberative norms of independence, autonomy and equality.<sup>5</sup> In this critique of feminist theory, Hoyt echoes and expands upon the points anthropologist Saba Mahmood made in her groundbreaking work on devout Muslim women, in which Mahmood explicates the ways scholars too often measure Muslim women against the norms of equality and independence that do not adequately represent their dominant priorities and values.<sup>6</sup> Mahmood and Hoyt helpfully expand notions of female agency beyond resistance to status quo norms, describing frameworks of agency that include upholding norms, resisting norms, and complicated mixtures of both.

In this dissertation, I build upon Hoyt's and Mahmood's work by analyzing global and U.S. Mormon women of color's complex, agentic navigations of gender norms in three separate geographically-situated case studies. I argue that although the paradigm of gender equality is important and useful in pinpointing structural inequities, it is insufficient in and of itself when analyzing the worldviews, actions, and moral priorities of nonfeminist Mormon women of color. I argue that these traditional religious women should be analyzed through a different paradigm:

---

<sup>4</sup> Hoyt, “Agency, Subjectivity and Essentialism,” 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-39.

that of non-oppressive connectedness, human and divine. While this non-oppressive connectedness encompasses elements of female empowerment and liberation, it is characterized by a broader moral focus on fostering positive, productive, and vitalizing relationality in a variety of different realms. In this paradigm, gender inequality or gender complementarity are not primary moral evils or concerns. Indeed, the nonfeminist women I interviewed often found what could be described as liberation in their membership in this patriarchal church. Oppression and alienation from both God and other humans were the states which these women were actively working against. This ethical imperative of non-oppressive connectedness emerged as a connecting theme in the stories and voices of dozens of Mormon women of color, as they discussed how Mormonism successfully or less successfully satisfied this moral and relational orientation in their various cultural contexts.

### ***Women's Liberation, Gender Equality, and Women's Studies in Religion***

Women's studies in religion emerged in the late 1960s alongside the women's liberation movement as women began to analyze the ways in which patriarchal systems and structures marginalized women and denied them equal rights and opportunities. Scholars such as Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Judith Plaskow, Rita Gross, Carol Christ, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza turned their gazes to religion and critiqued the incessant androcentrism and patriarchy that undergirded so much of the world's major faith traditions.<sup>7</sup> This scholarship became so influential that the category of gender has become an important focus of scholarly

---

<sup>7</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983). Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990). *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, eds. Rita Gross and Nancy Falk, New York: Harper & Row, 1980). *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

analysis in the realm of religious studies, with many scholars not only incorporating women's experiences into their work but also challenging the production of knowledge itself as biased and distorted.<sup>8</sup> As Bradley Herling states, because of this foundational scholarship on women and gender, the category of gender is now "an aspect of any thorough treatment of religious phenomena."<sup>9</sup>

Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow describes the link between the field of women's studies in religion and feminist critique in her overview of the inception of the field: "Connections between feminist critique and social change have been evident in all areas of women's studies in religion from its beginnings."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the field of women's studies in religion has been largely grounded in a feminist critique advocating social change towards equal opportunities and visibility for women. In her analysis of the field, Plaskow saw three overlapping and consecutive stages of scholarship in the field:

Initially, the preponderance of works in the field focused on the analysis and critiques of male texts, institutions, and traditions. Then, without critical work being abandoned, there was a gradual shift toward recovering women's history within and outside patriarchal traditions. Most recently, there has been a burgeoning of constructive writing focused on the reform or transformation of existing traditions and the creation of new ones.<sup>11</sup>

While the first stage Plaskow mentions most explicitly ties women's studies in religion to critiquing patriarchy and thus gender inequity, the following stages she sites likewise are linked to visions of women's increased voice, opportunities, and leadership in religious communities. Even the second stage of recovering women's history was conceptually linked to women's

---

<sup>8</sup> Darlene M. Juschka, "General Introduction," in *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. Darlene M. Juschka (New York: Continuum, 2001), 8-18.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley Herling, *A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 129.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Plaskow, "We are Also Your Sisters: The Development of Women's Studies in Religion," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1/2 (1993): 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

liberation since, as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues, accepting male texts as accurate representations of women's reality erases women's actual experiences and thus is a collusion with patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

More recently black, Hispanic, African and Asian women's studies in religion scholars have emerged prominently in the field. Delores Williams, Mercy Oduyoye, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Kwok Pui-lan, are only a few of the scholars who have added their voices, visions, and nuances to the field.<sup>13</sup> These women, while still critiquing gender inequity and patriarchy, also point out other oppressions women of color, global and American, face in their lives. For them, gender inequity is only one oppression among many with which women in their communities contend, and recognizing the ways gender oppression interacts with other oppressions of race, class, colonialism, etc. is paramount. For these scholars who employ a variety of methodologies ranging from theology to history to textual studies to anthropology, transformation of current patriarchal systems is either an explicit or implicit project.

The work of the above feminist scholars has changed the very face of religious studies, effecting an important shift in the field by uncovering the ways in which religions and the field of religious studies itself have been premised on gender-biased assumptions. This contribution to the field has been monumental. However, as Hoyt and Mahmood argue, it is important to recognize that feminist theory itself, which undergirds many of these scholars' analyses of religion, was premised upon liberal Western assumptions that prized equality, independence, and autonomy. Thus, the thoughts, experiences, and actions of religious women who embrace

---

<sup>12</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xii-xxv. Fiorenza's introduction discusses the need to reconstruct and reclaim early Christian women's history. Plaskow mentions this point in her article, "We are Also Your Sisters," 13.

<sup>13</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993). Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women's Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996). Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

patriarchal systems and who do not fight for equality and autonomy have been largely unexamined by the most prominent authors in the field of women's studies in religion.

### *Religious Women and Agency*

In the 1990s and 2000s scholars using ethnographic methodologies began to write careful and nuanced analyses of the lived religion of traditional religious women who embrace and support their patriarchal traditions. Scholars such as Robert Orsi, R. Marie Griffith and Saba Mahmood took religious women's viewpoints and experiences seriously, and the question of agency—how these women's beliefs and religious communities did or did not engender liberation, voice, piety, connection, and various forms of resistance—was often of central interest to the authors. Robert Orsi, for example, in his masterfully nuanced study of Catholic women's devotion to the cult of St. Jude, finds that prayer to Jude could render the women porous, dissolving boundaries between themselves and others in ways which resulted in women neglecting their own needs. However, he also finds that the women's devotion to the saint helped women to articulate their stories and needs, form sustaining female connections, and strengthen themselves emotionally in the face of increasingly alienating hierarchical male medical systems.<sup>14</sup> In his mixed-method ethnographic and historical study, Orsi uncovers the ways their patriarchal faith could lead to healing, action, voice, and even at times, emancipation.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Lost Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 187-190.

<sup>15</sup> Despite Orsi's balanced and sensitive description of these women's religious lives, Orsi does, as Amy Hoyt writes, propose an approach to lived religion that "emphasizes dissent, subversion, and resistance" in his article, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David D. Hall (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15. Thus, theoretically, he too infuses a focus on liberation into his analysis. See Hoyt, "Agency Essentialism, and Subjectivity," 12-13. Hoyt also finds R. Marie Griffith at times using a similar liberation lens when analyzing the members of Women's Aglow. This may indeed be true at certain moments of their analyses, but I find that these two authors do a remarkably fine job of respectfully uncovering and analyzing the worldviews of their subjects.

R. Marie Griffith takes a similar nuanced approach to Orsi in her examination of devout evangelical women. Using participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis, Griffith, like Orsi, helps to move scholarship of traditional religious women beyond dichotomous characterizations of victimization and liberation. Exploring the evangelical world of Women's Aglow, Griffith finds that Aglow teachings do reinforce notions of women's fragility, dependence, and submissiveness, but at the same time she discusses the way this script made a positive difference in the lived lives of women, often in troubled marriages. Their submission to male authority in the home often engenders better treatment, happier marriages, and thus leads to transformation and paradoxically power in their lives.<sup>16</sup> Griffith also describes the Aglow meetings as a remarkable women's space where gifts of the spirit abound, women build strong relationships with others, and women articulate problems and solutions through their open and vulnerable prayers and discussions.<sup>17</sup> Submission to God also leads these women to become "prayer warriors" as they image themselves in agentive terms as warriors battling Satan.<sup>18</sup> In the last chapter, Griffith critiques feminists who discount or show contempt for traditional women, asking whether liberation must be defined in secular terms and urging scholars to view conservative women not as oppressed women, but instead as creative thinkers and self-transformers amidst a world of grief and disappointment.<sup>19</sup> Griffiths treats her subjects with respect and subtlety, clearly acknowledging the ways their spiritual practices and theological positions have improved their lives, but also occasionally identifying—as in her discussion of

---

<sup>16</sup> R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 175.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 201

body image and the quest for slimness—the way their narratives do contribute to internalized oppression and give divine sanction to cultural prescriptions.

In the mid-2000s, anthropologist and religion scholar Saba Mahmood systematically dismantled the dominant concept of women's agency, arguing that scholars following liberal Western notions of individualism and autonomy have often conceptualized agency as resistance to social norms and structures. Thus, ordinary women who uphold their traditions' injunctions and gender roles have received scant attention or been dismissed as oppressed and unworthy of scholarly attention. Mahmood argues that Western conceptions of agency must move beyond the notion of agency as subversion to authority.<sup>20</sup> For her, "the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific," thus the meaning and form of agency changes based on the worldviews and culture of the people in question.<sup>21</sup> She sees agency enacted repeatedly by women in the conservative Egyptian mosque movement, who gather to receive teachings from female preachers about the cultivation of piety. Agency discourse, she argues, should encompass actions that support patriarchal norms and structures. Other postcolonial feminist scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Uma Narayan have likewise emphasized the importance of not thrusting Western liberal categories, understandings, or agendas onto women in the global south, understandings which do not reflect their priorities or understandings of themselves.<sup>22</sup> The work of global southern theologians and postcolonial feminist scholars is discussed more fully in subsequent chapters.

---

<sup>20</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). As an example of this tendency of Western scholars to thrust foreign concerns on global southern women, Achola Pala writes of women in African villages wanting better health facilities, piped water and access to agricultural credit, yet researchers conduct surveys asking about family

Following Mahmood's lead, scholars of Mormon women have further worked to nuance and reconceptualize agency in such a way that honors and acknowledges the complexity, creativity, and choices of religious women supporting patriarchal systems. Amy Hoyt in her work on Mormon women's agency seeks to complicate usual understandings of agency as resistance. Based on her ethnographic work within a U.S. Mormon community, she finds that Mormon women often engage in a form of agency which constitutes "simultaneous engagement between self [and] community within a continuum between autonomy and determinism."<sup>23</sup> She described this agency as a mode in which women simultaneously resist and uphold religious boundaries.<sup>24</sup> One woman for example, upheld the Mormon leaders' injunctions for mothers to spend their time child-rearing at the same time she resisted it, when she chose to reduce her work hours rather than quit her job.<sup>25</sup> Hoyt's simultaneous agency moves the discussion beyond dualistic constructions of resistance or maintenance of norms and offers a helpful lens through which to conceptualize the behavior of traditional religious women, who negotiate in complex ways between individual, communal, and kinship loyalties.

Catharine Brekus likewise advocates for a reconceptualization of agency that acknowledges structural constraints as well as the capacity of women to act and create change within their traditions, rather than against their traditions.<sup>26</sup> Some points that would characterize this approach are recognizing that women can show agency by upholding social norms, recognizing that agency is on a continuum, and reconsidering the association between agency

---

planning and female circumcision. Achola Pala, "Definitions of Women and Development: An African Perspective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 1 (1977): 10.

<sup>23</sup> Hoyt, "Agency, Subjectivity, and Essentialism," 132.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Catharine Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 58-87.

with intentionality.<sup>27</sup> If agency were thus reconceptualized, Brekus argues, scholars could see regular Mormon women as agents who perpetuate the distinctive beliefs and practices of their tradition, as when Lucy Clark encouraged her husband to marry another woman because she believed in the principle of plural marriage.<sup>28</sup> They could also, Brekus writes, see agency in Mormon women's poems and stories which placed women at the center of eternal progression. These women did not intend to create a new female-centered theology, yet their common concerns and questions led them to do so.<sup>29</sup> Developing a model of agency that moves beyond an association with freedom, liberation, and intentionality, Brekus argues, could lead to the development of better understandings of how religious change takes place and how Mormon women contribute to Mormon history.<sup>30</sup>

This nuanced, expansive concept of agency is useful as an analytical lens for scholars examining traditional religious women. While this newer understanding of agency can encompass a vast array of decisions and actions, its power lies in its insistence on examining people as rational, thoughtful subjects who creatively navigate their lives and produce new meanings, understandings and ways of being in the world. This lens of agency stands in stark contrast to other analytical lenses—for instance, the lens of false consciousness—which have been deployed to depict traditional religious women, not as subjects navigating their lives, but as objects of oppression, not as producers of meaning, but as blind consumers of beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 78-85.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Daly, for example, famously describes “patriarchally possessed women” as “fembots,” incapable of recognizing their own oppression. Mary Daly, “Be-friending: The Lust to Share Happiness,” in *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, eds. S. Hoagland and J. Penelope (London: Onlywomen Press, 1988), 208. Andrea Dworkin likewise discounts the choices of nonfeminist women, saying, “The Right in the United States today is a social and political movement controlled almost totally by men but built largely on the fear and ignorance of women.... Every accommodation that women make to this domination, however apparently stupid, self-defeating, or dangerous, is rooted in the urgent need to survive somehow on male terms.” Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York:

Examining women within a nuanced lens of agency illuminates the lives, worldviews, and decision making of multitudes of women whose complicated lives and stories resist the simplistic reductionism of oppression/liberation analyses.

In my project centering on Mormon women's navigation of gender norms in different global locations, this more expansive concept of agency—how women creatively propagate, support, change, resist, critique, and justify gender norms, often in simultaneous ways—is central. My analysis contributes to the conversation by showing *how* women employ their agency in their positionalities as women of color of various nationalities, and *to what end* they employ it. I argue that while themes and concerns emerge in women's oral histories that are specific to their particular contexts, a major moral imperative for many of these women—a moral orientation and imperative that drives many of their agentive actions—is that of non-oppressive connectedness. Mormon women's choices to affiliate, support, change and/or propel this patriarchal, community-minded tradition reveal the central values which ground their lives.

This project expands upon Hoyt's fine ethnographic work on a group of American Mormon women. Her argument—that feminist theory's emphasis on equality and emancipation shuts out the experiences of traditional religious women who have different theologically-informed understandings of women's distinct roles and notions of male/female interdependence—is an important intervention in feminist theory. My project adds to and complicates the discussion of Mormon women's gendered navigations by incorporating issues of race, class, and nationality. I find that while an exclusive paradigm of gender equality illuminates issues of structural inequity and androcentrism—a crucial and important intervention—it does

---

Putnam, 1983) 34. R. Marie Griffith discusses this passage, noting how this viewpoint “exemplifies rigid victimization theory that continues to dominate most feminist analyses of nonfeminist women.” Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 204.

fall short as an analytical lens for these Mormon women of color. However, given that these women also navigate other, sometimes less privileged subjectivities and identities than middle-class white Americans, the ways Mormonism does and does not enable voice and empower is a fruitful area of discussion, so long as it is combined with analyses that also acknowledge other dominant values centering their lives. The central theme of non-oppressive connectedness, human and divine, acknowledges an orientation toward and awareness of issues of oppression, but also it acknowledges a moral focus on relationality and connection with God and other humans. Gender equality may not be a central paradigm in the lives of global and American nonfeminist Mormon women of color, but rejecting injustice on broader levels, decrying mistreatment on personal levels, and embracing productive and sustaining relationships is. Focusing on these other values is therefore central in my analysis.

### ***Connectedness, Relationality, and an Ethic of Care***

When Mormon women of color enact their agency, it is often with the end goal of creating or sustaining positive, ennobling relationships. That relationality, as opposed to justice or equality, can be a valid area of ethical or moral concern is an argument that psychologist Carol Gilligan made in 1982. Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* changed the face of Western ethics and psychology when she advanced a revolutionary concept: that the ethical orientation which tends to focus on care and relationships, more often associated with females, is just as moral as the ethical orientation toward justice and rights, more often associated with males.<sup>32</sup> She premises her argument with the claim that

---

<sup>32</sup> One of Gilligan's primary arguments is that there is a significant degree of correlation between gender and moral orientation or voice. She finds the "different voice" of care-orientation more likely to be presented by females rather than males. She writes that the different voice's "association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development." Men/boys, she finds, often use fundamentally different approaches when engaging in moral reasoning. She is astute to point out, however, that "the association is not absolute," that "no claims are made about the origins of the differences," and that "these differences arise is

psychology has persistently and systematically misunderstood women—their motives, their moral commitments, the course of their moral/psychological growth, and their views of what is most important in life. She writes, “When women do not conform to the standards of psychological expectation, the conclusion has generally been that something is wrong with the women.”<sup>33</sup> She sees this in several influential theories of moral development, such as that of Lawrence Kohlberg’s, her mentor, which place universal ideas of justice and impartiality as the highest point of moral development. As Kohlberg and other scholars observed girls and boys on the playgrounds, girls did not score as high as boys on the traditional morality scales, since girls were more likely to bend the rules or end the game to preserve relationships. This contrasted to boys who were more likely to uphold rules, even at the cost of a friend’s feelings. Such studies placed females as less morally developed than males, a finding that Gilligan disputes as biased in terms of evaluation criteria.

As Gilligan examined the responses of males and females to various ethical decisions, she discovered a distinctive voice emerge, primarily among the female respondents. This voice of moral reasoning often incorporates a focus on narrative, on the tendency of females to put moments of moral decision making into wider contexts which account for the needs of many.<sup>34</sup> As Gilligan wrote of one girl’s moral reasoning, “Her world is a world of relationships and psychological truths where an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a

---

a social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the experiences of males and females.” These are important caveats which help to ward off accusations that she is merely essentializing all women as nurturers. Gilligan saw her studies as the products of a certain time, place and population, and she was uninterested in making universal claims about women’s and men’s inherent natures.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response.”<sup>35</sup> These emphases are central to an ethic of care.

While Gilligan finds the women in these studies tending toward care ethics, and men tending toward justice ethics, she does argue that in the morally mature person, the two orientations converge. That one orientation is not morally superior to the other is a central premise for her. She writes, “While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt. In the representation of maturity, both perspectives converge in the realization that just as inequality adversely affects both parties in an unequal relationship, so too violence is destructive for everyone involved.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, Gilligan posits that there is integrity to both modes of being, but that both are inadequate in and of themselves. To reach the highest level of moral reasoning, individuals recognize the violence inherent in inequality, as well as the limitations of a justice orientation that does not consider different contexts and needs.

Ultimately, Gilligan’s work was significant in a number of ways. First, she led scholars to question whether moral concepts and methodologies were gender biased. Second, she presented the care orientation as equal to the justice one, thus stepping beyond Kantian and utilitarian frameworks to contribute an alternate moral orientation. Third, she valorized actual caring and personal relationships, finding that the personal point of view, with its distinctive history, embodiment, and commitments, was an appropriate standpoint for moral reasoning. Fourth, while making no claims about women’s and men’s inherent natures, her work confirmed conventional wisdom about the differences between the sexes. Later scholars uncomfortable with

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 174.

emphases on gender differences would push back against Gilligan's correlation of care with women, while still others worked to incorporate notions of justice into care ethics.<sup>37</sup>

Gilligan's work is particularly important for Mormon women since it elucidates and validates a relational orientation that is often an important central value for them. Amy Hoyt touches on the relational orientation of Mormon women when she describes the gendered cosmology which anchors Mormonism, a cosmology in which "men and women are radically different from one another and ... become perfected only through their ongoing interdependence."<sup>38</sup> Male-female interdependence, Hoyt suggests, is a grounding assumption and understanding through which Mormon women view their lives and the world, an observation that resonates to some degree with some of Gilligan's work on relationality.

While notions of male-female interdependence and cooperation are indeed an important aspect of many Mormon women's worldviews, I suggest that a broader paradigm of non-oppressive relationality is illuminating in evaluating the lives and choices of Mormon women who navigate their lives without white or male privilege. Whether the relationship is male-female, mother-child, friend-friend, individual-community, human-God or any other number of permutations, non-oppressive relationality is a theme and desire that surfaced in many of my interviews. Gilligan's work which validates relationality is particularly helpful since she suggests a framework in which women who value healthy connectedness and reject alienation can be evaluated in terms other than gender equality and autonomy which center so much of feminist

---

<sup>37</sup> See Marilyn Friedman, "Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender" in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 61-77. Sarah Hoagland, "Some Thoughts About 'Caring'" in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), 246-263. Joan Tronto, "Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring?" in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 101-115.

<sup>38</sup> Hoyt, "Agency, Essentialism, and Subjectivity," 66. Hoyt describes how this male/female interdependence is reinforced through Mormon understandings of the pre-existence and post-mortal existence where spirits are gendered, embodied, and linked together to attain exaltation, through notions of gendered Heavenly Parents, through LDS temple rituals, and through LDS discussions of the nuclear family.

theory. At the same time, her work also acknowledges the importance of a justice orientation, an orientation that is also present in the reflections and experiences of many Mormon women of color I spoke with. With the exception of the feminist women I interviewed, this justice orientation was often not oriented toward issues of gender equality, given Mormonism's gendered cosmology and strong emphasis on the appropriateness of different gender roles. Instead, it was often oriented toward a critique of abuse in any form, an awareness of economic injustice, and a rejection of racial and colonial oppression.

### ***Mormonism***

To situate the convictions, tensions, and perspectives of Mormon women of color, a very brief orientation to Mormon history is in order. Mormonism, a restorationist tradition, was founded in New York in 1830 by the young visionary Joseph Smith, Jr. amidst the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening. As a fourteen-year-old farm boy in 1820, Smith experienced a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ while praying for guidance as to which church he should join. In this story which has become foundational for Mormons, these embodied divinities told him that he would have a key role to play in the coming restoration of the true Church of Christ. In subsequent years Smith experienced more visions which ultimately led to him finding and translating the allegedly ancient document now known as the Book of Mormon. The institutional church was founded shortly after the Book of Mormon's publication. The religious movement grew rapidly in its first couple of decades but was dogged by persecutions in the late 1830s and 1840s due to the movement's burgeoning numbers, distinctive beliefs, and suspicions that Mormons were engaging in plural marriage.

After Joseph Smith was killed in 1844, his successor Brigham Young began making plans to move the Saints to the West. Nearly a third of members decided to not follow Brigham

Young to the West, and many ultimately joined other Mormon sects, most notably the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, headed by Joseph Smith Jr.'s son. Mormon followers of Brigham Young (known as Latter-day Saints or LDS) began settling in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847, ultimately displacing indigenous tribes already living there. In the shelter of this valley, beyond the reach of hostile Americans and the American government, Mormon leaders began to acknowledge their practice of plural marriage, which became an identity marker for Mormons in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Other defining markers were the Mormon belief in authoritative living prophets and the mingling of religious and civil authority. After the church formally abandoned the practice of polygamy at the turn of the century, Mormonism underwent a period of assimilation to wider American culture, culminating in the 1950s in which Mormon and wider American norms, with its post-war emphasis on large nuclear families and clear gender roles, most fully converged.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Mormonism has experienced significant growth outside the United States. During these years of global growth, there were also concerted efforts to centralize and consolidate Mormon teachings, making practices, doctrines, handbooks, and teaching manuals simple, clear, and available globally in several languages. This movement toward simplification and consolidation, in which many auxiliaries (including the official women's auxiliary of the church, the Relief Society) were brought firmly under the control of male priesthood leaders, is known as "correlation." The church saw rapid membership gains in many Latin American countries but was hampered in Brazil and African countries because of its policy to not ordain people of African descent to the lay priesthood conferred on Mormon men twelve and older.<sup>39</sup> In 1978, however, the church removed this restriction, and Mormonism has

---

<sup>39</sup> Armand Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 237.

begun to see growth in more countries in the global south. Today, over half of Mormon members reside outside the United States.<sup>40</sup> Mexico has the highest number of LDS members outside of the United States, but some of the fastest growth is now occurring in various African countries.<sup>41</sup>

This very brief recounting of seminal moments in Mormon history foreshadows various tensions that are explored in this dissertation. First, Mormonism carries within it an ongoing tension between personal revelation and agency on the one hand, and institutional and prophetic authority on the other. Joseph Smith's experience of a God who poured down revelations upon him was foundational to Smith's theological vision of the heavens being open and revelation accessible to everyone. Kathleen Flake describes Smith's vision of ideal religion in this way: "Joseph Smith was the Henry Ford of revelation. He wanted every home to have one, and the revelation he had in mind was the revelation he thought he'd had, which was seeing God."<sup>42</sup> In Joseph Smith's teachings is a profound respect for moral agency, free will, human potential, and the ability to communicate directly with God. As Terryl Givens states, it is therefore ironic that Smith founded "one of the most centralized, hierarchical, authoritarian churches in America to come out of the era famous for the 'democratization of religion.'"<sup>43</sup> Mormon members even today navigate the tension between institutional authority and personal revelation which might at times compel members in different directions.

---

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 217-220. While this may be technically true, it is important to note the low retention rates in the global church. Bowman says that only twenty-five percent of baptized members in Latin America and Asia go to LDS churches on Sunday.

<sup>41</sup> For reliable overviews of Mormon history, see Bowman, *The Mormon People*; Daniel Walker Howe, "Emergent Mormonism in Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24-37; Thomas Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1996); Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> Helen Whitney and Jane Barnes, *The Mormons* (documentary film), WGBH Educational Foundation (Arlington, VA: 2007), transcript available at <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/script.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

Second, from its earliest years, tensions over the role and purpose of women characterized Mormonism. Smith instituted secret plural marriages as he developed his theology of individuals and families sealed together in a web of eternal relationships. Bound in this web sacralized by plural marital sealings, people would be exalted, not individually, but with their families. In plural marriage sealings, Joseph restored the Biblical practice through which he could eternally bind himself to friends he dearly loved, as he married their sisters, daughters, and wives.<sup>44</sup> At the same time that this new frontier religion bound many women in norm-violating plural marriages which clearly placed them as subordinate to men, it also offered Mormon women opportunities unavailable to women in polite society.<sup>45</sup> Joseph Smith's wife Emma Hale Smith was commanded in Mormon scripture to "exhort the church" and moreover to "expound scriptures," an activity associated at the time with that of clergy.<sup>46</sup> Women's roles were also expanded in Utah in the nineteenth century as plural wives necessarily learned to earn a living and make their own decisions, given the frequent absences of husbands.<sup>47</sup>

Third, tension arises even today because of Mormonism's historic legacy of teachings about race and lineage, which prevented men of African descent from being ordained to the lay priesthood and women and men of African descent from participating in sacred temple rituals until 1978. This historic legacy also holds mixed messages for Native Americans, as Joanna Brooks explains: "Beginning as early as 1830, early Mormon missionaries brought to the Sac

---

<sup>44</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 439-440. See also Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Women's subordination in marriage was standard practice in nineteenth-century Christianity, so Mormonism was well within societal norms regarding patriarchal marriage. Plural marriage, however, was highly uncommon and roundly denounced by the larger American culture.

<sup>46</sup> See D&C 25: 7 and Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 128 and 165.

<sup>47</sup> Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Pedestals & Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2005), 7-8.

and Fox, Delaware, Wyandot, Cattaraugus, and Shawnee nations a double message: first, that they were peoples of a sacred legacy and destiny that they could come to understand through the Book of Mormon, and second, that the disobedience of their ancestors was the source of their Indigeneity.”<sup>48</sup> Pasifika people face a similar tension, as Mormons teachings include them in the cosmology of Mormonism as members of the house of Israel, but also connect their dark skin to a curse from God.<sup>49</sup> Teachings about dark skin as a curse are no longer emphasized in the contemporary church, and other strands of Mormon thought reject racism and insist that “all are alike unto God.”<sup>50</sup> However, this legacy of racial exclusion haunts the experiences of some Mormons of color, as they continue to see white men in Utah assume the highest positions of authority in the church.<sup>51</sup> For global members of color who are less aware of or less burdened by this historic legacy, tension might arise as cultural practices come into conflict with church prescriptions.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Gender and Mormonism***

As mentioned above, Mormonism is filled with contradictions and paradoxes regarding women’s status and role. Scholarship centering on Mormonism and gender over the last forty years has been dominated by the histories, theologies, experiences, and critiques of white, middle-class, almost always American Mormon women. This scholarship has primarily taken a historical focus, as scholars like Jill Derr, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Linda King Newell,

---

<sup>48</sup> Joanna Brooks, “Mormonism as Colonialism, Mormonism as Anti-Colonialism, Mormonism as Minor Transnationalism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” in *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, eds. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 166. The Book of Mormon verse that connects dark skin to a curse is 2 Nephi 5:21.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-166. See also Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai’i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2012), 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> 2 Nephi 26: 33.

<sup>51</sup> On March 31, 2018, an Asian American man and a Brazilian man became two of the Apostles in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. This day marked the moment when, for the first time its nearly 200-year history, this crucial and powerful decision-making body in the LDS church was not entirely comprised of white men.

<sup>52</sup> Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 220-221.

Lavina Fielding Anderson, Martha Bradley, and Claudia Bushman have delved into the lives and experiences of often elite early Mormon women.<sup>53</sup> They discovered a greater flexibility in gender roles and conceptions in the early years of Mormonism, as early Mormon women blessed, anointed, claimed some form of priesthood, fought for suffrage, and ran their largely autonomous women's organization, the Relief Society. Linda King Newell, David Hall, Marie Cornwall, and Laura Vance document the slow tightening and narrowing of Relief Society's vision and power in the twentieth century, as well as the tightening and narrowing of Mormon ideas about proper gender roles, as domesticity and full-time motherhood ideals began to push out earlier support for wage-earning and community-involved Mormon womanhood.<sup>54</sup>

Scholars that approach questions of gender from a theological standpoint have explored Mormon teachings for their liberatory and constraining potentials. Margaret Toscano and Janice Allred have worked to shatter the silence surrounding Mormonism's Heavenly Mother and raise her out of theological obscurity and into the Mormon godhead, while others have interrogated Mormonism's contemporary ontological positioning of women as mothers against men as priesthood holders.<sup>55</sup> Still others have examined the mixed or contradictory messages about the

---

<sup>53</sup> See Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1992). Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums*, 7-8. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987). Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Dave Hall, "A Crossroads for Mormon Women: Amy Brown Lyman, J. Reuben Clark, and the Decline of Organized Women's Activism in the Relief Society," *Journal of Mormon History* 36 no. 2 (2010): 205-249. Marie Cornwall, "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 239-264. Laura Vance, "Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897-1999," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 1 (2002): 104. Linda King Newell, "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992), 23-48.

<sup>55</sup> Margaret Toscano, "Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power," in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, eds. James McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2007), 193-223. Janice Allred, "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother," in *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997). Sonja Farnsworth, "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Motherhood-Priesthood Connection," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992), 299-314.

scriptural figure of Eve, whom Mormon leaders over the last several decades have celebrated as an exemplar of agency and wisdom for choosing to eat the fruit and thus propel humankind toward its cosmic destiny of godhood, but who is also paradoxically subordinated to Adam in spite of her righteous and wise decision.<sup>56</sup>

A central question for some scholars examining Mormon theology, doctrine, history, and contemporary culture is the nature of Mormon patriarchy. The *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology* defines patriarchy in this way: “Originally used to describe autocratic rule by a male head of a family, patriarchy has been extended to describe a more general system in which power is secured in the hands of adult men.”<sup>57</sup> Using this definition, few would contest that Mormonism’s male-only priesthood and male-led institutional system is overtly patriarchal. Within the family realm, patriarchy reigned supreme in the early years of Mormonism as well. In this, Mormonism was not unusual—most Christian traditions upheld overtly patriarchal practices and ideals in the nineteenth century. B. Carmen Hardy points out that nineteenth-century Mormon patriarchal ideology, which embraced ideas of male superiority and female inferiority, found a powerful ally in the Mormon doctrine of polygamy, which was seen by several Mormon leaders as a brace for male authority in the home.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary Mormon leaders, however, employ a dual discourse on male power in the home. On the one hand, men are instructed to “preside” over their wives and children and wives ritually submit to husbands in the endowment ceremony in LDS temples.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, however, contemporary Mormon leaders in their

---

<sup>56</sup> Jolene Edmunds Rockwood, “The Redemption of Eve,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3-36. Caroline Kline, “The Mormon Conception of Women’s Nature and Role: A Feminist Analysis,” *Feminist Theology* 22, no. 2 (2014): 186-202.

<sup>57</sup> Meagher, “Patriarchy,” 441.

<sup>58</sup> B. Carmon Hardy, “Lords of Creation: Polygamy, the Abrahamic Household, and Mormon Patriarchy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 20 (Spring 1994): 128-129.

<sup>59</sup> In Mormon endowment ceremonies, women embody the Biblical figure of Eve, who functions as an archetype for every woman. In this ritual, women make covenants pertaining to Eve’s experience before and after the Fall.

sermons often emphasize the importance of equal partnership, joint decision making, and loving affection in marriages. Contemporary Mormonism might be best described as a soft or benevolent patriarchy, in which men are strongly encouraged to treat women—whom they often describe as spiritual and moral superiors to men—with kindness and respect.<sup>60</sup> In this soft patriarchal system, complementarian gender roles are upheld as ideal, with men encouraged to be benevolent priesthood holders, primarily responsible for providing and protecting as well as presiding, while women are encouraged to be primarily responsible for nurturing children. Within this complementarian framework, however, they are to act as “equal partners” in the family.<sup>61</sup>

Mormon theologian Sheila Taylor uses different language to describe Mormon patriarchy, distinguishing between “fallen” patriarchy, which involves male tyranny and domineering authoritarianism and “godly” patriarchy, which involves men presiding as the head of the family yet also acting as equal partners. Taylor sees this godly version of patriarchy encapsulated in the LDS scripture D&C 121 which emphasizes gentleness, meekness, long-suffering, love and persuasion as elements of righteous authority. Contemporary Mormon

---

One of those covenants pertains to the Biblical injunction that Adam rule over Eve after she eats the fruit. Consequently, women ritually promise to hearken unto their husbands’ counsel as their husbands hearken unto God. For a brief discussion of this covenant, see David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994), 178.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Boyd K. Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign*, November 1993, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1993/11/for-time-and-all-eternity?lang=eng> and Bruce C. Hafen, “Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners,” *Ensign*, August 2007, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/crossing-thresholds-and-becoming-equal-partners?lang=eng>. Much of LDS church leaders’ rhetoric on male benevolent headship mirrors that of conservative Protestants, who often encourage male “servant-leadership,” which W. Bradford Wilcox describes as soft patriarchy. W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 172.

<sup>61</sup> “The Family,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 76. For an overview of the evolving LDS institutional rhetoric on decision-making power in marriages, see Caroline Kline, “Saying Goodbye to the Final Say: The Softening and Reimagining of Mormon Male Headship Ideologies,” in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, eds. Patrick Mason and John Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 214-233.

leaders, Taylor argues, reject fallen patriarchy but embrace godly patriarchy.<sup>62</sup> However defanged patriarchy might be in many Mormon homes, the Mormon institution itself—particularly on the general levels—remains a bastion of male power, as males dominate ecclesiastical administrative roles and the development of Mormon policy and doctrine.

Much work on Mormon women has been historical and theological, but some scholars with sociological interests have explored the ways authoritative Mormon rhetoric on gender has shifted or not shifted over time, as well as how contemporary women have navigated the culturally conservative and patriarchal LDS faith.<sup>63</sup> Lori Beaman, Amy Hoyt, and the authors of *Mormon Women Have their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection* have all explored how mostly white American or Canadian Mormon women have articulated their experiences, understandings, struggles, and feelings of empowerment within Mormonism's gendered structure.<sup>64</sup> The recent edited volume, *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, showcases the wide breadth of scholarly writings on Mormonism and gender since the 1970s.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, it also contains some recent pieces by Mormon feminists of color, which examine issues of Mormonism and gender from their particular cultural and racial contexts. My project seeks to likewise contribute to the broadening and deepening of scholarship on Mormonism and gender by highlighting the voices of Mormon women of color in the U.S. and the global south. It

---

<sup>62</sup> Sheila Taylor, "The Problem of Female Salvation in LDS Theology," *Element* 5, no. 2 (2009): 5-6.

<sup>63</sup> Carrie Miles, "LDS Family Ideals versus the Equality of Women: Navigating the Changes since 1957," in *Revisiting Thomas F. O'Dea's the Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Cardell Jacobson et al. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 101-134. Laurence R. Iannaccone and Carrie A. Miles, "Dealing with social change: The Mormon church's response to change in women's roles," *Social Forces* 68, no. 4 (1990): 1231-1250.

<sup>64</sup> Lori G. Beaman, "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter-Day Saints Church," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2001): 65-86. Amy Hoyt, "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women," *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 1 (2007): 89-100. Claudia Bushman and Caroline Kline, eds., *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

also seeks to expand upon the above-mentioned ethnographic and sociological work of scholars through an intersectional examination of the lived experiences of women of color navigating issues of gender, race, and class within a Mormon context.<sup>66</sup>

### ***Global Mormon Studies***

A central question for many scholars examining international Mormonism is how beliefs, structures, and practices of an American church adapt or do not adapt in response to local needs and traditional cultural attitudes and practices. Sociologist Armand Mauss sees Mormonism grappling with how to achieve “optimum tension” or how to accommodate itself somewhat to various global cultures without losing important parts of Mormon beliefs and structures.<sup>67</sup> David G. Stewart, Jr. describes the “Americentric” dynamic of the global Mormon church, which continues to depend on North American missionaries, resources, and leaders for its survival.<sup>68</sup> Commenting on the tensions involved with exporting American-derived structures and cultural elements to non-American cultures, David Knowlton points out the imperial and colonial dynamics of taking Mormonism into regions in Latin America. He notes that Latin Americans are often suspicious, with good reason, of foreigners coming to their country to exploit their resources and people.<sup>69</sup> Knowlton also points to a prime attraction of the tradition to people in

---

<sup>66</sup> “Intersectional” describes a type of analysis which considers the overlapping and interconnected nature of class, race, and gender discrimination. I explain the concept further later in the introduction. See Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

<sup>67</sup> Armand Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 208-212. More recently Philip Jenkins has addressed this question, finding a “striking failure of inculturation” in the global Mormon church. Philip Jenkins, “Letting Go: Understanding Mormon Growth in Africa,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35 (Spring 2009): 1-25. Jehu Hanciles comes to a similar conclusion in Jehu Hanciles, “‘Would that All God’s People Were Prophets’: Mormonism and the New Shape of Global Christianity,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41 (April 2015): 35-68.

<sup>68</sup> David G. Stewart, Jr. “Growth, Retention, and Internationalization,” in *Revisiting Thomas O’Dea’s The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Cardell K. Jacobson et al. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2008), 329.

<sup>69</sup> David Knowlton, “Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (1992): 43.

Latin America, as they associate sober, suit-wearing Mormon men with upward social mobility and middle-class values.<sup>70</sup> Joanna Brooks likewise calls attention to neo-colonial dynamics for Mormons in the global south and indigenous American Mormons, exploring how these Mormons negotiate inequality and racism within the church and Mormon culture.<sup>71</sup> She examines the various ways Utah Mormonism, itself founded on the displacement of Native Americans and the exclusion of black men and women, both damages and nurtures indigenous identity and the identity of Mormons of color. One central challenge several scholars note as common in a variety of global contexts is the church's inability to retain male priesthood holders necessary for local leadership.<sup>72</sup> As Gordon and Gary Shepherd explain, this lack of male leadership leads to further difficulties in retaining new converts.<sup>73</sup>

Other scholars of global Mormonism examine specific communities around the world and their distinct successes and challenges. Henri Gooren notes that the three principal sites of tension for Mormons in Central America are callings, machismo, and inactivity.<sup>74</sup> Hokulani Aikau examines the way Mormonism and indigenous culture mix together in her study of Mormons in Hawaii, finding that indigenous self-determination can coexist with Mormonism's racialized and colonial perspectives and history.<sup>75</sup> Jennifer Basquiat, in her ethnographic exploration of Mormonism in Haiti, found a population of Mormon Haitians who are

---

<sup>70</sup> David Knowlton, "Mormonism in Latin America: Towards the Twenty-first Century." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 171.

<sup>71</sup> Joanna Brooks, "Mormonism as Colonialism," 163-185.

<sup>72</sup> Armand Mauss, "From Near-Nation to New World Religion?" in *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Cardell K. Jacobson et al. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2008), 314.

<sup>73</sup> Gordon and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984), 45-52.

<sup>74</sup> Henri Gooren, "The Mormons of the World: The Meaning of LDS Membership in Central America," in *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Cardell K. Jacobson et al. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 363. Callings in a Mormon context are volunteer church jobs given to members of the church. Since Mormonism is a lay church, nearly every member of a ward (congregation) has a calling. Callings typically last from one to five years, after which a member is asked to serve in a different calling.

<sup>75</sup> Aikau, *A Chosen People*.

simultaneously conformist church members and vodou practitioners. She describes them therefore as “subversive performers who take from Mormonism only what they need to best craft their individual designs for living.”<sup>76</sup> Basquiat’s study helpfully discusses the ways this population in the global south adapted Mormon teachings to their own culture and needs. Melissa Inouye and Taunalyne Rutherford likewise note the ways that global Mormons find space within the tightly centralized faith to address issues and carry out priorities in ways that are specific to particular regional contexts.<sup>77</sup>

Scholars of global Mormonism identify issues and dynamics surrounding the international church and its interaction with local cultures, but, with few exceptions, do not with any depth explore how women, the majority of members in these international and American contexts, make sense of the gender roles promoted by the Utah-based church, and how they navigate, adapt, reject, embrace, and syncretize them with the gender roles of their own communities and cultures.<sup>78</sup> They do not explore the ways gender impacts how these women of color experience and live their religion. They do not explore the multiplicity of theologizing Mormon women around the world do as they try to make sense of the teachings they have inherited from American Mormonism about their place in this life and the next. My project positions Mormon women from around the globe as interpreters of their own experience who do many different things with Mormonism’s ambiguous legacies on gender and race.

---

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou, and the LDS faith in Haiti,” *Dialogue – A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (2004): 3.

<sup>77</sup> Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, “A Tale of Three Primaries: The Gravity of Mormonism’s Informal Institutions,” in *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, eds. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 229-262. Taunalyne Rutherford, “The Internationalization of Mormonism: Indications from India,” in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*, eds. Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 37-59.

<sup>78</sup> An exception is Stacilee Ford’s essay on female domestic workers in Hong Kong. Stacilee Ford, “Sister Acts: Relief Society and Flexible Citizenship in Hong Kong,” in *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, eds. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 202-228.

### *Project Description, Methods, and Methodology*

In this project, I conducted oral histories with Mormon women in Mexico and Botswana, and with Mormon women of color in the United States, exploring the ways Mormon women articulate their relationship to contemporary questions of gender at the crossroads of colony, race and class. I chose to focus one of my ethnographies on a location in Veracruz, Mexico because this developing country has the largest population of Mormons outside the United States, numbering (according to church records) 1.435 million.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, members of the church in Mexico overwhelmingly are of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent (mestizo), thus they navigate the white Utah-led Mormon church as people of color with different cultural frameworks and contexts.<sup>80</sup> In fact, Mexico was the site of significant dissatisfaction with the centralized church hierarchy in the 1930s, after church leaders appointed a white American to preside over the Mexican mission. Several Mexicans in positions of church leadership, fueled by ethnic pride, desired a Mexican mission president, and the church's denial of this led a third of Mexican Mormons to break away from the church. Many of these Mormons, known as Third Conventionists, ultimately returned to the church a decade later.<sup>81</sup> Mormonism's rich and long history in Mexico, begun in the nineteenth century as it became a refuge for American polygamists fleeing prosecution from the federal government, made it an ideal location from which to explore issues of race, culture, and gender.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> "Facts and Statistics," Mormon Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 30, 2018, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/mexico>.

<sup>80</sup> For more on the mestizo race and identity, which was heavily promoted by Mexican post-revolutionary elites as positive and a source of national unity, see Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 15-17.

<sup>81</sup> F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987), 137-159

<sup>82</sup> Note that the concepts of race and indigeneity operate differently amongst the three populations with which I worked. Thus, the reader should shift her understanding of the vocabulary as she navigates the chapters and narratives. In Veracruz, Mexico, according to Christina A. Sue, racial categorizations operate in a particular way. Race terms such as mestizo (mixed race) and *indígena* (those who self-identify as having an indigenous cultural

Unlike Mexico, the LDS church in Botswana is very young, with its first congregation established in 1983.<sup>83</sup> This Southern African landlocked country, located only a four-hour drive from the South African capital Johannesburg, has 3,376 members and fourteen congregations.<sup>84</sup> Because the church in Botswana is so new, nearly all members over the age of twenty-five are converts to the church, and very little scholarly work has been done on Mormons in Botswana. A former British Protectorate, Botswana achieved independence in 1966, though it was able to retain some of its traditional structures and systems under British colonialism, which began in the late nineteenth century. While racial discrimination against black Africans influenced government policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of local amenities, public services, and facilities, in the mid-twentieth century “a culture of consultation between the colonial government and Botswana led to genuine attempts at eliminating official race discrimination in the territory, and peaceful decolonisation.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, racial tension between blacks and whites is mild compared to that of its neighbor to the south, South Africa. Botswana’s main ethnic groups are Tswana people (seventy-nine percent), Kalanga people (eleven percent), and Basarwa (three percent), otherwise known as Bushmen or San people.<sup>86</sup>

---

background) “are linked to understandings of ancestry and imply a sense of groupness.” However, Sue finds that Veracruzanos are more likely to describe people using terms that connote both race and color, such as *blanco*, *moreno*, and *negro*, or terms that exclusively describe color, such as *moreno claro*. Color terms do not have the same connotations of groupness as the racial terms do. Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36-37.

<sup>83</sup> “Botswana Information,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 27, 2018, <https://africase.lds.org/botswana-information1>.

<sup>84</sup> “Facts and Statistics,” Mormon Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 28, 2018, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/botswana>.

<sup>85</sup> Christian John Makgala, “A Survey of Race Relations in Botswana, 1800-1966,” *Botswana Notes and Records* 36 (2004): 14

<sup>86</sup> “The Major Ethnic Groups of Botswana,” World Atlas, accessed July 19, 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-major-ethnic-groups-of-botswana.html>. Anthropologist Sidsel Saugestad calls the Basarwa people, known for their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, millennia-old connection to the land, and distinctive language, “indigenous” people, as they have recently begun to organize and claim indigenous status. Saugestad notes, however, that “indigenous” is a controversial term for the Basarwa, and they might also be considered a minority ethnic group. However they are defined, they are a group characterized by poverty and marginalization from the sites of power in Botswana. See Sidsel Saugestad, *The Inconvenient Indigenous: Remote*

People of European descent make up about three percent of the population. Nearly every Mormon woman interviewed in Botswana belonged to the Tswana ethnic group. As oral histories attest, Batswana Mormon women carve out interesting and complex paths, as they navigate elements of their traditional culture and their loyalty to their new chosen LDS faith.

The U.S., a Western industrialized country with gender norms which emphasize ideals of equal opportunities for women, is the location of my final case study. As the birthplace of Mormonism and the site of considerable racial tension throughout its history, Mormon women of color in the U.S. sometimes feel the weight of America's—and the Mormon church's—troubled history with race.<sup>87</sup> Unlike in Mexico or Botswana, where local leaders are predominantly the same race as the vast majority of their congregants, Mormon women of color in America often experience their congregations as racial minorities. Questions about oppressive systems and patterns arise in the minds of some Mormon women of color in the U.S, who navigate oppressions on multiple levels. Their everyday experiences of being minority women in a

---

*Area Development in Botswana, Donor Assistance, and the First People of the Kalahari* (Boras, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2001), 26-30. Within the ethnic groups of Botswana are various tribes. Among the Tswana, a Bantu speaking people who arrived in what is now Botswana about 1500 years ago, tribes or chiefdoms emphasize ideologies of common familial alliance. Thus, tight bonds of reciprocity and obligation exist between Batswana, particularly those living in villages. See David N. Suggs, *A Bagful of Locusts and the Baboon Woman: Constructions of Gender, Change, and Continuity in Botswana* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 2002), 6-11.

<sup>87</sup> While race in the context of the U.S. has traditionally referred to groups that are biologically distinguishable by physical traits, scholars of race in America today point to the ways race has been, in large part, socially constructed. For example, in the nineteenth century, Irish and southern Europeans were viewed as distinct races, but today people would see them as subtle shades of “mostly undifferentiated whiteness.” While some immigrant groups like the Irish were considered racially distinct, it is important to note that certain groups were regarded with particular hostility. Blacks, according to John Iceland, were relegated “to the bottom of the racial pecking order,” experiencing the brutality of slavery and other extreme forms of discrimination, leaving a legacy of structural inequality that blacks today must contend with. Native Americans’ (otherwise known as First Peoples or indigenous peoples) contact with European settlers was devastating demographically and culturally as they were pushed off ancestral lands and decimated by disease. Hispanics, according to the U.S. Census Bureau are listed as an ethnicity, or a group of people differentiated by culture rather than genetic difference. However, even among social scientists, people tend to use the words “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably. Ultimately, as Iceland points out, racial distinctions are meaningful “to the extent that people are treated differently and experience different kinds of life experiences and outcomes.” John Iceland, *Race and Ethnicity in America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 10-14.

historically white patriarchal church brings to light issues of privilege unique to the U.S., but these experiences also show the ways Mormonism gives these women resources to carve out more satisfactory lives.

The following questions drive my project: How do questions of gender register to women of color in the U.S. and global south? How do women interpret the legacy of Mormon gender understandings within their specific contexts and in parallel to third and fourth wave movements in global and intersectional feminism? What ethical imperatives do women of color, global and American, emphasize as they live their Mormon lives? Where are the sites of tension and resonance as they adopt and adapt Mormonism to their contexts? How do women enact a complex agency as they navigate their sometimes-conflicting loyalties?

To investigate these questions, I employed a multi-method approach for studying communities of Mormon women in America, Botswana, and Mexico. My methods were:

- a) Oral life histories, which reconstruct narrators' individual experiences and perspectives. This method is particularly valuable for capturing the voices of marginal groups, such as women, that historians often overlook.<sup>88</sup> Oral life histories allow researchers to glimpse the lives of everyday members of certain communities and allow narrators the opportunity to assess their own agency in relation to the structures (religious, social, etc.) that impact their lives. My approach to conducting oral histories was conversational and open-ended, giving narrators the opportunity to share the experiences and insights that are most important to them. Interviews were recorded and transcribed later, and each narrator had the opportunity to edit her oral history transcript in order to make it a product that she felt best represented her life

---

<sup>88</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, "Introduction," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2.

and perspectives. Interviews in Botswana and the U.S. were conducted in English and interviews in Mexico were conducted in Spanish through an interpreter, except for two or three interviews that were conducted in English because the women were fluent English-speakers. A colleague and I collected twenty-nine oral life histories of Mexican women. Narrators in Botswana were found through official Mormon church networks, facilitated by local leaders that embraced the project. While this led to a certain level of homogeneity in interviewees (all practicing Mormons), we were able to travel beyond the capital city of Gaborone to speak with women in rural districts. These women were often of a different socio-economic class and thus brought a measure of breadth to the study. Colleagues and I collected a total of forty-eight oral life histories in Botswana. Interviewees in Mexico and the United States were found through informal networks (not official church networks) using purposive sampling to reach a range of interviewees and snowball sampling.<sup>89</sup> In the United States, colleagues and I conducted twenty-one oral life history interviews with Mormon women of color. For demographic information by country about the women interviewed (education level, marital status, birthyear, and age at LDS baptism/affiliation), see Appendix D.

- b) Participant observation. As I interviewed participants, attended church and other social gatherings with them, and sometimes visited them in their homes, I gathered data using the method of participant observation. As ethnographic scholars have

---

<sup>89</sup> Purposive sampling entails targeting different demographics and snowball sampling entails finding interviewees based on the recommendation of interviewed women. For more on sampling techniques for oral historians, see Mary A. Larson, "Research Design and Strategies," in *Handbook of Oral History*, eds. Thomas L. Charlton et al. (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2006), 123-126. While some oral history researchers emphasize a variety of techniques to ensure some degree of representative coverage, other oral historians question whether this is even necessary. See Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 121-122.

noted, participant observation gives important insight into local taboos, how people relate to each other, what the cultural parameters are, etc.<sup>90</sup> It allows for richly detailed description and access to the “backstage culture.”<sup>91</sup> In order to protect the privacy of individuals whom I observed and interviewed, I use pseudonyms throughout the dissertation, alter minor details about their lives, and change details in my descriptions of their physical appearances.

- c) Textual Sources. While most of my data was gathered in the above ways, I also draw from articles, talks, books, blog posts, and podcasts that help contextualize women’s position, status, and experiences within Mormonism and within their specific geographical location.

While these methods (particularly the first two ethnographic ones) are meant to illuminate the thoughts, perspectives, and experiences of women so often ignored in androcentric research and to position women as subjects worthy of careful study and analysis, they also hold within them certain dangers. Whenever researchers engage in the practice of “representation,” particularly of people with whom one has cultivated relationships to extract information, there is potential for unethical use and exploitation by researchers more concerned with their own agendas and presentation of “objective” facts than with the ethical and careful treatment of their subjects. As indigenous researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued, anthropology has a long and troubled history of exoticized, demeaning, or ethnocentric representations of “native” or otherwise “other” people.<sup>92</sup> She advocates for methodologies and methods, among them oral

---

<sup>90</sup> Steven L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1999), 91.

<sup>91</sup> Victor C. deMunck and Elisa J. Sobo, eds. *Using Methods in the Field: A Practical Introduction and Casebook* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1998), 43.

<sup>92</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Second Edition* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 9.

histories, that “work with marginalized communities, that facilitate the expression of marginalized voices, and that attempt to re-present the experience of marginalization in genuine and authentic ways.”<sup>93</sup> Smith delineates a number of decolonizing methods, methodologies, and projects which further the goals of ethical indigenous research, which are “the survival of peoples, cultures, and languages; the struggle to become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies.”<sup>94</sup> Among these projects are writing tribal and family histories, recording oral testimonies, documenting foundational stories of the community that communicate beliefs and values, celebrating survival and resistance toward colonialism, and reframing the ways in which indigenous issues and social problems are discussed.<sup>95</sup>

While my own white feminist paradigm of gender equality may have revealed itself in my choice of certain interview questions, I did consciously make a pronounced effort to carry out an ethical, sensitive, and non-imperial/decolonizing project. In my analysis and writing of my chapters, I attempted to be ethical and non-imperial by avoiding isolated quotes from anonymous, non-contextualized women. Rather, I built my chapters around the stories of a small handful of women, so I could present their lives and perspectives in their complexity.<sup>96</sup> During my interviews, I also attempted to be ethical by deliberately giving the women opportunities to articulate their own specific themes, priorities, complex identities, and particular navigational

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 144-154.

<sup>96</sup> The women I chose to highlight in my chapters articulate important themes, strategies, and priorities that emerged from the body of collected interviews. This methodology of building chapters around the voices of select women who best articulate or represent certain themes is similar to exemplar methodology, which “involves selecting and studying a sample of individuals who exemplify a particular characteristic in an exceptionally full-fledged manner.” Meghana A. Warren, “Exemplary Allyship: Raising the Bar for Inclusiveness in the Workplace” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2018), 26. Exemplar methodology is usually used by psychologists to discuss human development, but it also informs my methodological choices to discuss dominant themes by highlighting select women. For more on exemplar methodology, see Kendall Cotton Bronk, “The Exemplar Methodology: An Approach to Studying the Leading Edge of Development,” *Psychology of Well-being: Theory, Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2012): 5.

strategies. Many of my questions were intentionally broad-scoped, focusing on the challenges, joys, and difficult decisions they had made in their lives. I invited them to discuss the ways their own cultures and identities melded with that of their chosen Mormon faith tradition. If women had stories they wanted to tell about their lives—be they stories of sorrow, achievement, joy in finding the Mormon church, or attitudes toward life—I tended to sit back and let the women tell their stories, whatever those might be.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, as feminist oral historians have emphasized, it is important to keep in mind that oral histories are ultimately co-created documents, shaped by both the narrator and the researcher asking the questions.<sup>98</sup> Thus in some real sense, “the typical product of an interview is a text, not a reproduction of reality.”<sup>99</sup> This cautionary reminder is particularly important given my own insider/outsider status in relation to the women I interviewed. I may have been an insider in terms of my sex and Mormon affiliation, but I was an outsider in terms of culture and race. Different perspectives and analyses could certainly emerge with a different scholar bringing her own unique positionality and experiences to the subject at hand. Indeed, there is every possibility that a researcher who arose within the communities studied would elicit different stories and produce different analyses.

Alongside the important work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, other scholars have worked to develop methodologies which address the power imbalances between researcher and researched and to ensure more ethical and less ethnocentric treatment of subjects. Feminist approaches to

---

<sup>97</sup> Other scholars of women in the global south have written of the way Western researchers have often missed the mark when analyzing gender issues in global southern contexts. See Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms* and Pala, “Definitions of Women and Development,” 10. I tried to avoid such pitfalls (and I was somewhat successful, I believe), by making many of my interview questions so broad they could take them in nearly any direction they wished. See Appendixes A, B, and C for lists of questions from which I drew as I interviewed women.

<sup>98</sup> Gluck and Patai, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

research have been particularly attentive to issues of power, representation, and difference, and in my research I utilized feminist frameworks and methodologies which work to redress power imbalances during the research process, attend to differences between women, and explicitly locate the researcher within the production of knowledge. At their core, feminist research methodologies and approaches aim to empower women and other oppressed people, as well as create knowledge that is beneficial to women, and to do so in ethical and reflexive ways that disrupt traditional hierarchies.<sup>100</sup> These research methodologies are based on the belief that “women can possess and share valuable knowledge and thus research can start from the perspective of women’s lives.”<sup>101</sup> As Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber et al. explain, rather than assuming a subject-object split where the researcher is the knowing party and the researched is the object, “feminists aim at *developing* knowledge *with* their research subjects who bring their own experiential knowledge, concerns, and emotions to the project.”<sup>102</sup>

Feminist methodology also calls for researchers to be explicit about their positionality. Feminist researchers reject third person “view from nowhere” objective scholarly accounts in favor of producing a “view from somewhere.”<sup>103</sup> Explicitly revealing the social location, questions, experiences, ideology of oneself as researcher helps readers to assess the value and biases of the work.<sup>104</sup> Thus, throughout this dissertation, I deliberately insert myself into my descriptions of my interviews with various women. Each of my three ethnographic chapters, as

---

<sup>100</sup> Joey Sprague and Mark Zimmerman, “Overcoming Dualism: A Feminist Agenda for Sociological Methodology,” in *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory*, ed. Paula England (New York: Aldine DeGruyter, 1993): 266. Margorie L. Devault, *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>101</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser, “Feminist Approaches to Research as a Process: Reconceptualizing Epistemology, Methodology, and Method,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 14.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, “Feminist Approaches,” 12.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> See Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Is there a feminist method?” in *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1-14.

well as this introductory chapter, begins with a personal anecdote that locates myself and my positionality as a researcher. This insertion of myself into my chapters may at times seem unnecessary, but I am committed to an explicit acknowledgment of myself and my positionality as the filter through which my analyses and critiques emerge.

Feminist researcher Sandra Harding also makes the important point that incorporating the perspectives and experiences of people marginalized through race, gender and/or class leads to fuller and more accurate accounts of the world, or as she puts it, “strong objectivity.”<sup>105</sup> This notion of attending to the voices of the marginalized relates to the influential epistemological approach of feminist standpoint theory, which is premised on the idea that oppressed people can see patterns of domination and exclusion that those in privileged positions cannot. It also relates to Kimberle Crenshaw’s influential concept of intersectionality, the idea that gender, race, and class are interlocking systems of oppression.<sup>106</sup> Crenshaw coined the term as she explained the necessity of accounting for multiple grounds of identity when analyzing issues of discrimination. Failure to attend to these interlocking matrixes of oppression elides the vulnerabilities of women of color, she argues.<sup>107</sup> Thus, attention to intersectionality—and not exclusively the category of gender—is another hallmark of more recent feminist approaches to research. To that end, my dissertation explicitly evaluates the experiences of women of color, both international and American, regarding issues of race, class, and culture in the church.

---

<sup>105</sup> Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993): 51.

<sup>106</sup> Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 139-167. Patricia Hill Collins also talks about interlocking matrixes of oppression that must be acknowledged. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 234.

<sup>107</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

## *Contributions*

This dissertation helps to fill certain gaps in the field of Mormon studies, while simultaneously furthering ongoing conversations in the field women's studies in religion. First, it documents the lives and experiences of American and global Mormon women of color whose voices have been largely unheard and unanalyzed within both the academy. The vast majority of academic work on Mormonism has focused on the institutional church, its theology, and institutionally powerful people (usually men) within it. Yet with very few exceptions, there has been little attention paid to Mormon women on the margins of Mormonism, far away from the seats of institutional power. These heretofore unheard voices document how Utah-based Mormonism affects their lives and interacts with diverse cultures and contexts. This focus on the voices and lives of global and American Mormon women of color therefore decenters white North America in the emerging field of Mormon studies.

Additionally, this project attends to issues of difference between Mormon women in ways prior studies have not. Feminist scholars since the 1980s have pointed out that to comment meaningfully on issues of gender one must consider women's distinct cultural locations. As Elizabeth Spelman notes, many earlier feminists' "focus on women 'as women' has addressed only one group of women—namely white middle-class women of Western industrialized countries."<sup>108</sup> She suggests that scholars must attend to differences between women: "Rather than assuming that women must have something in common as women, ... researchers should help us look to see whether they do, to investigate not only the respects in which women of different races, classes, nationalities, historical periods, religions, sexual orientations, and so

---

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 3.

forth, are similar but the respects in which they are different.”<sup>109</sup> As Spelman indicates, to speak of women as a monolith is now understood to be inadequate and to erase the experiences and lives of women in different cultural, racial, and class contexts, who may very well not feel constrained or empowered by the same things that many Western white middle-class women do. In paying attention to issues of intersectionality—the various ways race, gender, and class intersect to affect women’s lives—this project stands at the cutting edge of Mormon studies.

This dissertation also challenges and enriches feminist critiques of religion by broadening and complicating the way we think about women’s agency at the intersection of race, colony, and class in the context of religion. While noting the moments of tension in which women resist or struggle with certain norms—a tension that has predominantly been associated with women’s agency—this dissertation also examines moments in which women embrace, creatively propagate and support patriarchal norms. These agentive acts, which encompass everything from resistance to support to complex combinations of the two, point to worldviews and values that anchor many of these women’s lives.

Finally, this dissertation also enriches feminist critiques of religion by suggesting an alternative interpretive paradigm through which to view the lives of traditional religious women. While dominant feminist analytical frameworks valuing women’s independence, autonomy and equality are helpful in pointing to the ways religions empower or constrain women, I suggest that for Mormon women of color around the world, the interpretive framework of non-oppressive connectedness illuminates their choices more fully and more fairly. As a paradigm which incorporates both notions of liberation and notions of relationality, it acknowledges and honors the ethical imperatives that drive many of these women’s decisions.

---

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

## *Discussion of Chapters*

This introductory chapter argues that the concept of gender equality, which has undergirded so many of the most seminal works in the field of women's studies and religion, only takes us so far when studying religious women who choose to affiliate with an overtly patriarchal tradition such as Mormonism. I suggest that a fairer, more comprehensive, and more helpful paradigm to evaluate the lives and choices of Mormon women is that of non-oppressive connectedness, divine and human. Following the important work of Hoyt and Mahmood, I also suggest that a broad, complex understanding of agency illuminates the lives of these women on the margins of Mormonism, who contend with multiple loyalties based on their particular positionalities in terms of race, class, nationality, and culture.

Chapter Two examines the choices, lives, and perspectives of a group of Mormon women in Veracruz, Mexico. I argue that Mormonism, even with its patriarchal structure and theology that bound women's actions, opens certain liberative spaces for Mexican women. These liberative spaces often include opportunities to reject alienation, find meaningful community, and uplift themselves financially. For these women in Mexico, liberation encompasses some notions of justice, independence and uplift, but often it involves chances to reject destructive patterns of infidelity, abuse, and alienation. Fostering relationships that are sustaining, uplifting, and non-oppressive are moral values that center their lives.

Chapter Three analyzes Batswana Mormon women's choices to affiliate with this American-born, historically white tradition and the ways they agentively navigate their Mormon affiliation alongside loyalties to their own cultures of origin. Examining four spaces of tension and confluence—chastity, adoption, bride wealth, and companionate marriage—I argue that Mormonism offers Batswana women spiritual and social connectedness in a society that has

experienced deterioration of traditional ways of being over the last few decades. With Botswana having shifted from away from a tribal village sociality and economy to a modern cash economy, Mormonism operates in some sense as a new village for Mormon women, giving them boundaries, responsibilities, and social ties that were more readily available to Batswana women in generations past. These boundaries and opportunities are framed by Western and patriarchal understandings, which Batswana women agentively adapt or adopt to their own purposes, purposes which often center around creating non-oppressive relationships with humans and God.

Chapter Four examines the experiences of Mormon women of color in the United States. I argue that a dominant concern for these women is the rejection of oppressive relationships. These women have found within Mormonism, even with its gender complementarianism that places males as family presiders and ecclesiastical leaders, resources to reject oppressive relationships and cultivate healthy ones. At the same time, their accounts reveal the ways white and class privilege characterizes some teachings within the Mormon church which these women carefully navigate. Thus, their oral narratives offer certain interventions and redirections in Mormon rhetoric, interventions which point towards ways Mormon rhetoric could be more inclusive towards women of color who navigate their lives without white, male, or class privilege. Finally, I analyze certain theological themes within Mormonism, such as personal revelation, which women of color in the U.S. find particularly ennobling and agentive.

Chapter Five constructs a framework for a Mormon womanist theology of abundance, based upon the theological reflections of the women I interviewed in Botswana, Mexico, and the U.S. These theological reflections on abundance arise from these women's commitments to a non-oppressive personal God and to healthy relationships with self and others. I explicate this theme of metaphysical abundance which emerged in the interviews, describing how the theme

took on different nuances in different locations yet are connected by an expansive vision of human capacity and God's desire for human wholeness and well-being. Based on womanist theological/ethical methodology, I suggest other sources which could contribute to this theology of abundance, such as the writings of Mormon Relief Society leader Chieko Okazaki and scriptural women like Mary, mother of Jesus.

By examining questions of gender at the crossroads of race, nationality and class, this dissertation uncovers new understandings of the Mormon tradition—its power, its potential, its challenges and its shortcomings. Also elucidated are the complex, nuanced, and complicated perspectives of Mormon women of color, who adapt and adopt Mormonism to their contexts and for their purposes. In analyzing the oral life histories of these women on the borderlands of Mormonism, this dissertation ultimately suggests an important intervention in the field of women's studies in religion: that scholars pay attention to the ways that marginalized women contest or nuance the preoccupations of white Western feminist scholars. By uncovering and honoring the paradigms that mark the lives and values of women in various global contexts, a fuller, richer, and more complete understanding of religion and religious adherents emerge.

**Chapter Two**  
**Navigating Gender, Negotiating Agency:**  
**Mexican Mormon Women's Experiences and Self-Constructions in Oral Narratives**

On a sunny warm day in March 2015, I sat in a bedroom graciously offered to me as a place to conduct oral life history interviews with Mormon women in Veracruz, Mexico. The sights and sounds of urban Mexico filtered through the open windows: tortilla sellers on motorcycles with loudspeakers called out their wares, music from cars filtered up from the nearby street, and the light reflected off the bright pink house across the street. I was sitting in the room with my interpreter and Paloma, a woman in her sixties, wearing sensible brown shoes, plain brown skirt, gray shirt, and a friendly expression. As I began to get my voice recorder ready, I asked her to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire. While she filled out the sheet in careful and awkward writing, she asked my translator, chuckling, “Can I put *mujeriego* [womanizer] as my husband’s occupation?” My translator and I laughed and assented, and she slowly wrote *mujeriego* on the line.

I have frequently reflected on this moment. I had asked about occupations on the sheet in order to get a sense of the women’s social location in society, but Paloma’s humorous response highlighted the limitations of my project to conduct and analyze oral life histories of a community of Mexican Mormon women. I had embarked on the project to expand the archive of existing work on Mormon women beyond the borders of the U.S. and Canada, where the vast majority of studies on Mormon women had taken place. I was convinced that, as a scholar of Mormon women, it was neither adequate nor ethical to focus my attention on predominantly white women in the U.S., since women’s experiences with Mormonism may differ significantly along the intersecting lines of race, class, and nationality. Yet my interview questions were

products of my own limited experience. Paloma's response signaled to me that several of my questions might not align with the stories the women wanted to tell me about their lives. I witnessed Paloma convert this interview into the story she wanted to tell: that of a difficult marriage, a brutal fight for the life of her sick child, and the horror of watching that child die.

I had embarked on this research project with considerable trepidation. I was a white middle-class Mormon feminist from the U.S., and I had spent weeks agonizing over the ethics of me, a privileged outsider, carrying out this project to gather stories and perspectives of devout LDS women in Veracruz. I had only a semester of Spanish under my belt, and thus would need to work alongside an interpreter and research colleague, and I worried about how I could fairly tell and analyze these devout women's stories given my feminist and white American positionality. While acknowledging to myself these complications, I hoped to do right by these women who were gifting me with their trust, time, and stories. I ultimately proceeded forward with the project, hoping that despite our differences, these women would seize these interviews as an opportunity to shape and voice the stories they wanted to tell about their lives, as Paloma ultimately did.

A one to two-hour interview can never capture the complexities, struggles, and triumphs of a woman's life, but these interviews did reveal many multifaceted glimpses of these women's experiences within Mormonism. A number of themes ultimately emerged in the thirty oral history interviews we conducted during my eleven-day stay. First, many of the older women who joined the church two, three, or four decades ago converted in contexts of domestic violence, *mujeriego* husbands and fathers, and alcoholism. The move towards the LDS church was a rejection of patterns of behavior they deemed damaging and harmful. Second, many women found in the church resources and skills that enabled them and their children to rise socially and

economically. From gaining increased literacy through scripture reading to household production learned in Relief Society weekday meetings, these women were able to materially benefit from their association with Mormonism. Third, women who chose Mormonism found in the religion spiritual power. Many of these women before their conversions had spiritual connections to the divine, but Mormonism, with its constant emphases on observance and devotion, often enhanced their connection to God. The close personal relationships they developed with God as friend and companion as well as the ability they found to connect with God personally, often through dreams and visions, gave them a sense of a loving deity standing next to them in times of conflict and difficulty.<sup>1</sup> For many of these women, embracing the relatively strict and patriarchal LDS church was a step towards a markedly better life because of its emphasis on clean living, devoted families, skill acquisition, close community, and a loving and personal God.

That these women found in Mormonism uniquely appealing practices and teachings, given their particular contexts, is not surprising. As feminist scholars have discussed for three decades now, women are not a monolith and cannot be approached as a group with essential similarities and issues.<sup>2</sup> Intersectional feminists have pointed out that women's lives and experiences must not only be viewed through the prism of gender, but also of race, class, culture, and sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup> When one takes into account these other markers of history, identity, and experience, one sees that different concerns, challenges, and standpoints emerge. We even at times see that what is restrictive and problematic for one group of women can be liberating and

---

<sup>1</sup> While elements of Mexican Mormon women's spirituality are discussed in this chapter, the majority of discussion of Mexican Mormon women's dreams, visions, and theological insight is in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Spelman, *Inessential Woman*, 137.

<sup>3</sup> See Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" and Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." See also Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, eds. Mary Margaret Fonow et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 41-43.

ennobling for another, given their different contexts.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I elaborate on these and other themes, focusing particularly on agency, self-conception, and authority. To best honor their voices and stories, I center the chapter on the experiences of a handful of the women which particularly elucidate themes I found important in the oral histories. I argue that Mormonism opens certain liberative spaces for Mexican women, even as its patriarchal structure and theology simultaneously bound women's actions. These liberative spaces include opportunities to reject destructive patterns of infidelity, abuse, and alcoholism, to construct vitalizing relationships with family members, church community and a personal and loving God, and to pursue self-development and economic/social advancement. Complementarian gender roles and patriarchal church structures undoubtedly imbue their Mormon lives, yet these women's primary moral concerns revolve around rejecting alienation, eliminating abuse, and building strong relationships and futures for themselves and their children. The paradigm of a non-oppressive connectedness, which encompasses a focus on both vitalizing relationality and liberation, thus emerges as a particularly fruitful lens through which to analyze these Mexican Mormon women's lives.

### ***Agency, Authority, and Liberation***

Maria was a small woman in her fifties, wearing plain clothes, straight gray hair and eyeglasses. Her warm coppery skin was lined and her voice was low, as she tearfully told us that she had not had a pretty or easy life. My colleague and I assured her that that was all right, that

---

<sup>4</sup> A classic example of this the feminist call in the 1960s and 70s to enter the workforce. Many white college-educated women felt liberated by this move, but this call did not resonate with working-class women and women of color, who were already in the workforce and not feeling particularly empowered by it. See Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner, "Introduction: Sex and Gender Through the Prism of Difference," in *Gender Through the Prism of Difference*, eds. Maxine Baca Zinn et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

we appreciated any perspectives or experiences she was willing to share with us. What unfolded was an eye-opening interview for me. When we were done, I turned to my colleague and said, “The church for Maria is liberation. Liberation!” I had not expected that. Comfort, certainty, community—I had expected these given the many years I had spent practicing Mormonism and speaking with Mormon women. But a sense of liberation from a strict, patriarchal, highly centralized, American-directed church was something of a surprise to me. What I later came to understand, after studying Maria’s oral history interview, was that the liberative sense that Maria described finding in Mormonism was primarily tied to the ways in which the tradition facilitated positive human and divine connectedness, rather than the elimination of gendered power dynamics.

Maria was raised in difficult circumstances by a mother who “hated everything. [She] had children with different men but never loved anyone. Because I didn’t fit in her world she was always against me. I feel like she hated me. I think that in my life, I’ve never had a worse enemy that would hate me so much as my own mother.”<sup>5</sup> Maria grew up feeling utterly alone, in a world where “children start drinking when they are little. When they are ten, eleven, twelve, years old they start dating women. In fact, parents are accustomed to taking them to prostitutes when very young so they become men, they say. But as long as I can remember, that was not right from my perspective. I hated that world.”<sup>6</sup> Maria actively fought against this world, telling of one Christmas when, as an eight or nine-year-old, she began throwing out the beer against her

---

<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 2, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. “Odiaba todo, tuvo hijos con diferentes hombres. Ella nunca quiso a nadie, y como yo no encajaba en su mundo siempre me llevaba la contraria. A mí me odiaba, yo siento. Creo que en la vida no tuve peor enemigo que me odiara tanto como mi madre.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3. “Los niños empiezan a tomar desde chiquitos, andan con mujeres desde los diez, once, doce años. Inclusive los padres acostumbran llevarlos desde muy niños con prostitutas para que “se hagan hombres” dicen ellos. Pero desde que yo tuve uso de razón para mí eso no era correcto. Yo recuerdo que a los ocho ó nueve años, yo odiaba ese mundo.”

uncle's wishes.

This world which Maria described as being so damaging to her personally—she talked about crying continually and going without food for days—reflects some aspects of Latin American machismo culture well documented by scholars.<sup>7</sup> Susan M. De Vos and Bron Ingoldsby describe machismo as being characterized by male aggressiveness (verbal, physical, and in relation to alcohol) and hypersexuality.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars have noted that machismo is connected to colonialism and “conquest trauma,” as men “displace their class antagonism onto gender relations.”<sup>9</sup> Maria rejected and resisted this machismo world of promiscuity and rampant alcohol use in her childhood and also as an adult. She married a man from whom she ultimately separated. She explained, “There was a bit of violence, but most of all irresponsibility. He was a womanizer. He hid it for a time. And he would economically and morally abandon the family.”<sup>10</sup> Male abdication of familial responsibilities, Elizabeth Brusco writes, is a key element of machismo culture, and Maria refused to put up with it.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See Elizabeth Stevens, “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America,” in *Female and Male in Latin America*, ed. A. Pescatello (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1973), 89-101 and Elizabeth Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Columbia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). Stevens wrote that machismo is derived from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Mediterranean concepts of shame and honor, imported from the Old World to the Americas through colonization.

<sup>8</sup> Susan M. De Vos, *Household Composition in Latin America* (Springer Science and Business Media, 2012). Bron B. Ingoldsby, “The Latin American Family: Familialism Vs. Machismo,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 22: 1 (1991): 58. Recently, some scholars have critiqued the emphasis on machismo when discussing Latino masculinity and advocate a wider discussion about Latino masculinities, including that of gay men with feminist consciousnesses. See Aida Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha, *Beyond Machismo: Intersectional Latino Masculinities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 11-15.

<sup>9</sup> Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*, 145. See also Manuel Pena, “Class, Gender and Machismo: The ‘Traacherous-Woman’ Folklore of Mexican Male Workers,” *Gender and Society* 5, no. 1 (1991): 31; Olivia Espin, “Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexuality in Hispanic/Latin Women,” in *Race, Class, and Gender*, eds. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992), 144; Denise A. Segura and Jennifer L. Pierce, “Chicana/o Family Structure and Gender Personality: Chodorow, Familism, and Psychoanalytic Sociology Revisited,” *Signs* 19, no.1 (1993): 79.

<sup>10</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 1. “Había un poco de violencia pero lo que más había era desobligación. Él era mujeriego, lo ocultó por un tiempo y desatendía a la familia económicamente y moralmente”.

<sup>11</sup> Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 82-83.

The beginning of Maria's story is characterized by division, hostility, opposition, and resistance to the world in which she was living. Maria could not accept this culture and its expectations that she endure the behavior of her husband, expectations which, Evelyn Stevens writes, are built into the female cultural counterpart to machismo. According to Stevens' classic article, the female counterpart to machismo is marianismo, which is the cult of feminine spiritual superiority. In this framework, the ideal woman is characterized by

moral superiority, and spiritual strength. This spiritual strength engenders abnegation, that is, an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. No self-denial is too great for the Latin American woman, no limit can be divined to her vast store of patience with the men in her world.... She is also submissive to the demands of the men: husbands, sons, fathers, brothers.<sup>12</sup>

Maria was fighting not only against the behavior of her mother, husband, and others in her world, but also against gendered expectations that she passively accept this behavior.

During the breakdown of her marriage, Maria came into contact with LDS missionaries, whom her husband invited into their home to teach them. Her husband wanted to change his life and felt that joining the church would give him a new start. But because her husband was the one pushing for an association with Mormonism, Maria resisted the church. She felt like the missionaries "were my husband's accomplices because I saw they understood each other very well. I lived on the offensive against the missionaries."<sup>13</sup> Maria attended church for her daughter's sake, sitting in the back and not talking to anyone. It was only after her husband gave up on going to church that Maria realized she missed it when she did not go. "I felt sad. I longed to go," she related.<sup>14</sup> Maria threw out her Catholic saint icons and began living the life Mormonism preached. It was not hard for her to change her life:

---

<sup>12</sup> Stevens, "Marianismo," 94-95.

<sup>13</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 1. "Yo sentía que ellos eran cómplices de mi esposo, yo decía porque se entienden muy bien Yo vivía en guardia contra los misioneros."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2. "Yo me sentía triste, anhelaba ir."

I never liked living in that world – I never understood it. There was no room in it for me because I was going against everything; in that world there was never a place for me. I was always alone, I felt trampled on, sad, offended. And suddenly here where I was, now I felt peace, I felt good.<sup>15</sup>

Given her opposition to her cultural environment, it makes sense that Maria might feel comfort and peace within Mormonism. Because of Mormonism's strict norms against alcohol and infidelity, and because of its emphasis on involved breadwinning fathers, Maria would have seen in Mormonism moral and behavioral teachings that would have resonated with her and condemned certain male behavior to which she was so opposed.

Maria explained her initial attraction to Mormonism as rooted in feelings of peace. However, Mormonism offered other appealing elements. Mormon teachings helped her son to progress socially and economically. Her son is a returned missionary, has never drunk a drop of alcohol, and has completed his college education. Given that Maria herself only attended elementary school and has worked in low paying job sectors such as domestic service and vending, her son's achievement is no small accomplishment. Her daughters, who left practicing Mormonism behind as teens and had children out of wedlock, have had harder lives. Thus, Mormonism's strict behavioral standards and emphasis on personal discipline could very well have helped Maria's son achieve a level of financial and life security that her daughters have never known. That Mormonism has been attractive to Latin Americans because of its association with social mobility and middle-class values has been documented by other scholars.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. "Nunca me gustó vivir en ese mundo; nunca lo entendí. Para mí nunca hubo cabida porque yo iba en contra de todo, en ese mundo nunca hubo un lugar para mí, siempre estuve sola. Me sentía pisoteada, triste, ofendida, y de pronto acá donde ahora estaba ahora sentía paz, me sentía bien."

<sup>16</sup> Wesley W. Craig, Jr. "The Church in Latin America: Progress and Challenge," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 3 (1968), 69. LaMond Tullis, "Three Myths about Mormons in Latin America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7:1 (1981), 79-87. Henri Gooren, "Latter-day Saints Under Siege: The Unique Experiences of Nicaraguan Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 40, no. 3 (2007): 150. Stewart, "Growth, Retention, and Internationalization," 329. Knowlton, "Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America," 43. The attraction to middle-class values and social mobility are a prime marker of difference between Mormon converts and Pentecostal converts in Latin America. Pentecostal converts are primarily drawn from the working class and

Another liberating element Maria found in Mormonism is the sense of a close, personal Father God:

I've told them [my children] that He will always be with us. Bad times may come ... but that doesn't mean that we have been defeated because the Father will give us, will help us, and that's why I keep repeating to them every time I can.... And just like the scriptures state, the gates of hell may be opening their mouths upon us, but the Father will be there and He will lift us up.<sup>17</sup>

Life for Maria is still something of a battle. She used language of war and tribulation to describe her challenges, but within and alongside these challenges, she described a personal loving God who knows her, cares for her, and stands with her.

Maria talked about never reading scriptures before her conversion to Mormonism, but scriptures have become a source of comfort and strength for her. She explained, "While reading the scriptures, I feel transported to something very real. Time passes and I don't want anyone to talk to me when I read the scriptures. It leaves a very good impression. I understand Father's love better."<sup>18</sup> Maria's experience of personally reading sacred texts has connected her to a benevolent and loving Father God. They have also provided figures to admire and to whom she can relate. She selected Job as one of her favorite scriptural figures. The story of Job might be a troubling text to some feminists because of the frightening image of God deliberately killing off innocents to test a man, but for Maria and the several other Veracruz women who mentioned Job as their favorite scriptural character, seeing their experiences of hardships and survival reflected in the life of this man overwhelmed any disturbing messages about God in the story.

---

tend to stay working class. Robert Williamson, *Latin America: Cultures in Conflict* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 187.

<sup>17</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 7-8. "Les he dicho que siempre va estar con nosotros. Pueden venir malos momentos... pero eso no quiere decir que ya estamos derrotados, porque el Padre nos va a dar, nos va ayudar y eso se los repito cada que puedo.... Y como dicen las escrituras "el infierno puede estar abriendo su boca sobre nosotros pero el Padre va estar ahí y él nos va a levantar."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. "Pero al leer las escrituras siento como si me transportara. Es algo que siento muy vivido, muy real cuando me pongo a leer las escrituras. Y puede pasar el tiempo y no quiero que nadie me hable. Como que el leer las escrituras me deja un buen sabor de boca, como que comprendo mejor el amor del Padre."

While Maria loves reading her scriptures alone, she also has within Mormonism opportunities to read them with others. Having served as a Sunday School teacher, Maria led discussions of scriptural stories and passages in a mixed group of males and females. Other scholars of Latin American religion and theology have spoken of the power of reading the Bible in the light of one's own situation and experiences, particularly for poor and marginalized populations. Maria Pilar Aquino discussed the transformational potential of ecclesial base communities in Latin America, where small groups of people (mainly women) come together to read the Bible in the context of their own lives and claim "their right to be the church and regarded as creative participants within it."<sup>19</sup> In a sense, Mormonism might to some extent be performing some of the functions of an ecclesial base community, since LDS members take responsibility for ministering to each other and holding classes where they can read and discuss scriptural passages in light of their own lives. Mormonism therefore offers members like Maria an active, participatory role in the church which stands in contrast to some other religious traditions where interpretive authority and expertise lie in the hands of a priest or pastor.

One of the most fascinating questions that arises when I contemplate Maria's story is what role agency and authority play in her life. The extent (or even existence) of women's agency in patriarchal religions has been a central issue for scholars of religion. Can women who choose to affiliate with conservative patriarchal religions be viewed as agents? Can they be agents when they insist on obeying their male church leaders? As mentioned in Chapter One, scholars embracing liberal Western notions of individualism and autonomy have often conceptualized agency as resistance to social norms and structures, and so ordinary women who

---

<sup>19</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 53.

uphold gender roles and religious injunctions received scant scholarly attention.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, however, several scholars have offered more nuanced analyses that explore the ways women have acted agentively within their traditions. Saba Mahmood, a pioneer in this reconceptualization of agency, argues that Western conceptions of agency must move beyond the notion of agency as subversion to authority. She argues that agency is also present in actions which uphold norms, including patriarchal norms. Mahmood sees this agency in the women's mosque movement in Egypt, in which women gather to read the Qur'an and *hadith* and receive teachings from female preachers about piety, submissiveness, and modesty. "If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific... then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance," she argues, pointing out that agency can emerge in different forms in different places.<sup>21</sup> Thus agency should be recognized not only in acts of resistance to norms, but also in the various acts which support them. Catherine Brekus likewise argues for a new model of agency that acknowledges ordinary women's power to create change as well as the real structural constraints on their agency.<sup>22</sup> She argues that such a notion of agency should include ideas about agency as reproducing norms, not just subverting them, and about agency being on a continuum between full freedom of action and complete constraint.

How does Maria function as an agent in her oral life history? Before she joined the LDS Church, she fell well in line with predominant conceptions of women's agency as resistance to oppressive systems and individuals. Her life story is characterized by the tensions, sadness, loneliness, and hatred that being in constant opposition to one's family and society engenders. After she embraced Mormonism, however, she found belonging and community in this new

---

<sup>20</sup> Brekus, "Mormon Women," 71-72.

<sup>21</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 3-14.

<sup>22</sup> Brekus, "Mormon Women," 78.

world she has chosen:

Here [at church], I can have a very big problem with someone, because I have had them, and my rational thinking tells me, “leave,” but my heart—that that internal me that I have that’s unexplainable—keeps me here. One day my children laughed a lot because I made a choice. I told them, “I would not leave even if nobody loved me, only if my bishop asked me not to come again.” I do not leave the Gospel just like that. For me that is the biggest thing the Lord has given me. And when I’m sad, depressed, defeated, I know I have a place in my Father’s house.<sup>23</sup>

With this statement, one can see some of the complexities of her agentic status, as it becomes clear that her agency indeed rests on a continuum between absolute freedom and absolute constraint. She has retained her personality and individual opinions if she has difficulties with some members. However, we also glimpse elements of constraint in this brief passage. She has given primacy and a large amount of authority to her male priesthood leader, who alone, she said, has the moral authority with his words to keep her away from the church. Thus, while she continues to resist and push against certain people, she also chooses to uphold the patriarchal and hierarchical elements of Mormonism.

This willingness to support patriarchal authority is likewise present in Maria’s God-language. She finds solace in her Father God, never mentioning Heavenly Mother. Robert Orsi’s insights about some Catholic women’s devotion to the male St. Jude may shed some light on Maria and other Mormon women’s devotion to their male God and male savior. Orsi describes Jude as stepping into the space vacated by absent, disengaged, or oppressive men in these women’s lives. Their men might be undependable, but Jude is always there for them.<sup>24</sup> Maria

---

<sup>23</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 6. “Aquí yo puedo tener un problema grande con alguien porque los he tenido, y la mente racional me dice: ‘vete.’ Pero mi corazón, ese yo interno que tengo que no me explico, me mantiene aquí. Un día mis hijos se rieron mucho porque yo tomé una decisión y les dije, ‘Yo no me voy a ir aunque nadie me quisiera, solo que mi obispo me dijera ya no vengas.’ Yo no dejo el evangelio así como así, para mí es lo más grande que el Señor me dio. Y cuando estoy triste, deprimida, derrotada, yo sé que tengo un lugar en la casa de mi Padre.”

<sup>24</sup> Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude*, 106.

likewise experiences her reliable, loving, and engaged Father God as comforting, perhaps particularly so given her experience with an absent father and disappointing husband. God the Father satisfies her emotional needs in a way few of her male relatives were able to. Resistance to and accommodation of patriarchal norms thus characterize her narrative.

This same complexity regarding agency, resistance, and accommodation is present in a temple recommend interview with her priesthood leader, who encouraged her to discuss her problems with her mother. She said:

I had interviews to enter the temple, they asked me about my feelings and I told them that I didn't love my mother, so the leader who interviewed me helped me a lot. I am blessed to be an introvert—it's very rare and difficult for others to understand me—but I have the blessing to know that that the words of my leaders are the law for me. So for me it was easy to change my relationship or feelings with my mother. You can say that it improved because I started to understand her. I especially understood that only God has the right to judge her. I realized that I have the duty to forgive everyone.<sup>25</sup>

In this interview, permeated by male power and ecclesiastical privilege, we see the patriarchal power and deference to leaders that is encouraged within Mormon culture actually help Maria overcome resentment toward her mother. Maria used her agency to comply with church authority and gained greater understanding, compassion, and the capacity to forgive. Yet, this healing was at the behest of a male church leader whose words “are the law for me.” For Maria, male priesthood authority in this situation was enabling rather than constrictive. In one of the most powerful moments in the interview, when I asked about her experiences with her church leaders, she said, “My leaders have been my everything because they have helped me understand my life.

---

<sup>25</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 3. “En las entrevistas para ir al templo me preguntaron de mis sentimientos y les dije que no quería a mi mamá, entonces el líder que me entrevistó me ayudó mucho. Tengo la bendición de que tengo mi carácter introvertido y es muy raro, muy difícil que me entiendan los demás. Pero tengo la bendición de entender que las palabras de mis líderes son ley para mí. Entonces para mí fue fácil cambiar mi relación o sentimientos con mi mamá. Se puede decir que mejoró porque la empecé a comprender, en especial porque comprendí que solo Dios tiene derecho a juzgarla. Comprendí que yo tengo el deber de perdonar a todos.”

I've had excellent leaders; if I can speak to you it's because of them. I used to not speak with anyone."<sup>26</sup>

In some sense, Maria's male church leaders have, as feminists sometimes say, heard her into speech. She was able to express the inexpressible with their help and encouragement. Throughout Maria's oral history, we can see the complexities of her agentive status within Mormonism. Her leaders' words might be law for her, and they hold a moral and ecclesiastical authority which is extensive in the scope of its power, but when those words enable her to find her voice and tell her story, she experiences this male authority as a kind of power that empowers personal, emotional, and spiritual growth and connection. Her male leaders, who have listened to her, empathized with her, and helped her find insights, have functioned as the opposite of what she encountered as male authority in her childhood and marriage. We find in Maria's story a complicated form of agency, in which her submission and compliance to male church leaders leads paradoxically to voice, power, and healing in her life.

Maria's faith in her leaders and her relationship with them also gives her moral support in her fight for justice. As many womanist and mujerista theologians have noted, a primary moral concern for women of color is survival in contexts of oppression and injustice. Womanist theologian Delores Williams describes a God who does not always liberate exploited women from their oppression completely, but this God does care about their survival and helps them achieve a better quality of life.<sup>27</sup> Like many of the women upon whom womanist and mujerista theologians base their writings, Maria too has been affected by exploitation and injustice, and with the moral support of her leaders and the sustenance of her God, she has fought against this

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6. "Mis líderes han sido mi todo porque ellos me han ayudado a entender mi vida. Yo he tenido líderes excelentes. Si yo puedo hablar con ustedes es por ellos. Yo no hablaba con nadie."

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 20-33.

injustice. She described her daughter doing hard physical work for an exploitative employer who denied handing over a house for which the daughter had paid him over the years. Desperate for help, Maria spoke to the stake president about her problems. They prayed together, and Maria found ways to move forward legally to bring this exploitative employer to justice. She described praying to God about this matter, “because only He can help us. The employer is very tough and we ask the Lord that he will soften his heart and give him a bit of a thirst for *justicia*.”<sup>28</sup>

Mormonism gave Maria a sense of a personal God who hears her, answers prayers, and stands with her in her need for justice against exploitation. It also gives her a community, including men in authoritative positions, with which to sit, pray, articulate problems, and envision solutions.

From an early life characterized by pain, loneliness, opposition, and damaging behavior, Maria has found in Mormonism a strong community, a personal benevolent God, opportunities to grow and contribute, and strict standards resonating with her own sense of rightness and justice. Conversion to this conservative patriarchal church has, according to Maria’s narrative, enhanced her agentive status and enabled her to move forward productively with her life. In Mormonism she has found an agency which gives her affirmation to resist not only machismo and the self-abnegation of marianismo, but it has also given her agentive scope and motivation to connect, grow, forgive, and find her voice.

### ***Obedience, Abuse, and Change***

Ana, a coiffed, long haired, and fair-skinned woman in heels and a ruffled dress, elaborated in both English and Spanish upon the power dynamics of an abusive Mormon marriage in her oral history. Raised by a practicing single Mormon mother, she described obedience being a characteristic she was taught as a child. When she was eighteen she met a

---

<sup>28</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #170 (2015), 5. “porque solo él puede ayudarnos. El patrón es muy duro. Le pedimos al Señor que conmueva su corazón y le dé un poco de sed de justicia.”

forceful returned missionary who wanted to marry her. She was unsure. She related, “He had specific goals, and I wasn’t ready to get married yet. I would see him and I would feel scared. But just like my mom, he would say, ‘Everything I tell you is the best thing for you,’ so I obeyed. It was always *obediencia*.”<sup>29</sup> Despite her proclivity towards the docility and obedience she had been taught as a child, Ana was undecided. She prayed continually. She said, “I asked the Father, ‘Should I do this? Is he the right person? ... And I didn’t feel answers.’”<sup>30</sup> Eventually after talking with her stake president’s wife, she came to understand that “the Father wasn’t going to tell me. The decision was mine. I mean, He’s not going to take away my free agency by saying, ‘Yes, it’s him,’ or ‘No, this is not the one.’ This was part of the decision that I had to make.”<sup>31</sup> Respect for free agency and the importance of prayerfully using one’s own resources and insight to navigate difficult situations characterize Ana’s oral history. This understanding that she was responsible for making her life what she wanted it to be would ultimately give her the determination to work through what turned out to be an abusive marriage.

Ana decided to marry the man, and when asked about challenges in her life, alluded to “big challenges” in her marriage, “big challenges that I wasn’t used to bearing. And I didn’t know if they were correct or incorrect because I’ve never been in a situation like this. So they were really big challenges. Later I realized that most Mexican women have them, it’s just we keep quiet and no one says anything.”<sup>32</sup> After she was asked if she was referring to abuse, she

---

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #173 (2015), 2, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. “Él ya tenía metas más específicas y yo todavía no estaba lista para eso. Yo lo veía y él me daba miedo. Pero, pues, como mamá él decía ‘Todo lo que yo diga es lo mejor para ti,’ yo obedecí. Siempre fue la obediencia.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3. “[Y] pregunté al Padre, ‘Lo debo de hacer? ¿Él es la persona correcta?...’ Y no sentí una contestación.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. “[E]l Padre no me iba a decir. La decisión era mía. O sea, el libre albedrío, él no me lo va a quitar al decirme, ‘Sí, ese es.’ o ‘No, ese no es.’ Eso es parte de la decisión que yo tenía que tomar.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4. “fueron desafíos fuertes a los que no estaba yo acostumbrada a llevar. Y ni siquiera sabía si eran correctos o no eran correctos porque yo nunca había oído de una situación así. Entonces fueron unos desafíos muy fuertes. Luego me di cuenta de que la mayoría de las mujeres en México los pasan, nada más que todos callamos y nadie lo dice.”

said, “Yes. We all experience it, but no one speaks about it. No one talks about it because, I don’t know, out of fear.”<sup>33</sup> The fact that spousal abuse is so widespread in Ana’s experience is startling. This sense of the ubiquity of spousal abuse was seeded when, unsure of whether domestic violence was a normal part of marriage, she asked her Mormon mother-in-law about it. Her mother-in-law told her, “It’s normal. You have to endure it.”<sup>34</sup> However, years later after she had three children with her husband, Ana ultimately understood that this behavior was unacceptable when her mother and three older LDS brothers discovered the abuse. They were shocked and upset, advising her, “Get a divorce. Stay here. Don’t go back.”<sup>35</sup> Ana neither agreed nor disagreed with their advice, but once again prayed continually.

In the meantime, however, her mother, terribly upset over her discovery, had spoken to an LDS lawyer who had grown up with Ana. The man was serving as a stake president in the area, and he arrived with divorce papers.<sup>36</sup> Ana described their encounter:

He asked me, “What do you want to do? Do you want to get divorced?” And I said, “No. No, he’s a good man. He’s a good member of the church; he just has this difficulty.... I need to help him until it goes away, but I don’t know how. I don’t have the ability to handle it, I don’t know how to do it.”<sup>37</sup>

The stake president then said a prayer with her and came up with a plan. He said, “Here are the divorce papers. Let’s give them to him. If he signs, it’s because he wants to change and it won’t happen again, etc. If he doesn’t sign, that means you shouldn’t go back because he’s not sure that he’ll be able to do it [not beat you any more].”<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. “Sí. A todas lo pasa, pero nadie habla. Nadie lo dice porque...no sé, por temor.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5. “Tienes que aguantar esto, es lo normal.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. “Divórciate. Quédate, ya no regreses.”

<sup>36</sup> A stake president is the lay leader of a group of LDS congregations called a stake. A stake is roughly equivalent to a Catholic diocese.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. “[Él] me dijo, ‘¿Qué es lo que quieres hacer? ¿Te quieres divorciar?’ Y le dije, ‘No. No, porque él es un buen hombre. Es un buen miembro de la iglesia, solamente que tiene este desafío.... Necesito ayudarlo a que desaparezca, pero no sé como. No tengo la habilidad para manejarlo, no sé como hacerlo.’”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. “Aquí están los papeles de divorcio. Vamos a dárselos. Si él firma es porque quiere cambiar, y no volvera a suceder,’ etc. ‘Si no lo hace, quiere decir que no debes regresar porque no está él seguro de poder hacerlo.’”

This anecdote reveals multiple ways that Mormon masculinity and power issues can affect a Mormon woman. On the one hand, Ana's husband represents a domineering, abusive Mormon presence who expects obedience from his wife. On the other hand, we see the lawyer friend, a benevolent Mormon male leader figure, emphasizing Ana's right to decide for herself what course to take and helping her come up with a plan enabling Ana to end the abuse but preserve the marriage—the outcome she preferred. His plan gave her significant leverage to stop the abuse.

When she presented her husband with the divorce papers to sign, “He cried and cried and cried.... He asked me, ‘Do you know what you’re asking me to sign?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ And he said, ‘I will sign. I will sign because I know that I can change and I know that this won’t happen again.’”<sup>39</sup> Ana described their life after this episode as a honeymoon. She said, “He totally changed. Everything changed. It was like starting a new marriage.”<sup>40</sup> Interestingly she then added this:

That’s when I realized that we are the ones who have the answer to decide how to change our own husbands. We live with them more than their own mothers, and we end up educating them.... When things aren’t being done right, it’s only because we’re afraid to do what we need to. Like any mother who is afraid to punish their child because you don’t know if the child will react well or not, so we don’t do it. This is the reason things don’t change—for fear.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Maria, who never explicitly addressed the question of agency, Ana addressed it and clearly embraced the notion of free agency, personal action and personal responsibility. From her earlier realization that God wouldn’t impede on free agency by telling her whether or not to

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. “Cambió totalmente, Todo cambió. Fue como el comienzo de un nuevo matrimonio.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. “Entonces fue cuando yo me di cuenta de que nosotras somos las que tenemos las respuestas de decidir cómo cambiar a nuestros propios esposos. Nosotras vivimos más con ellos que sus propias madres, y nosotros los terminamos de educar.... Cuando las cosas no están siendo correctos, nada más es porque nos da miedo hacerlo. Como cualquier mamá que le da miedo castigar a su bebé porque no sabes si el bebé va a reaccionar bien o va a reaccionar mal, no lo hacemos. Y ese es el motivo por lo cual las cosas siguen igual--por miedo.”

marry her husband—that it was up to her to figure it out—to this episode with the divorce papers, in which she realized that it is up to her and every other wife to forthrightly change damaging dynamics in the marriage, we can see that Ana values initiative and proactivity. Her belief that women can stem violence by literally choosing not to take it anymore is striking and implies an expansive sense of her own and other women’s agency. One senses the personal growth in her narrative, as she initially described herself as this obedient, docile, and scared figure, but then became a woman insisting on her ability and right to make decisions herself, to enact change in her life, and to change her husband’s behavior. Throughout this journey to a new self and better marriage, Ana described a God who has been a constant and benevolent companion through prayer, but one who, like herself, values individuals’ sometimes painful journeys toward self-growth and realization.

When asked about the scriptural figure she admires most, Ana named Emma Smith, a woman who chose Joseph Smith and “knew what she wanted. Even though her parents disagreed, she was firm in what she wanted. And she was firm in bearing everything she was asked to bear.”<sup>42</sup> Ana certainly manifested a similar strength of purpose and determination to find her way through her own trials. Though Ana herself never articulated this connection, Emma Smith is an intriguing figure for Ana to mention for another reason: both Ana and Emma resisted marital behavior they found damaging. Emma ultimately put her foot down against Joseph’s polygamous behavior and teachings, just as Ana put her foot down against her husband’s abuse.<sup>43</sup> For both of these women, these acts of resistance were turning points in their

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19. “Desde que escogió a José y ella sabía que es lo que quería. Aunque sus padres no estaban de acuerdo, ella fue firme en lo que quiso. Y también fue firme en soportar todo lo que tenía que soportar.”

<sup>43</sup> Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery discuss Emma Smith’s resistance to polygamy— and occasional acquiescence to it — at length. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 130-182.

lives. When reflecting on the challenges she endured, Ana said, “I needed to live a really challenging experience so I could have a strong character. My character was very weak.”<sup>44</sup> Change from weakness to strength, from passivity to action, is a driving theme in her oral history.

Yet Ana’s agency is on a continuum, as Brekus theorized. Ana changed her husband’s abusive behavior, but it became clear later in the interview that she was unable to totally change her husband’s authoritarian behavior. To get an outcome she desired, she described having to carefully manage and finesse her husband. As she said, “We women have an ability and tremendous capacity to get the things we want without them [husbands] realizing. We let them believe it’s them who are making the decision, but in reality, they’re doing what we think is best.”<sup>45</sup> When asked for an example of this, she described the remodeling of their home:

He would always choose the furniture, he chose the color of the house, and I didn’t like any of it.... I didn’t have the negotiating skills to say, “I like this color,” and “Look, I like this piece of furniture.” So I started to think about how to tell him that I wanted the kitchen to be white and blue, and I said, “How do I explain this to him? How do I tell him? How do I choose my colors?” ... One day we went to a friend’s house who was renovating her kitchen and I liked it.... On the way back from their house, I commented on the good taste the husband had in choosing those colors. Later when I came [to our house], the same colors were in my kitchen.<sup>46</sup>

While Ana was able to have the outcome she wished, it is significant that she was able to achieve

---

<sup>44</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #173 (2015), 8. “[N]ecesitaba yo vivir una experiencia muy fuerte para también tener un carácter fuerte. Mi carácter era muy débil.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9. “Las mujeres tenemos una habilidad y una capacidad tremenda de conseguir las cosas que nosotras queremos sin que ellos se den cuenta. Les hacemos creer que son ellos que toman la decisión, pero en realidad están haciendo lo que nosotras pensamos que es lo mejor.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. “Todo el tiempo él escogía los muebles, él escogía el color de la casa, y nada de eso a mi me gustaba.... Y no tenía...mi poder de negocio para decir, ‘Este color... y fíjate este mueble me gusta...’ Hasta que empezaba a buscar la forma de decirle que la cocina me gustaría que fuera blanca con azul, y dije, ‘¿Cómo se lo explico? ¿Cómo se lo digo? ¿Cómo escojo mis colores?’... Un día fuimos a la casa de una amiga que estaba remodelando su cocina y a mí me gustó. ¿Cómo le decía yo que ese era el color que quería? En esa ocasión que fuimos, en ese tiempo esa familia eran muy amigos nuestros. Cuando regresamos de su casa, en el camino, le hice comentarios del buen gusto del esposo de ella había tenido a escoger esos colores. Entonces, después de que regresé de un tiempo para acá, estaban los mismos colores en mi cocina.”

this outcome only by subtle finessing and not by forthright negotiation and declaration. She may have felt empowered as a change agent and a decision maker, and she was able to stop the physical abuse, but power dynamics are clearly such that she does not have the same hard decision-making power as her husband. Because she does not have that same authority in the marriage, she resorted to a gentle manipulation. Ethicist Sarah Hoagland defines manipulation as “exercising (some) modicum of control from a position of subordination,” and she describes it as a survival strategy women have created in contexts of male domination.<sup>47</sup> R. Marie Griffith describes a similar dynamic in the marriages of evangelical women, whose submission to their husbands could be viewed as a “strategy of containment” which benefits both men and women, since women’s submission helps to “maintain domestic harmony as well as their own security.”<sup>48</sup> Ana felt that in her marriage, even after the abuse had stopped, a strategy of gentle nudging and non-confrontation was the safe and productive route to achieving outcomes she desired. Ana’s carefully thought out navigations and strategies in her marriage serve to highlight some of the limitations of female agency within a context of female subordination.

Patriarchy is a fact that Ana has learned to contend with in her marriage. One important question is the relationship between both abusive patriarchy that her husband exhibited earlier in her marriage, and the less abusive but still authoritarian patriarchy she discussed later in her marriage, to Mormonism. Is his behavior tied to Mormon patriarchal teachings in any way? Does Mormonism open up space for men like this husband to believe that they are within their rights to dominate and bully and even hit their wives—or if not to physically abuse them, to nevertheless rule over them in other ways? As is made clear in other oral histories, and as Ana herself baldly asserted, domestic violence is everywhere. In the case of Ana’s husband, it is not

---

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values* (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), 53.

<sup>48</sup> Griffith, *God’s Daughters*, 181.

possible from the oral history to ascertain whether his traditional patriarchal beliefs about power dynamics within marriage are in some way tied to Mormon teachings or practices. Ana never told us that he justified his abusive behavior with claims of his right to preside in the home or her duties to obey him as husband. However, she painted a complicated and nuanced picture of the role the church plays in both discouraging and not discouraging such damaging male behavior.

A couple incidents in Ana's oral history indicate that some church leaders discouraged domestic violence. In addition to the stake president friend who denounced her husband's abuse, we also see hints of discouragement of abuse at an institutional level. Ana told of her stake in Mexico City arranging for fifteen women in each ward to attend a three-day program hosted by an LDS woman formerly involved in the Miss America Pageant.<sup>49</sup> Ana described going to this program and hearing this successful American Mormon woman speak about her own experience with domestic violence. Ana recounted the audience's reaction:

Everyone [in the audience] was like, "Ah! [Gasp] I'm not the only one!" And we all started to write, and I turned around to look and saw everyone was writing it [their experience with abuse] down. And we were just fifteen women from the ward, so what about the rest? That's when I realized it's not just here or there, it's everywhere.<sup>50</sup>

At this same weekend program in Mexico City, Ana described other focuses of the weekend:

They did fashion ideas with the sisters, they taught us the color wheel, how to put makeup on, which colors look good on us. We ended with a fashion show, modeling clothes, new haircuts, new looks. You leave with a different mentality.... [The weekend was about] your worth as a woman.... And most importantly that you don't have to stay silent.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Ana couldn't remember the name of the woman, but it is a high probability that the woman she was referring to was former model, image consultant, philanthropist, and motivational speaker Barbara Barrington Jones.

<sup>50</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #173 (2015), 10. "Cuando ella habla y cuenta su historia que fue de demasiada violencia, todas como que 'Ahh! No soy la única!' Y cuando todas empiezan a escribir y empiezo a voltear a ver y vi que todos están escribiendo. Y nada más fuéramos quince de barrio, ¿y las demás? Es cuando me di cuenta de que no es aquí, no es allá, es en todos lados."

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12. "hicieron cambios de looks a las hermanas, nos enseñaron la tableta de colores, como maquillarnos, que colores nos quedan. Terminamos con la pasarela, modelando ropa, nuevos cortes, nuevos looks. Sales con una mentalidad diferente....[Este fin de semana se trató de] Tu valor como mujer... Y sobre todo que no tienes que quedarte callado."

This program worked to countermand damaging abuse dynamics and encourage women to speak about their own experience with violence. Giving voice to their own experiences of abuse was remarkably empowering for women like Ana, who once again saw that she was not alone in having dealt with violence in her most intimate relationship. Importantly, it also made it clear that domestic violence was not an isolated, regional problem, but one experienced in different parts of the world, and even by women who were educated, beautiful, and privileged. This was a liberating and empowering moment for Ana, who became determined to not bury her experience but speak openly about it.

Notably, this program also played into complementarian notions of women's worth and role, complete with a focus on female physical attractiveness. Ana, comfortable with notions of gender complementarity and gender roles, experienced this focus on beauty as self-esteem building, rather than limiting. Stacilee Ford describes LDS Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong likewise feeling uplifted from church activities and expectations that involve beauty and fashion, as they, at least in part, represent an opportunity to shed their weekday appearance and role, which could often be lonely and difficult.<sup>52</sup> For these domestic workers, and for domestic violence survivors like Ana, physical transformations could be symbolic reminders of inner transformations, and they left women feeling new fortitude to carry on. Ultimately, this LDS program for women in Mexico City indicates that there are strong currents within the church, coming from people with influence and power, against domestic violence, and at the same time, these currents are mixed with gender traditionalism and complementarianism.

Despite these currents within the local church opposing spousal abuse, Ana felt that church leaders had not done enough to discourage domestic violence. She baldly stated, "The

---

<sup>52</sup> Ford, "Sister Acts: Relief Society and Flexible Citizenship in Hong Kong," 222-223.

priesthood knows [about this problem of abuse]. What hurts me the most is that they don't...."<sup>53</sup>

She trailed off here in the interview, but then she continued:

I think there should be more specific classes, or more specific trainings. Things that are more direct. Because when you say things out loud, things aren't left to the imagination.... So there need to be trained members of the church who speak directly. Because if there aren't, it can be counterproductive.<sup>54</sup>

Ana suggested to her stake president in Veracruz that they look for the American woman who ran the workshop in Mexico City and invite her to Veracruz to do a program, because her insights would be helpful to the sisters of her stake. It appears that her stake president never took her up on that suggestion. This exchange demonstrates how women can have considerable influence in local LDS churches, but ultimately, a great deal of the decision making rests with men like bishops and stake presidents. Without the support of her stake president (or regional/area church leaders with more financial resources), hosting a program such as the one Ana participated in in Mexico City was impossible.<sup>55</sup> While this anecdote highlights that women have limited structural power in the church, none of the women I interviewed explicitly acknowledged the systemic power differentials for women and men in the LDS ecclesiastical structure. For them, like for Ana, a sense of liberation and wholeness was more likely to be found in positive, non-abusive relationships than in the dissolution of patriarchy.

Ana's experiences with gendered power differentials reflect larger trends in the Mormon church. In other work, I have reviewed the shift in Mormon teachings about marriage, which emphasized stark male dominion in the nineteenth century but eventually softened in the late

---

<sup>53</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #173 (2015), 11. "Sí, y el sacerdocio lo sabe. Lo que a mi me da mucha pena es que no...."

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. "Yo creo que deben de haber clases más específicas, o talleres más específicos. Cosas más directas. Porque cuando se habla al aire, se deja la imaginación.... Tienen que ser personas capacitadas, miembros de la iglesia, que sean directas. Porque si no, puede ser contraproducente."

<sup>55</sup> Admittedly the stake president may not have had the financial resources to bring a prominent American speaker to Veracruz, even if he wanted to. He could, however, have organized local trainings, regardless of his budget.

twentieth century to emphasize instead equal partnership in the home.<sup>56</sup> General church leaders, whose words are broadcasted and translated for church members around the world, have also forthrightly condemned domestic violence, abuse of all kinds, and domineering behavior.<sup>57</sup> Simultaneously though, teachings persist which place the husband as the one who “presides” in the marriage, and sacred temple ceremonies continue to subordinate wives to husbands. Mormon authorities now envision husbands as presiding over their families through benevolent proactive fatherhood and religious training, rather than outright decision-making power.<sup>58</sup> While Ana’s husband embraced older notions of marital male decision-making power, it is notable that she described his proactivity with children and household tasks. She said that in her husband’s family of origin, men “don’t wash dishes, they don’t wash clothes, they don’t sweep, they hit. He [my father-in-law] is a chauvinist. But he [my husband] isn’t. He always helped with the kids, he always washed bottles, washed diapers. He helps me with meals, with things. And he lets me work. He lets me have my money, spend my money.”<sup>59</sup> Ana’s husband embodies an evolving type of Mormon masculinity which retains older notions of male decision-making power, but which also produces helpful activity within the household and with children.<sup>60</sup> Ana experiences

---

<sup>56</sup> Caroline Kline, “Saying Goodbye to the Final Say: The Softening and Reimagining of Mormon Male Headship Ideologies,” in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, eds. Patrick Mason and John G. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 216-222.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Richard G. Scott, “To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 40-43. Whether or not members in Mexico actually hear or read sermons from general church leaders is highly variable. Some women I interviewed were familiar with general church leaders and their sermons, while others were not. In general, though, members who attend more meetings would be more likely to hear messages like this.

<sup>58</sup> Kline, “Saying Goodbye,” 220-221.

<sup>59</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #173 (2015), 14. “En casa de él ellos no lavan platos, no lavan ropa, no barren, golpean. Él es machista. Y él no. Él siempre ayudó con niños, siempre lavó mamilas, siempre lavó pañales. Me ayuda con la comida, con las cosas. Y me permite trabajar. Permite que yo tenga mi dinero, que yo gaste mi dinero.”

<sup>60</sup> While Ana’s husband’s domestic labor reflects changing norms for Mormon men, they may also reflect changing norms for Mexican men. Matthew Gutmann’s study of masculinity in Mexico City notes that younger men participate in more domestic chores than men from the previous generation. Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City, Tenth Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 151.

this male domestic proactivity as positive and liberating, and she experiences her own wage-earning as similarly positive. While Ana never expressed a desire to eliminate patriarchy or gender roles in her interview, she has found happiness in a marriage in which domestic tasks are shared, in which violence is absent, and in which she has the freedom to pursue her own self-development and career.

Ana's narrative is primarily one of liberation. This liberation does not take the form of gender equality, but rather it takes the form of transformation—particularly, her own transformation from abused passivity to agentive empowerment as she took effective action to end the violence in her home once and for all. In her quest to stop this abuse, certain elements within her Mormon framework became useful tools to enact this change. Her Mormon family and friends gave her support and an effective strategy to end the abuse but preserve the marriage. Additionally, her church-sponsored weekend centering on domestic violence opened her eyes to the ubiquity of the problem and to the transformative importance of telling her story. Thus, like for Maria, voice and truth-telling are central components of Ana's sense of liberation, as she created community and relationships of trust by telling this difficult story to other women who might similarly be experiencing domestic violence. In her determination to help others likewise change their lives, she has encouraged her male church leaders to confront the problem of domestic violence within their stake boundaries. Ana, who operates within a largely unchallenged Mormon framework of gender roles and male hierarchy, has found in Mormonism useful concepts like agency, change, community, and critiques of violence, which have unquestionably changed her life for the better and have enabled her to form healthier relationships with others. For Ana, the ability to take action, change, and form better relationships is liberation. This liberation is certainly not without its gendered constraints which

she must carefully navigate, but it is one which has opened her life to new transformative possibilities.

### ***Agency, Economic Empowerment, and Male Domestication***

In some ways, the oral history of Sofia, a thin woman in her late sixties, with a soft voice, gray short hair, and worried eyes resonates with that of Maria, who found voice and liberation in the church, as well as that of Ana, who embraced her responsibility to change herself and others. However, her story also highlights important insights about other benefits the church delivers to women in oppressive circumstances—namely the development of marketable skills and social uplift.

Sofia found the church as a young mother trying to cope with a miserable marriage. She said, “My husband drank a lot. He beat me. I was physically abused and I found refuge in the gospel.”<sup>61</sup> This abuse was a reliving of childhood beatings from her stepfather. Her life with her stepfather was so filled with abuse and so deprived that at nine years of age, she said, “I turned myself in to a family so they would give me work and so I could have something to eat.”<sup>62</sup> She even changed her first name after she left her family home since “I wanted to be another person; I didn’t want to be the same one.”<sup>63</sup> She met and married her husband at sixteen, hopeful of a happier future. However, some measure of happiness did not find her until she found the church and convinced her husband to be baptized along with her and the children. “I considered myself adopted by the church,” she explained.<sup>64</sup> Her language of adoption is entirely appropriate; she

---

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #174 (2015), 1, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. “Mi esposo tomaba mucho, me pegaba, recibí maltrato físico y yo encontré refugio en el evangelio.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1. “A los nueve años me fui a entregar con una familia para que me dieran trabajo y yo tuviera para comer.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2. “Quería ser otra persona no quería ser la misma.”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 3. “Yo me di como adoptada en la Iglesia.”

embraced the church as a new family, full of supportive sisters and brothers who gave her moral support, but also saw in her a woman with the potential for talent and leadership.

Within the church, Sofia also found personal uplift, literacy, and increasing abilities and skills to support herself. Here she described some of her progression:

I never went to school, I never got an education. I learned to read with the Book of Mormon, with the Bible, reading books, scriptures, and I started writing this way too. I didn't take any classes. I now realize I can stand up and give a talk, give my opinion on certain things, talk and teach when it's expected of me as a leader in Relief Society. That helped me a lot inside and outside of the Church. I've been very blessed.<sup>65</sup>

Sofia described a steady move away from violence and poverty after she joined the church and towards middle-class values of literacy, self-reliance, and social mobility, a pattern that Wesley Craig, Jr. discusses in his analysis of the Mormon church in Latin America. He wrote that converts to the church in Latin America are often from under-privileged classes, with little education and money. Their first exposure to the church is usually two obviously middle-class people: "They [converts] often see membership in this congregation as a social step upward. They anticipate that it will help their children to improve their own social position through education and leadership-skill development which might be converted into an improved socio-economic status in the broader society."<sup>66</sup> While it is unclear that upward mobility was the initial attraction to Mormonism for Sofia, it was certainly a result of her conversion. Because Mormonism emphasizes the importance of personal scripture study and because Mormonism is a lay church with every member contributing by giving sermons, teaching lessons, and performing ministerial and organizational duties, Sofia developed literacy and life skills that enriched her

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 1. "Yo nunca fui a la escuela, nunca estudié. Yo aprendí a leer con el Libro de Mormón, con la Biblia, leyendo los libros, las escrituras, así empecé a escribir. No tomé clases. Ahora me doy cuenta que puedo levantarme a hablar, opinar de ciertas cosas, platicar e instruir cuando se requiere como líder dentro de la Sociedad de Socorro. Eso me ayudó mucho dentro y fuera de la iglesia he sido muy bendecida."

<sup>66</sup> Craig, "The Church in Latin America," 69.

life. She has also, like Maria, found her voice within the church, which has given her a platform for speaking to audiences with a sense of authority and power. She said, “I share my testimony when the sisters have a very weak testimony, and they admire me a lot. I have very nice letters from the ... sister missionaries, who were teaching the discussions to my brother so he could come out of the darkness. One of them who is from Guatemala told me, ‘Sister, when I’m older I want to be like you.’”<sup>67</sup> In this way, Sofia has received affirmation from church members for her willingness to raise her voice and speak her truth.

Mormonism has helped her develop other skills as well. When asked about how she has supported herself financially, Sofia said this:

I’ve been a fighter.... I make and sell pies.... Before when I was younger, I worked in homes as a housekeeper, but I would leave my children by themselves, so I decided to do sales and with that I’ve been able to subsist helping my husband. But it’s been thirteen years already that my husband became diabetic, so he doesn’t work anymore, he depends on me and on my daughter.... I learned to make pies at church, Sister [Teresa] taught us.<sup>68</sup>

Sofia’s brief statement reveals how important Relief Society weekday meetings have been for several women in this area. In these meetings, women learned crafts and cooking that many, like Sofia, turned into marketable ventures that have supported themselves and their families in times of need.<sup>69</sup> Natalia, a chic fifty-something middle-class woman with startling blue eyes, similarly

---

<sup>67</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #174 (2015), 4-5. “Esto me gusta transmitírsele a las mujeres que no son dela iglesia y comparto mi testimonio cuando las hermanas tienen un testimonio muy débil les hablo pero ellas me admiran mucho, tengo cartas muy bonitas ... de las misionera, ellas le estuvieron dando las pláticas a mi hermano para que el salga de la obscuridad, una de ellas que es de Guatemala llorando me dijo, ‘hermana cuando yo sea grande quiero ser como usted.’”

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 2. “He sido una mujer luchona ... hago pay para vender .... Antes cuando era más joven trabajaba en las casas haciendo limpieza, pero dejaba a mis hijos solos así que decidí hacer mis ventas y con eso he venido subsistiendo ayudando a mi esposo. Pero hace como trece años mi esposo se enfermó de diabetes, así que ya no trabaja, depende de mí y de mi hija.... Los pay los aprendí hacer en la Iglesia; la hermana [Teresa] nos enseñó.”

<sup>69</sup> These weekday classes, in which women would often learn to produce various products for home use or for vending, were called by different names by different women. One woman called them manual arts classes. Another called them self-sufficiency classes. Most just referred to them generically as classes taught to the Relief Society women. From the women’s descriptions, these classes sound equivalent to the “Homemaking” or “Enrichment” meetings of Relief Society in the U.S.

talked about using skills she learned in Relief Society weekday meetings to provide financially for her family. She spoke of her husband getting laid off and the family falling into greater and greater financial difficulties. Natalia, who had not been a wage earner during her marriage, described the inception of her business:

One day I said “I don’t do anything. I need to help my husband.” My children were studying. Years before I had taken a course in soy products organized by the church in Mexico [City] when I went to visit my daughter. I liked the course very much. Everything I know I’ve learned through the Church. I said, “I know how to make soy milk so I can sell it and make products.” I started selling and I still do today.... With this I can help my husband economically. I already have customers. I also know how to work with wheat and non-members who are not familiar with this like it. They ask me where I learned it, and I always say, “I learned it at my church.”<sup>70</sup>

Natalia later mentioned that one of the reasons she loved the church is that it taught her how to *do* things, unlike other churches that she felt did not teach practical skills. The church’s focus on self-reliance, progress, skills, and development have materially benefitted many women in this area who have supported or helped to support their families on their earnings. The importance of this cannot be understated. While Mormon leaders teach members that fathers are to be primary breadwinners and mothers are to be stay-at-home mothers (a message which various Mexican interviewees reported receiving in church classes), women like Sofia were simultaneously taught skills at church-sponsored events which women were then able to use to start small home-based businesses and alleviate their financial stress. Given that so many of the (usually older) Mexican women I interviewed mentioned the importance of these classes in teaching them new marketable skills, there seemed to be explicit recognition among local ward and stake leaderships

---

<sup>70</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #171 (2015), 3, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. “Entonces un día yo dije, ‘Yo no hago nada, tengo que ayudar a mi esposo.’ Mis hijos estudiaban, años antes había tomado curso de soya por medio de la iglesia en México cuando fui a ver a mi hija. Me gustó mucho el curso. Todo lo he aprendido en la iglesia. Yo dije, ‘Sé hacer leche de soya, pues la puedo vender y hacer productos.’ Empecé a vender y sigo vendiendo.... Con este apoyo a mi esposo en la situación financiera, ya tengo clientes que me piden. También trabajo con el trigo y la gente del mundo como no conoce eso les gusta. Cuando me preguntan ¿dónde aprendió eso? les digo, ‘En mi iglesia.’”

that women needed to learn ways to either save or make money.<sup>71</sup> For some women, skills learned at church-sponsored meetings decades ago became life-changing opportunities to improve their material situations.

None of these women with home-based businesses manifested tension between their selling practices and Mormonism's gendered teachings. A lack of tension may be due to Mormonism's embrace of the principle of self-reliance, but also because much of the work of informal vending takes place in the home and takes place according to the woman's own schedule, rather than an employer's. Sofia was able to balance breadwinning with other duties like childrearing and therefore could easily regard herself as fulfilling her primary women's role. A lack of tension for some women may also simply be due to an understanding of economic realities in Mexico. Eva, a woman in her thirties from a suburb of Mexico City, described women working as something the vast majority of Mexican women need to do, given the economic reality of the country:

Even if church leaders tell us to stay at home, our reality is another. When the leaders speak to us, they speak from the US reality. We live with poverty, unemployment, or really low wages—it's another reality. We try to adapt that to the direction from the leaders. Some women feel bad they have to work. Most of them see the reality, though. It's not optional—they need to work.... Eighty percent of the women worked outside the home in my old ward. It's a luxury to stay at home.<sup>72</sup>

Eva's comment points to the possibility of slightly altered discourses or understandings about women working arising among Mexican Mormon women, due to recognition of the Mexico's particular economic situation. Indeed, Rosa, an educated career woman in her late thirties, explicitly told women in her Veracruz Relief Society that she supported mothers working,

---

<sup>71</sup> These home-based businesses seemed to primarily arise in the 1980s and 1990s and were discussed primarily by women in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. Younger Mexican women did not mention turning skills learned in Relief Society into businesses.

<sup>72</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #158 (2015), 9-10, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. This woman spoke to me in English.

despite institutional messages to the contrary. She said, “We do get messages about being stay-at-home moms here in Mexico. When I was Relief Society president, I would say that it doesn’t matter if you choose to be at home or choose to work. You still have to go to school and study, you still have to know things because your kids will want to know things.”<sup>73</sup> Another woman, a young mother, spoke of being encouraged by a priesthood leader in a private interview to stop working, a suggestion she politely declined due to her desire for greater financial security.<sup>74</sup> In many cases, for both women who earn money outside the home or inside the home, a pragmatic understanding of economic realities and benefits of working often outweigh idealized institutional discourse about breadwinning as a male domain. While stay-at-home motherhood rhetoric is alive and well in Veracruz, other discourses, particularly among women, are present which support working mothers.

Particularly striking, however, are the experiences of older women like Sofia, for whom Relief Society cooking and crafting classes were transformative. These classes may have taught stereotypically feminine/domestic tasks, but through them, Mormon women expanded their economic opportunities. Anecdotes like Sofia’s were evidence to me of the possibility of Mexican Saints “turning an imported religion to their own purposes.”<sup>75</sup> Relief Society programs teaching home and handicraft skills might have originated in the United States and been exported out to the rest of the Mormon world, but local Relief Society leaders in Veracruz were able to use this program in ways appropriate to their context, ways that expanded women’s self-esteem and financial horizons. As such, their Mormon faith and community contributed to their agentive

---

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #178 (2015), 6. Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. This woman spoke to me in English.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #177 (2015), 7, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>75</sup> David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xvi.

status, as these women's choices and opportunities expanded substantially with greater skills and earning power through these domestic arts classes.

One former stake Relief Society president's experience with these Relief Society classes highlights the agentive creativity women in Mormon leadership positions could bring to their callings. When she was expecting her second child in the 1980s, Lucia talked about quitting her job as a chemical engineer, but she struggled with the confines of this domestic role. With the encouragement of her Mormon mother to find ways to use her skills, she became inspired to make household products (soaps, lotions, cleaning products) from everyday food remnants, like orange peels:

I started to make formulas for products, which, from 1984 to the present, there are one hundred and seventeen. At the beginning of the creation of the formulas I spoke with my stake president to ask his advice if we could teach the sisters in the organization [Relief Society]. His response was immediate and affirmative. This is how training began for all the sisters in all the wards of the ... stake. Currently we continue in different states training the wards of the stakes.<sup>76</sup>

Lucia found within the structure of the patriarchal church space, time, and authoritative support to do this self-sufficiency training for women. Her agentive scope in creating and carrying out this program was expansive and her male church leader supportive. Notably, this program later expanded beyond church auspices. She explained that she has offered these techniques and formulas to local and national government organizations as well as women's groups. This Mormon woman has become an important figure in the Mexican entrepreneurial and scientific community, winning in 2010 the Mexican national Better City Living Prize in the category of

---

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #175 (2015), 3, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. "Empecé a realizar formularios de productos los cuales, de 1984 a la fecha, existen ciento diecisiete técnicas. Al iniciar con la elaboración del formulario platiqué con mi presidente de estaca para pedir su consejo si podíamos enseñar en la organización a las hermanas. Su respuesta fue inmediata y afirmativa. Así se inició la capacitación a las hermanas de todos los barrios de la estaca [ ]. Actualmente continuamos en diferentes estados capacitando a los barrios de las estacas."

impact/innovation.

Sofia did not mention attending these particular Relief Society classes, but a similar sense of agency and possibility permeated her life story, filled though it was with difficulties and pain. We can see her faith enabling this sense of agency and voice when she discussed some of her struggles with her husband, who eventually was baptized. “My husband didn’t change 100%. Even being a member of the Church, he drank. It took him a lot of work to change,” she related.<sup>77</sup> She has clearly played an important role in this alteration of his behavior. When asked about her greatest challenges, she said, “The challenges I’ve had have been to confront my husband with his weakness.”<sup>78</sup> She later described a confrontation with her husband:

I tell him, “Your testimony is very weak.” I speak to him, I read him the scriptures. I tell him, “If we are not right with the Lord, everything scares us. If you strengthen your testimony in Jesus Christ you will have the courage to face everything just like I’ve had to deal with so much.”<sup>79</sup>

Her faith has given her a platform for critiquing her husband and encouraging him to change his behaviors and outlook. She has assumed the dominant spiritual role in the relationship and has spent much energy convincing him to fully embrace the Mormon faith. While the spiritual strengths and benefits of conversion are a major talking point for Sofia, scholarly work has shown that husbands’ conversion to strict Christian sects has also materially improved the lives of many Latin American wives. Brusco specifically speaks of Colombian evangelicalism being something of a “strategic women’s movement, because it serves to reform gender roles in a way that enhances female status as an antidote to machismo.”<sup>80</sup> Given that a full conversion to

---

<sup>77</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #174 (2015), 1. “Mi esposo cambió no al 100% pero más o menos, aun siendo miembros dela iglesia tomaba. Le dio mucho trabajo cambiar.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 3. “Los retos que he tenido son los de enfrentar a mi esposo con sus debilidades.”

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 4. “Le digo ‘tu testimonio es muy débil,’ platico con él le leo las escrituras, le digo ‘sino estamos a fines con el Señor todo nos produce miedo, si tú fortaleces tu testimonio en Jesucristo vas a tener valor para enfrentarte en todo así como yo me he enfrentado en tantas cosas.’”

<sup>80</sup> Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 6.

Mormonism, like a full conversion to certain other strict Christian sects, would entail the abandonment of alcohol, infidelity, and abdication, and would encourage active and helpful partnership in the home, one can understand why Sofia might continually assert to her husband the importance of embracing the gospel. These oral histories often show that males embracing Mormonism translated to more functional and more involved husbands and fathers. Sofia never saw the full conversion she wished for in her husband, but she, like many others I interviewed, did see caring and involved fatherhood in the actions of the sons they raised in the church. Christian conversion leading to a kind of “domestication of men” turned out to be particularly true for men one generation removed from their mothers’ original conversion to the LDS church.

Sophia’s choice to join the Mormon church has led to expanded opportunities, self-development, and affirming community. In Mormonism she found the encouragement and opportunity to develop literacy, speaking, and leadership skills, as well as a marketable baking skill which has improved her financial situation. She has found a community that adopted her when her own family was abusive and violent. She has also found in Mormonism a framework to encourage loving and contributing male behavior in the home, a goal that she has seen realized in the lives of her sons. For Sofia, as for many of the older and poorer women I spoke with, Mormonism was experienced as highly liberating, as it provided pathways to better relationships and to economic and self-development.

### ***Gender, Race, and Mormonism: Intersectional Reflections on Limitations and Possibilities***

Throughout the oral histories of LDS women in Veracruz, Mexico, I saw myriad forms of agency emerge in the lives of Mormon women. From changing oneself and others, to nurturing voice and personal expression, to skill acquisition, to transcendent communion and development of personal relationships with the divine, these women found hope, community, and power

within the LDS church. This power and agency is not unbounded given Mormonism's gendered power structure, but in these women's narratives, Mormonism was overwhelmingly characterized as more of an empowering and productive influence in their lives than a restrictive one.

When asked directly if they felt women were treated equally or valued equally in the church, most women quickly said they did and chose not to elaborate beyond that. However, one or two oral histories captured some of the mental grappling some women underwent as they confronted the limitations and possibilities of their roles as Mormon women. When Yvonne, an adult convert who had learned to be self-reliant as a child, was doing some repairs on her roof, her LDS husband told her to get down since she was a woman and should not be up there. She then recounted this:

At that moment I didn't truly understand it, and for that reason it was difficult, because I had to lower myself to the level, the role, that is appropriate for me [as a woman]. To be a daughter of God, willing to be obedient, to be a good mother, good wife, good daughter, good neighbor .... So I've lowered myself from everything from that period, but only through the power of God.<sup>81</sup>

While Yvonne indicated that it was not always easy to confine herself to her women's role, she displayed no unhappiness with this new understanding when she later elaborated on it. In fact, she embraced it and felt fulfilled, complete and important. Her repeated use of the verb meaning "lower," appropriate given its figurative and literal meaning in the anecdote, is striking. In one sense, she was acknowledging the constraints and submission that accepting this role entails and hinting at some of the accompanying struggles. But this lowering has led, she explained, to

---

<sup>81</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #176 (2015), 9, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. "A ese momento no lo comprendí a verdad, pero por eso fue difícil, porque yo tuve que bajarme al nivel, al rol, que me correspondía. A ser una hija de Dios, dispuesta a someterse, a ser buena madre, buena esposa, buena hija, buena hermana, buena vecina .... Entonces he ido bajando de todo de ese periodo, pero solamente a través del poder de dios."

contentment and relief that she does not have to be all things for all people and can instead focus on certain domains and areas of life. This gives rise to the possibility that for some women, having a delineated space and stewardship that feels valued and important by her community contributes to a sense of power and possibility in one's life. Other scholars have in fact noted that conservative women who have defined female spaces often develop women-centered orientations and perspectives that might surprise Western liberal feminists.<sup>82</sup> Thus Mormon gender roles for middle-class Yvonne are simultaneously and paradoxically lowering and liberating. For others, particularly those coming from less privileged circumstances, Mormonism is experienced as predominantly elevating to women.

These women's narratives reveal how social location affects how women experience Mormonism. The circumstances from which one comes and the expectations and hopes borne from those expectations matter. Mormonism's teachings on gender roles, a personal God, and strict behavior standards were ennobling to many of my narrators, given their particular contexts with silence, exploitation, and abuse. As an outsider sensitive to structural inequities, I perceive some gendered constraints and boundaries in these women's Mormon lives, but these were not an overriding issue for these women. When we pay attention to women's unique particularities of location, nationality, class and race, we can see that programs and processes that do not feel particularly liberating for white middle-class U.S. women actually can be liberating for women in different parts of the world. As intersectional feminist scholars have pointed out, "gender can never be studied in isolation from race and class and related social conditions."<sup>83</sup>

One significant gap in this examination of women's gendered Mormon lives in Veracruz,

---

<sup>82</sup> Debra Renee Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 2-3

<sup>83</sup> Margaret Anderson, "Thinking about Women: A Quarter Century's View," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 444

Mexico is a serious discussion of the ways race and American neo-colonialism intersected with their experience of Mormonism.<sup>84</sup> While I attempted to elicit perspectives on Mormonism, race and structural inequities by asking them if they felt distanced from the church's prophet and apostles because they were white men living in Utah, almost none of them admitted to feeling this distance. They nearly always said that they felt connected to these leaders in Utah when they read the *Liahona* or watched General Conference. There was often a palpable shying away from this topic of race, and I surmised that part of that might be due to a sense of politeness or awkwardness, given the fact that I am a white American.

The one exception to the general avoidance of issues of race and American privilege was the 2013 closing of the Benemérito de las Américas boarding high school in Mexico City. This LDS school had educated over 20,000 Mexican students since the school's opening in the 1960s, but church leaders in Utah decided to convert the facility into a Missionary Training Center. Women in this community in Veracruz, some of whom had attended or sent children to attend, mourned over this loss, tearfully telling me about the school's closure. A few articulated a suspicion that this closure was due to church authorities' willingness to cater to the desires of the rich white homeowners in Provo, who protested the MTC's 2012 proposed expansion.<sup>85</sup>

Hortensia said this about Benemérito's closing:

It was very sad, we all felt sad because it was a place for our youth and now there is no place. The decision happened because they really needed an MTC, but I also know that the US didn't allow it to be there, and for that reason they did it in Mexico. This was a disappointment because they [people in Provo] defended themselves and we were not

---

<sup>84</sup> Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks discuss the way neo-colonialism and Mormonism are intertwined. "Mormonism's rise in the nineteenth century and its global growth in the twentieth century also took place within the context of colonization and neo-colonization and drew from colonialist and neocolonialist ideas and attitudes." Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, "Introduction: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion," in *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, eds. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>85</sup> Donald Meyers, "New Mormon Missionary Training Center Building Plan Upsets Residents." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 2012, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/54118360-78/building-church-residents-heaton.html.csp>.

allowed to defend the Benemérito, they imposed it on us. It was difficult and a big disappointment.<sup>86</sup>

Mormonism's strong centralized structure, with its correlated materials translated into Spanish and available for use by Mexican Saints, proved to generally be seen as benign and helpful. However, the closing of Benemérito brought out deep-seated questions about race, power and privilege within Mormonism.

As Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks discuss, Mormonism can deliver significant benefits, such as worldly opportunities and strong community, to global southern and indigenous adherents. However, they write, access to these benefits entails a cost in terms of the necessity of bracketing critique or acceding to policies and decisions made by powerful American church leaders which contribute to loss and pain.<sup>87</sup> Colvin and Brooks describe this tradeoff—benefits in exchange for bracketing critique—as a “compact” brokered by the twentieth-century church with its global members. The Mormon women of Veracruz never articulated their experience with Mormonism in terms of tradeoffs or compacts, but certainly, in some sense, they had to bracket their pain and accept the Benemérito decision as a reality they could not change in order to move on with their lives as members of the church. Acceptance, however, did not entail silence for the women of Veracruz, who spoke among themselves and to me of their dismay and disappointment with this decision. Using the Colvin Brooks framework, these women's vehement disagreement and their refusal to fully bracket or silence critique could be interpreted as rooted in a sense of betrayal of this unarticulated compact, as these women saw an important

---

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #172 (2015), 11. Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. “Nos sentimos tristes porque ese era un lugar para nuestros jóvenes y ya no hay un lugar. La decisión fue porque realmente necesitaban un CCM., pero también se que Estados Unidos no permitió que fuera allá, por eso lo hicieron en México, y eso fue una desilusión porque dijimos ellos si se defendieron y a nosotros no nos permitieron defender el Benemérito a nosotros no los impusieron, fue difícil y desilusión muy grande.”

<sup>87</sup> Colvin and Brooks, “Introduction: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion,” 10-11.

church-sponsored vehicle for social mobility and educational opportunity for their young people eliminated. While the closure of the Benemérito is one striking example of disconnect between Mexican members and centralized church hierarchy, further work is needed to explore the ways Mormonism's American hierarchy and racialized teachings impact Mormon women in Mexico.

### *Conclusion*

Mexicans' experiences within Mormonism has been an understudied topic in Mormon studies, and work focusing on Mexican women's experiences is doubly rare. I undertook this project because of my conviction about the importance of welcoming diverse women's voices to the table in discussions regarding Mormonism and gender. These oral histories, which have provided intimate glimpses of how and why these Mexican women have embraced Mormonism, help to reframe issues of Mormonism and gender and decenter liberal feminist narratives and questions about gender equality. For the vast majority of interviewed women in Veracruz, gender equality was not a pressing concern. Far more important to them were principles and practices which encouraged positive, loving connection, well-being, and self-development. Alienation and violence were the prominent moral problems that they actively opposed, not gender roles and church systems which privilege male leadership.

Liberation may not be a term commonly associated with Mormonism, due to the tradition's conservative moral teachings, hierarchical structure and general emphasis on personal righteousness over systemic issues of oppression. Yet in this Mormon framework, Mexican women have described finding a real sense of liberation. Mormonism has given them a framework to develop better home lives, supportive communities, self-esteem, spiritual power and economic uplift. This liberation is contained and regulated within a patriarchal, "Americentric" structure which sometimes constrains women's decision-making power, yet the

women describe a significant amount of agency and self-determination within this framework. Ultimately, they have, as Joanna Brooks writes of indigenous and global southern Mormons, claimed Mormonism for themselves and found within it a resource for imagining a different way of being in the world.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Brooks, "Mormonism as Colonialism," 184.

**Chapter Three**  
**African Women Embracing an American-born Church:**  
**Mormonism, Gender, and Cultural Tension in the LDS Church in Botswana**

One cold evening in 2015 after a day of viewing wildlife in the Okavango Delta of Botswana, we gathered around a camp fire to chat with our safari guides. We were a group of women academics and oral historians from the U.S., on a brief break from our oral history work with Botswana women of various religious traditions. As the stars emerged in the cold clear sky, we asked these three native Botswana men about tensions between black and white people in Botswana, and if they had experienced racism or oppression. Our main tour guide leader, Ollie, a large bald man in his thirties, explained to us that Botswana have a different relationship to white people than most other black people in Africa. "We were protected by the British," he said in his accented English. He continued, speaking with great emphasis, "Protected. Not colonized. We asked for the help of the British, and they did help us. So, we in Botswana feel differently towards white people than people in other parts of Africa do."

Ollie, of course, would have had good reason to downplay racial tension stemming from colonization and play up good feelings between blacks and whites in Botswana, as he sat surrounded by a group of mostly white, mostly American women who had hired him to manage this safari. Yet his understanding of the history of his country—and particularly the difference between the harsh colonialism experienced by so many other African countries and the lighter hand Britain used as it made Botswana its protectorate—is echoed by many histories written about the country.

As Ollie alluded, Botswana did indeed escape the worst ravages of colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the face of encroachment by Zulus and Boers, Botswana,

then known as Bechuanaland, was taken under the protection of Britain in 1885.<sup>1</sup> Because Botswana was believed by Britain to be economically unviable, Britain initially left the protectorate largely to itself, even instructing its skeletal staff to leave the native chiefs to rule as they had done previously.<sup>2</sup> In 1895, three Batswana chiefs, *Kgosi* Khama III, *Kgosi* Sechele I, and *Kgosi* Bathoen I, famously traveled to Britain to petition the government to not turn this protectorate over to South Africa or Rhodesia, as it had originally expected to do, places where white settlers were taking over the most desirable pieces of land and establishing racist regimes.<sup>3</sup> Their campaign was successful, and Botswana remained a protectorate of Britain until independence was won in 1966, led by Seretse Khama, the son of one of those original three native chiefs who had petitioned to remain under British rule. Seretse Khama had attended Oxford, married a white British woman, and became the country's first president. Importantly, unlike so many other African countries which were ravaged by colonialism, most of their institutions decimated by colonial rule, Botswana throughout its protectorate period was able to retain its leadership class and social structures, thus providing important continuity as Botswana became independent.<sup>4</sup> Ornulf Gulbrandsen, highlighting the importance of traditional systems and structures to the stability of the postcolonial nation, explained, “The development of its [postcolonial Botswana’s] force is very attributable to extensive incorporation of symbolism and

---

<sup>1</sup> As Ornulf Gulbrandsen explains, Tswana chiefs eventually accepted the offer of British “protection,” but this “must be understood against a backdrop of other colonizing forces at work which was perceived by Northern Tswana as an indeed dangerous threat.” Thus, becoming a British protectorate was seen as the most palatable of options, particularly since the British had promised that the chiefs would be left to govern their own tribes and that in tribal territories white settler communities would be firmly restricted. Ornulf Gulbrandsen, *The State and the Social: State Formation in Botswana and its Precolonial and Colonial Genealogies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Makgala, “A Survey of Race Relations in Botswana,” 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gulbrandsen, *The State and the Social*, 29. *Kgosi* can be translated to “Chief.”

<sup>4</sup> For more on Botswana’s economic and political success, see Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson “An African Success Story: Botswana” in *In search of Prosperity: Analytic Narratives on Economic Growth*, ed. Dani Rodrik (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 80-120.

institutions of authority anchored in indigenous cosmology.”<sup>5</sup> Botswana, once considered one of the very poorest of African nations, has become, against all odds, the longest running and most stable democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, aided in part by wealth derived from diamond mines which opened shortly after its independence. With its traditional institutions in place to prevent dictators seizing power and pillaging the country's wealth, Botswana was able to maintain a stable democratic state. It is now one of the wealthiest and least troubled African countries. As one of our cab drivers said, as he drove us from the African Mall to our rooms at the University of Botswana in the capital city Gaborone, "Peace. Peace is the best thing about my country Botswana."

Decades before becoming a protectorate of Britain, European Christian missionaries from South Africa began to proselytize in Botswana. By 1880, every major town had had missionaries, who had often been invited by chiefs since these missionaries were seen as drawing trade and able to provide guns.<sup>6</sup> Various chiefs reacted differently to the incursion of Christianity, some wholeheartedly embracing it and others just as passionately rejecting it. Yet by the beginning of the twentieth century, Christianity had spread to the interior of the country and had become the official religion of five of the Tswana states. The early part of the century also saw the influx of more Christian missionaries (other than the original Scottish Congregationalists), such as Anglicans, Catholics and Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>7</sup> Today, over sixty-five percent of Botswana claim Christianity as their faith tradition, with the majority of the rest engaged in Botswana Traditional Religion, which permeates every aspect of these Botswana

---

<sup>5</sup> Gulbrandsen, *The State and the Social*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Fidelis Nkomazana, "The Botswana Religious Landscape," in *The Faith Sector and HIV/AIDS in Botswana: Responses and Challenges*, eds. Lovemore Togarasei, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

people's lives, from planting to education to funerals. Of those that identify as Christian, many have been drawn since the 1960s to African Independent Churches and Pentecostal churches, both of which emphasize healing, spiritual gifts, singing, and dancing.<sup>8</sup> Because Botswana's 1966 constitution assures freedom of worship, many religious groups, including "new churches" like the LDS church, have been able to gain a foothold in the country.<sup>9</sup> Mormon missionaries entered the country in 1990, and today there are fourteen congregations in the country with over 3000 members.<sup>10</sup>

These Botswana converts to Mormonism are part of a long history of Africans converting to Christianity in the face of concerted missionary efforts. African women and men have converted to the Christian religions of colonizing powers for the last two hundred years and have done so for a variety of reasons. Teresa M. Hinga described the advent of Christianity into Africa as an "ambivalent" encounter, since colonial Christianity presented both an emancipatory Jesus that Africans found inspiring and liberating, as well as a conquering imperial Jesus that obliterated many things Africans held dear.<sup>11</sup> Today, different scholars wrestle with the question of how and why Africans embrace Christianity. Jane E. Soothill discussed contemporary Pentecostal women in Ghana, finding that adherents to this faith negotiate gender relations through their access of spiritual power.<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Hodgson explored why Maasai women in Tanzania embraced Catholicism in the twentieth century. She found that Maasai women were

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>9</sup> For more basic statistics about Botswana, including information about religious groups in the country, see the Association of Religion Data Archives. [http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_29\\_1.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_29_1.asp).

<sup>10</sup> "Facts and Statistics," Mormon Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 28, 2018, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/botswana>. See also E. Dale LeBaron, "Botswana" in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, eds. Arnold K. Garr, et. al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 187-190.

<sup>12</sup> Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007.)

displaced from traditional sites of power after colonialism took root and that Catholicism opened up new avenues of power—that of spiritual and moral power. Thus while conversion to Christianity entailed the loss or adaptation of some traditional ways of being in and seeing the world, it also opened up other avenues for them to connect to the spiritual world and claim authority.<sup>13</sup> Notably, many of these Christian traditions that have flourished in Africa—particularly charismatic ones—have also been open to local adaptation, so that Africans can meld their own culture with the tenets and principles of their new faiths, making these faiths, in some sense, uniquely theirs.<sup>14</sup>

Batswana women’s conversion to the LDS church is particularly interesting because Mormonism’s tight centralized male leadership located in Utah in the United States makes indigenization or inculturation of the religion in the global south difficult.<sup>15</sup> The U.S.-based LDS church retains strong centralized control over worship practices, doctrine, and policies in the rest of the world. In Botswana, leadership and teaching manuals originate in the U.S., Western business attire is adopted for church attire (suits and ties for men, dresses and skirts for women), church services are conducted in English according to the pattern set in the U.S., music, sung in English, comes from a hymnal produced in the U.S., and General Conference which members watch via satellite twice a year features predominantly white American men giving sermons. As Walter E. A. van Beek explained in his article exploring some cultural tensions surrounding the LDS church’s growth in Africa, “From hierarchical priesthood structures to meetinghouse plans, and from priesthood ordinances to Sunday School lessons, unity shines through, but always in

---

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy L. Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Soothill, *Gender, Social Change, and Spiritual Power*, 219.

<sup>15</sup> Jehu Hanciles notes a “striking failure of inculturation” of the Mormon church internationally. Hanciles, ““Would that All God’s People Were Prophets,”” 56.

the form of uniformity.”<sup>16</sup> Mormon worship in Botswana felt very familiar to my white American eyes and ears, as I sang the same exact hymns in English that I have sung numerous times before in my California congregation—one exception being the noticeable discomfort and lack of enthusiasm many Batswana congregants had with the solemn, slow European-derived hymns. However, despite the strong influence Utah-based Mormon leadership has on LDS congregations throughout the world, this ward in Botswana was entirely black-led and directed. On an everyday, practical level, many Batswana Mormons’ experiences with the church probably have little overt connection to the white men in America running the institutional church. Nevertheless, with such a strong centralized church structure, there is little opportunity for members of the church to bring into their worship traditional Setswana elements.

Another reason that Batswana women’s conversions to Mormonism are particularly interesting is because of the faith’s mixed history with issues of colonialism and racism. Most other Christian faith traditions also, of course, have mixed or less than salubrious histories with race and colonialism, but Mormonism has a striking history with these issues. As Joanna Brooks pointed out, Mormonism has long been implicated in colonialist and racist projects, as it displaced natives in its move to the American West in the nineteenth century, spread throughout the world on the coattails of neo-colonial ideologies in the twentieth century, categorized indigenous people as people who might become “white and delightsome,” with conversion and time, and deprived black people of temple blessings and black men of priesthood until 1978.<sup>17</sup> However, despite this problematic past, Mormonism has simultaneously opened up space for indigenous and people of color to come together in ethnic wards, work for the well-being and

---

<sup>16</sup> Walter E. A. van Beek, “Church Unity and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity: A View from across the Sahara,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 72.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, “Mormonism as Colonialism,” 163-185.

self-determination of their communities, and see themselves as an integral and honored part of Mormonism's cosmology as lost tribes of Israel or descendants of peoples promised to "flourish as a rose" in the Book of Mormon.<sup>18</sup> Thus Saints in the global south convert in a context of Mormon mixed historical messages and actions—some as recent as the 1970s—towards people of color.

How do we understand Batswana women's choices to affiliate with this American-born, historically white religion? Are they dupes of Western neo-colonialism, playing into their own oppression from patriarchy and Western imperialism, as some earlier analyses of African women's conversion to Christianity suggest? Or are they agents carving out sites of power and finding ways to honor both their traditional culture and their new belief systems? Are they simultaneously agentive and constrained by structures privileging Western ways of being? Why would these women choose to affiliate with this white male-headed, hierarchical American-born faith and how do they navigate that affiliation alongside their loyalties to their own cultures of origin and ways of being in the world? This chapter addresses these questions.

My analysis is informed by postcolonial feminist scholars who have explored the complex positioning of global southern women of formerly colonized countries, who, as Batswana scholar Musa Dube describes, live at the intersection of various patriarchal structures, both indigenous and colonial.<sup>19</sup> Attention to these structures which confine and determine women's options is crucial. Also important is attention to the ways Western discourses and understandings have unfairly characterized global southern women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for example, decries Western feminists' tendencies to portray third world women as victims of

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. See also Aikau, *A Chosen People*.

<sup>19</sup> Musa W. Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, eds. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100-120.

brown men and of their own traditional cultures, instead advocating for a more complex analysis which explores how they in culturally specific ways are produced as subjects and act as agents within their societies.<sup>20</sup> I embrace Mohanty's approach, finding it most fair and most productive to listen closely to these women's places of grappling, dissonance, and resonance as they carefully navigate their chosen religion and their cultures of origin. By letting the women themselves indicate the places of tension and the places of resonance, we honor them as the subjects and experts of their own lives.

While I feel that an agentic lens on these women is most fruitful, some caution is certainly in order. Gayatri Spivak, a prominent postcolonialist, writes that the subaltern—the dispossessed person in a colonial society—“in the context of colonial production ... has no history and cannot speak, [and] the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”<sup>21</sup> This statement has sparked much controversy among postcolonial scholars, but a careful reading of Spivak's theory formulates that the subaltern can indeed speak; the non-subaltern, however, cannot hear her. This disconnect between articulation and comprehension/interpretation is because dominant systems of signification imposed in colonial or Eurocentric contexts are structurally (even down to linguistic structures) predicated on binaries that associate women and the other with silence. These binaries privilege a coherent speaking subjectivity that colonialism is predicated on denying to the colonized. This results in the effective silencing of the subaltern, though as one scholar explains, “the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation.”<sup>22</sup> Spivak's point about the powerful structures

---

<sup>20</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51-80.

<sup>21</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds., Cary Nelson et al. (London: Macmillan, 1988), 287.

<sup>22</sup> John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2000), 195.

that effectively render the subaltern silent is an important one. Therefore, caution about the many layers of filters (including my own, the Western feminist oral historian and ethnographer), and the variety of ways global southern women's voices have been misunderstood, impacted, and constrained by forces greater than themselves is key.

This question of agency, and how Batswana LDS women find and create spaces for agentive action and complex negotiation, even within the patriarchal and often Western strictures of the LDS Church, is an important focus of this article. Utilizing the more recent and nuanced conceptions of women's agency—elaborated by scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Amy Hoyt, and Catherine Brekus—which emphasize that agentive action is more than simply resistance to patriarchal norms and includes complex ways of upholding those norms, I examine the oral histories Batswana women actively negotiating their loyalties to both their chosen religions and their cultures of origins.<sup>23</sup> I also explore the diverse reality of their particular context in Botswana, which at times, makes LDS norms and strictures a difficult overlay onto this culture. This analysis extends these previous explorations of women's agency by situating religious women's agency at the crossroads of colony, race, and class. I find that a particular focus of agency and a particular moral center emerges in the lives and stories of these Batswana Mormon women: that of creating and maintaining positive relationships and social ties.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14; Brekus, "Mormon Women," 71-72; Hoyt, "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm," 89-100.

<sup>24</sup> While my work focuses on the agency of religious global southern women who convert to a Western-based religion, several other scholars have explored the question of global southern women's agency, most often outside the context of religion or within the context of indigenous religions. Lyn Parker helpfully introduces the concept of agency in social science literature, focusing particularly on the perennial debate on the relationship between individual agency and societal structures. Several other essays in the edited volume examine how agency is enacted for women in various Asian contexts. *The Agency of Women in Asia*, ed. Lyn Parker (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic), 2005. Jenny Sharpe seeks to complicate notions of slave women's agency beyond notions of resistance, noting the negotiated practices and semi-autonomous actions they engaged in in order to survive. Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xvi-xvix. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh explores the ways Yoruba women in Nigeria "enjoyed considerable agency, despite some indigenous and colonial patriarchal structures, during the nineteenth century

This analysis also points us toward *why* these women, in their particular context, have chosen to convert to this American-born faith. Despite Mormonism's packaging within certain Western and patriarchal norms, these Batswana women Saints have found liberatory elements in Mormonism, namely, the focus on loving committed husbands and fathers and the sense of a close personal loving God directing their lives. They have also found social and personal benefits stemming from Mormonism's strong community structure and lay organization which creates space for women to teach, preach, minister, oversee certain programs, and attend congregational council meetings. While these opportunities are bounded by patriarchal structures, Mormonism's high level of individual involvement and strong moral strictures and structures are attractive to many of these women who are seeking clarity and boundaries different from those of permissive contemporary society in Botswana. This society over the last two or three generations has shifted from a tightknit tribal subsistence village economy and sociality to a modernized cash economy and sociality that has seen some disintegration of these traditional ways of being, with younger generations having left the villages for work in the larger cities. In some senses, Mormonism functions as the new village for these women, giving them the boundaries, responsibility, and social ties that were more readily available in traditional communities of generations past. This analysis highlights how these women adapt their new religion to their particular culture and to their particular needs and purposes. These needs and purposes, I find, have overwhelmingly

---

and colonial area. They at times held political and religious power, directed domestic tasks, acted as female chiefs, carved out spaces for themselves in the public economy, and utilized the labor of dependents. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 244-246. With a more theoretical focus, Kalpana Ram challenges Spivak's assertion of the silenced subaltern and asserts that even though third world women have been oppressed, they have not been entirely deprived or agency or silenced. Kalpana Ram, "Too 'Traditional' Once Again: Some Poststructuralists on the Aspirations of the Immigrant/Third World Female Subject," *Australian Feminist Studies* 8, no. 17 (1993): 5-28. The edited volume, *Women, Religion & Space*, devotes a section to women in colonial regimes, and authors analyzes how women in colonial contexts negotiated access to and prohibition from various religious spaces. *Women, Religion & Space: Global Perspectives on Gender and Faith*, edited by Karin M. Morin and Jeanne Kay Guelke (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

centered around these women's desires to create and form relationships and communities. This relational moral imperative is often satisfied in community-minded Mormon structures and practices, but is also satisfied in doctrinal teachings about a loving, personal Father God and temple covenants that give Batswana hope that they will be bound to loved ones in the next life. While Mormonism accrues these benefits to Batswana women and enables certain agentive spaces and actions, these are bounded by patriarchal and Western-derived strictures, which these women carefully negotiate.

Altogether, this chapter makes three main contributions. First it documents the lives and voices of certain Mormon women in the global south, which thereby decenter white North America in Mormon Studies. Second, it enriches and extends feminist and postcolonial analyses of religion by examining religious women's agency at the crossroads of colony, race, and class and by highlighting the complex navigations Mormon Batswana women engage in as they work to honor both chosen religion and certain traditional practices, worldviews or realities within this non-Western context. Third, it explores the particular purposes to which women in Botswana adopt and adapt this American-born religion, purposes which often center around the desire to create and maintain strong relationships and bonds.

I organize this chapter around the stories and reflections of four Batswana women who describe the joys and challenges of embracing Mormonism in Botswana. These sites of resonance and tension center around a number of topics related to family, marriage, and motherhood. Their stories highlight the various ways and reasons they thoughtfully adopt Mormonism into their lives. Focusing on these Batswana women's agency and careful navigation of loyalties recontextualizes LDS church teachings and policies on sexual morality, adoption, bride wealth, and companionate marriage within this global southern context.

### *Single Motherhood, Chastity, and Extended Family Structures in Botswana*

The LDS Church has primarily gained a foothold in the very largest cities in Botswana, but some small congregations called “branches” survive in rural areas. I had the privilege of traveling to one of these rural towns during my first week in Botswana. As I and four colleagues drove out to this rural town, we passed field after field, dotted with cattle, farms, and small homes. When we finally pulled into the tiny Mormon church parking lot in the dusty village, a church that only consisted of a few small rooms, I met Naomi, the first woman I interviewed in Botswana. She was in her thirties, tall, willowy, long hair, and beautiful dark doe eyes. She wore a casual knee length skirt and a white blouse. A colleague and I sat in the small church room and thanked her for coming. We began with the usual questions about her childhood, but it was clear she had a particular story to tell.

Naomi grew up in this rural village, the daughter of a housewife who grew vegetables “for survival” and a hospital messenger father, one of nine children. As a teenager, Naomi was stalked and raped by a man, from whom she and the resulting baby acquired HIV. With the strong support of her mother, Naomi finished college and became a bursar at a school in the north of the country. Her mother was the primary caretaker of the baby, who caught meningitis as a newborn and suffered lasting developmental delays from the disease. Naomi visited her daughter as often as she could on weekends and holidays. While she was in this northern town, Naomi met her boyfriend and became pregnant with her son. While she was pregnant, a shortage of 1200 pula (about \$100), led to her losing her job and destroyed her career as a bursar. She returned to her home village to live with her family and have her son. To make money, Naomi opened up a tuck shop (tiny grocery store) in her front yard. When her son was four years old, she met some LDS missionaries in Gaborone and was impressed by their willingness to give two

years of their lives to their missions. After two months of reading the Book of Mormon and feeling touched by the Spirit, she decided to join. Within a few short years, she accepted the request that she serve as the Relief Society president, a calling which has enabled her to make connections with other women, but which has proved to be difficult given the high rate of inactivity in the branch.<sup>25</sup>

Naomi's oral history captures some of the realities of life for women in Botswana, particularly her experience with HIV/AIDS, which infects up to one in five people in Botswana, and her experience with single motherhood, which is a widespread phenomenon in the country. While the HIV issue is an important and fascinating part of her story—it is particularly striking that Naomi upends most institutional Mormon narratives on HIV which position people with HIV as either people who acquired this disease out of sinful behavior or who are objects needing Mormons' ministering help—I focus here on the issue of single motherhood, which is a common phenomenon in Botswana.<sup>26</sup> One third of the Mormon Botswana women I interviewed were single mothers.

In her accented English, Naomi described the logistics of how she initially managed single motherhood, given her job up north, and how she came to have her second child:

My daughter was with my mom. Because she was going for review and tests, I couldn't take her to the hospital. But during school holidays she would be with me, and when I was on leave I would come straight home. I was transferred to a particular college. When I was there, that's when I met a boyfriend. This was in 2005. 2006 was when I had my second child, a boy.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 1, 2015, interview 26, p. 5, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Relief Society president is a significant calling (church assignment), typically considered to be the most burdensome and respected calling among women in an LDS congregation.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, "Reverence and Morality," *Ensign*, May 1987, 46-47. Hinckley stated, "We should reach out with kindness and comfort to the [HIV] afflicted, ministering to their needs and assisting them with their problems. We repeat, however, that the way of safety and the road to happiness lie in abstinence before marriage and fidelity following marriage."

<sup>27</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #26 (2015), 5.

Naomi's description of how she initially managed single motherhood—giving her mother primary caretaker status as she earned money in another town—is not uncommon. Neither is it uncommon that Naomi had a baby with the boyfriend she met in the town up north. In Botswana many women have children out of wedlock and, if they are employed in towns, they often send their children to their home villages to be raised by their grandmothers or older village women. This arrangement, known sometimes as child fosterage, has a long tradition in Botswana and it often works well for mothers who need to produce money in towns and for grandmothers who can use the help of grandchildren for chores and farming.<sup>28</sup>

Studies have noted that single motherhood and the decline of marriage are products of rapid cultural and economic changes the country has undergone in the last half century. According to David Suggs, large numbers of Botswana men migrated for work in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, due to the demands of a new cash economy in which subsistence farming was no longer viable. They often went to urban areas and mining centers in Botswana and in South Africa.<sup>29</sup> Wendy Izzard, who examined this issue in the 1980s, explained the phenomenon of single motherhood this way:

The absence of men had a considerable impact on the role of women as wives and as mothers. [Out-migration] resulted in a reduction of the marriage rate ... and an increase in the number of deserted wives.... There were concomitant adjustments in attitude toward marriage.... Women no longer saw marriage as the chief means with which to enhance their status in society. The role of mother assumed greater significance in the face of the declining importance of "the wife," and the two roles became isolated from each other.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Upton, "'Women Have No Tribe': Connecting Carework, Gender, and Migration in an Era of HIV/AIDS in Botswana," in *Global Dimensions of Gender and Carework*, eds., Mary K. Zimmerman et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2006), 278.

<sup>29</sup> Suggs, *A Bagful of Locusts*, 46-47.

<sup>30</sup> Wendy Izzard, "The Impact of Migration on the Roles of Women in Botswana: Patterns, Causes, and Consequences," *Final Report National Migration Study 3* (Gaborone, Botswana: Central Statistics Office, 1982), 664-665.

Suggs, in his study of a rural village in Botswana agreed, saying, "Today a woman need not marry to establish her own household provided she has the funds to build it, the experience to run it, and the will to do so.... There is today a decreased emphasis on marriage as a definitional characteristic of women."<sup>31</sup> Yet motherhood, he emphasized, is paramount for Batswana women. Referring to the many Batswana women he interviewed, he summarized his findings on the topic of motherhood:

The general opinion among both young and old women is that a woman is never complete and never happy without having children. Children are valued on several levels; as objects of love, as continuation of family, as extra hands while one is working, and as security in old age. As one person [a Motswana in the village] stated the importance of motherhood: "Only women can do this thing. Those who cannot are not wholly women. They work for nothing and die for nothing."<sup>32</sup>

Motherhood is such a prominent part of Batswana women's identities that childless women endure significant pressure from family members to have children, whether or not they are married. This is one of the greatest challenges single Mormon women face in Botswana: the overwhelming cultural expectation that they will provide grandchildren for their parents no matter their single marital status. This, of course, becomes quite difficult when there is a dearth of Mormon men to marry, and marrying outside the faith is also difficult, given that some Mormon values are markedly different than the larger culture and that marriage is not seen as necessary by so many Batswana.<sup>33</sup> Naomi mentioned that a huge challenge for unmarried Mormon women was this pressure they feel to have children. She explained:

In our families, let's say I'm my age and don't have a child, my parents would keep encouraging me, "Hey, how can I have grandchildren if you don't have a child? Help us

---

<sup>31</sup> Suggs, *A Bagful of Locusts*, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> I do not have statistics that attest to the gender imbalance in the church in Botswana, but I do have anecdotal comments from women I interviewed about there being fewer Mormon men. One Batswana woman I interviewed emailed me this: "Yes there are more women than men in my ward. I think it starts right from the beginning when missionaries find people to teach, more women are usually receptive listening to missionaries messages than men, and these usually results in more women getting baptized than men." Private email, November 1, 2016.

out, even if you are not married – you need a child.’ So parents will encourage us to have a child, believing that the more you grow old, the more difficulties you will have. So they encourage us to have a child. Especially after 30, they will encourage us to have a child.... They don’t even look at getting married first. They just look at getting a child first. They want a child in the family.... People expect you to live with a boyfriend before marriage, so cohabitation is very common. Those are things that are very, very challenging in our lives.<sup>34</sup>

This is a fascinating example of the confluences and divergences of institutional Mormon and Batswana gender expectations, and it gives an interesting window into the tensions these women navigate. As many scholars have noted, motherhood and nurturing of children are primary roles and identity markers for Mormon women.<sup>35</sup> LDS religious leaders have repeatedly emphasized the primary role and identity of mother/nurturer for women throughout the twentieth century, and this association of women as nurturers in the family was near-canonized in the 1995 proclamation, “The Family.”<sup>36</sup> So repeated and prominent is the emphasis on motherhood and nurturing for women that this identity has even been extended to women who do not bear or raise children. General Relief Society counselor Sheri Dew noted that in Genesis Eve is named the “mother of all living” even before she had children. She said, “Like Eve, our motherhood began before we were born.... It is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity,

---

<sup>34</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #26 (2015), 9.

<sup>35</sup> See Tim B. Heaton, Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman, “In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?” in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall et al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 102. The authors write, “Mormon leaders stress a division of labor for husbands and wives. Men are to be breadwinners, while women are to be homemakers.... Both are to be involved with raising their children, but the mother bears the primary responsibility for child care.” See also Beaman, “Molly Mormons” and Kline, “The Mormon Conception of Women’s Nature and Role.”

<sup>36</sup> “The Family.” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102. This document, later retitled “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” is commonly known as “The Proclamation” among Mormons. It states “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of children.” President Ezra T. Benson elaborates on the association of mothers with primary care taking and nurture of children in his 1987 talk, “To the Mothers in Zion,” later turned into a pamphlet. Ezra T. Benson, *To the Mothers in Zion*. Pamphlet. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987).

our divine stature and nature, and the unique traits our Father gave us.”<sup>37</sup> This conception of all women as ontological mothers, whether or not they give birth or raise children, echoes earlier twentieth-century church leaders’ feelings about the main purpose and role of women. Mormon leader John Widtsoe claimed in 1939, “woman has her gift of equal magnitude [to the priesthood]—motherhood,” thus articulating what has become a common Mormon framework in which women’s central role of mother parallels men’s central role of priest.<sup>38</sup> Many Mormon women themselves have embraced this identity of mother, finding power and fulfillment in this realm.<sup>39</sup>

This conception of Mormon women’s identity being primarily nurturers and mothers resonates well with many Batswana women, whose cultures similarly assign the primary identity category of mother to women. Therefore, it is entirely unsurprising that Naomi showed comfort with and appreciation for this role assigned to women in Mormonism as mothers and nurturers. When asked to describe women’s role in the church in Botswana, she stated, “The most important role is nurturing children. Taking care of children. That’s a very very important role for us women. Because if we don’t teach our children the gospel, the world will teach them

---

<sup>37</sup> Sheri Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?” *Ensign*, November 2001, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2001/11/are-we-not-all-mothers?lang=eng>.

<sup>38</sup> John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government, Rev. Ed* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1954), 39. Sonja Farnsworth, in her seminal essay on this priesthood-motherhood equation, notes that this quote from Widtsoe is the first time the connection was made in official Mormon discourse. Sonja Farnsworth, “Mormonism’s Odd Couple,” 300-301. However, a very recent article attests that this framework was laid out years before in 1933 by Leah Dunford Widtsoe. Kathryn H. Shirts, “The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 2 (April 2018), 127-128. Farnsworth critiques this parallel, noting that because of this equation of motherhood and priesthood, “the word mother has become a kind of sacred title, like elder or bishop.... Through application of the title “mother” Mormon women are named out of the priesthood.” In this way, Farnsworth argued, the equation serves as a distraction from the real situation—that women are excluded from leadership structures in the church.

<sup>39</sup> Allison Keeney and Susan Woster, “Motherhood,” in *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, eds. Claudia Bushman and Caroline Kline (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 73-86.

things that are contrary to our standards.”<sup>40</sup>

For many Batswana women like Naomi, motherhood and raising up the next generation is a source of power and strength to them. Judith Van Allen’s work on women political leaders in Botswana highlights just how central and powerful the role of mother is for Batswana women. She writes that women political leaders are able to “enter male-gendered political spaces as ‘equal rights powerful mothers’—and as citizens, activists and leaders—and potentially transform their societies.”<sup>41</sup> She points out that this is a potent political strategy for Batswana women politicians—to claim and promote their identities as mothers—because of the long historical tradition of powerful mothers in Africa.<sup>42</sup> Van Allen insightfully puts her finger on so many women’s contemporary ambivalence toward wifhood: “A mother is someone to be taken seriously; a wife is someone who takes orders, serves and acts with deference toward men.”<sup>43</sup> Batswana women political leaders’ deliberate merging of ideas of gender difference (emphasis on motherhood) with more Western liberal democratic ideas about equal rights is proving to be an effective basis for women’s entry into political realms.<sup>44</sup>

It is also important to note that while motherhood is a central identity marker for women in Mormon rhetoric and in Botswana culture, there are some different notions of how one mothers and nurtures. Western Mormon leaders’ notions of women nurturing and mothering often have centered, particularly during the rise of the women’s movement in the latter half of the twentieth century, on the notion of stay-at-home motherhood. In his famous 1987 talk, “To the Mothers in Zion,” President Ezra Taft Benson quoted President Spencer W. Kimball’s

---

<sup>40</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #26 (2015), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Van Allen, “Radical Citizenship: Powerful Mothers and Equal Rights,” in *Power, Gender, and Social Change in Africa*, eds. Muna Ndulo and Margaret Grieco (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 65.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 73.

injunction from the previous decade, telling women to “Come home from the typewriter, the laundry, the nursing, come home from the factory, the cafe. No career approaches in importance that of wife, homemaker, mother—cooking meals, washing dishes, making beds for one's precious husband and children.”<sup>45</sup> While this emphasis on stay-at-home motherhood was prominent in the 1970s and into the 1980s, Laurence Iannaccone and Carrie Miles note that despite church leaders’ initial resistance to mothers’ paid employment, their rhetoric did gradually shift towards becoming more conciliatory and accommodative to working women in the 1980s and beyond, particularly in situations of financial need.<sup>46</sup> While church leaders have generally been more reluctant in the past several decades to castigate working mothers, there remains a kind of idealization of stay-at-home motherhood in authoritative Western Mormon rhetoric, with women advised to be primarily responsible for care taking and men advised to be primarily responsible for breadwinning.<sup>47</sup> Scholars have argued that this division of labor has its roots in the Western industrial revolution which introduced the phenomenon of men leaving the home for a separate workplace, unlike earlier familial constructions which saw the home as the site of both nurture and production.<sup>48</sup>

This notion that motherhood should ideally preclude paid labor or breadwinning is something of a foreign construct to Batswana women, who associate motherhood with not only teaching and nurturing, but also with production. Suggs noted in his work that Batswana women “have both in the past and the present validated their status as women by their capacity for

---

<sup>45</sup>Benson, *To the Mothers in Zion*.

<sup>46</sup> Iannaccone, “Dealing with Social Change.”1231-1250. Benson’s “To the Mothers in Zion” talk was a notable outlier to that more accommodative shift. Lavina Fielding Anderson writes about many women’s anger and hurt in the wake of this talk, given that so many felt it ignored the economic realities in the 1980s which often necessitated two incomes. Lavina Fielding Anderson “A Voice from the Past: The Benson Instructions for Parents,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 4 (1988): 105.

<sup>47</sup> Miles, “LDS Family Ideals,” 118.

<sup>48</sup> Heaton, “In Search of a Peculiar People,” 101.

productive labor. And they value their labor most highly when it is put to the care and provisioning of their children.”<sup>49</sup> Thus what it means to mother in a Western capitalist middle-class conservative Mormon framework is different than what it means to mother in Botswana, which entered the capitalist economy only a couple generations ago. For many Batswana women, a defining characteristic of a mother is one who labors and works to provide for her children. Mothering may also involve active daily nurturing and caretaking, but it might not, given how common it is for women to send their children to relative or friends to be raised, so that these women can more easily earn funds for their children’s upkeep. Mothering is indeed a central identity for Western Mormon women and Batswana Mormon women, but motherhood is constructed differently in Botswana than in the Mormon church’s Western culture.

While the Batswana and Mormon emphasis on women as mothers is in many ways a space of fortuitous cultural overlap for Batswana converts, tension arises from Mormonism’s emphasis on wifedom before motherhood.<sup>50</sup> As Izzard and Suggs explained, these two roles became separated in the latter half of the twentieth century in Botswana, as many men emigrated to other countries or regions. The Mormon emphasis on marriage therefore is in practice quite a difficult challenge for Mormon Batswana women who would like to be mothers, but for whom marriage seems unachievable due to gender imbalances in the church and different cultural expectations outside of it. Poignantly, Naomi ended her oral history speaking of her yearning to be married to a priesthood holder and sealed as a family:

I know that maybe someday God will bless me with a husband who I will be sealed to. And it also keeps me strong. I remember this other time when I had a Family Home Evening with my son, and he said, “Mom, why are you not staying with dad?” I said, “We are not married.” He said, “What if he marries another woman?” I said, “Yeah. Maybe I’ll be married to another man also.” He said, “No, maybe you won’t get married. You need to make a way to reach out to him.” I said, “The only way to do that is to put

---

<sup>49</sup> Suggs, *A Bagful of Locusts*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> In Mormonism, husbandhood should also precede fatherhood, so no double standard exists here.

that into our prayer.” Every night we pray for him and that we might be one family. It just gave me the thought that even our children want to have that family united so that we can live as one strong family in this life and the next life.<sup>51</sup>

In this brief exchange, we can catch a glimpse of Naomi’s reasoning for not having a relationship with her son’s father (“We are not married.”) and the yearning she has to form that sealed family that Mormonism promotes as ideal and eternal.

After her conversion to Mormonism, Naomi chose to end her intimate relationship with her son’s father, thereby bringing about the end of her relationship entirely. She explained the conversation she had with him over the phone in which she made it clear that that part of their relationship would need to end:

When I joined the church in 2011, I called him and talked to him and told him that now I was joining this church and that I made a covenant with Heavenly Father that if I join this church, I would obey his commandments. I explained to him the law of chastity. He said, “We’ll talk about it.” He kept saying, “We’ll talk about it.” Since then, 2011, I didn’t talk to him much. But I keep telling him about the baby. When the child does this or this, I just call him, though he’s not that supportive at times.<sup>52</sup>

Naomi is not the only Mormon convert woman that has had to figure out how to navigate Mormon teachings on chastity (sexual relationships only within heterosexual marriage) with the reality of an established intimate but non-marital relationship. Naomi’s choice was made slightly easier because of the physical distance separating her from her son’s father who lived in the north, but other women converts have a far more immediate and painful choice to make. Neo, who was given HIV by a boyfriend who later died from it, joined the church while actively in a relationship with the father of her last two children. She converted to the church, but then had to decide how to handle this long-term boyfriend. Like Naomi, Neo is attempting to live the law of chastity, a very difficult situation given that she is still in a relationship with the father of her

---

<sup>51</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #26 (2015), 14-15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

children. When asked how her boyfriend felt when she joined the church, she stated in her broken English, “He is upset... there are the laws we have to keep, like the law of chastity, I have to keep it *akere* [you know], he is drinking, I have to keep the law of wisdom, yes, but that one he can’t force [me], he knows that, this one she keeps the law of wisdom. The problem is the law of chastity.”<sup>53</sup> Neo has been able to draw the line with the Word of Wisdom and eschew alcohol and tea, but as she states, the notion of chastity is the real problem that she must navigate constantly with the father of her children.

One might question why these women cannot just convince their long-term boyfriends to marry them, but marriage is a complicated and difficult issue in Botswana. Marriage often requires bridewealth (*lobola*) on the part of the man since the wife’s family requires money or cows for a marriage to take place. This might take years for a man and his family to save up. Additionally, the wedding itself is supposed to be an elaborate affair. These expectations mean that marriage is extremely costly. Charles, one of our safari guides, for example, told us that he had three children with his girlfriend and had been with her for eleven years, and he is still saving up money for the wedding and dowry. He would very much like to marry her, but finances did not allow it at this time. Thus, quick and easy marriages are problematic options for Naomi and Neo, whose families would feel betrayed and offended if the couples eloped or married quietly without much family participation.<sup>54</sup>

Neo and Naomi’s choices to hold fast (or try to hold fast) to Mormon notions of chastity

---

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 6, 2015, interview 38, p. 4, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 3, 2015, interview 30, p. 18, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. In this oral history, the narrator Warona said that a marriage carried out without family participation or traditional cultural elements like *lobola* “destroys families.”

are poignant, as they highlight one cost of membership in the LDS church for some women in Botswana. Both have either ended or seriously jeopardized their romantic relationships in order to hold fast to this principle. While some scholars have found such chastity injunctions rife with patriarchal elements which impinge on women's agency to explore various types of relationships and enjoy physical intimacy, other scholars of religious women have pointed out how in some cases, women find a sense of safety and protection in these communities with strong chastity frameworks. Jennifer Finlayson Fife studied the sexual agency of American Mormon women, noting that "many LDS women, like cultural feminists, interpreted non-committal sexuality as male-defined and male-advantaging, and therefore undermining of their agency as it inherently served men's needs over their own."<sup>55</sup> Strong Mormon injunctions upholding chastity actually can give women a framework to demand commitment from romantic partners before engaging in sex, Finlayson Fife explains. In this way, this conservative choice to embrace Mormon notions of chastity actually has the potential of creating a shelter for women against male demands and male abdication of responsibility. While this framework of chastity within Mormonism increased some American women's senses of safety and agency because it allowed them to embrace and explore their sexual and erotic selves with committed husbands, it is important to note that these Mormon women in Botswana are not in a cultural context that would easily allow them to find committed partners who also embrace notions of chastity. As mentioned above, gender ratios in the LDS community in Botswana are skewed female, making finding an LDS husband difficult. Also difficult is finding non-LDS men who would respect and honor demands for chastity until marriage, since unmarried coupling or cohabitation is the expected norm. Thus, while Mormon chastity norms have helped some Mormon women achieve what they want in a sexual

---

<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Finlayson Fife, "Female Sexual Agency in Patriarchal Culture: The Case of Mormon Women," (PhD diss., Boston College, 2002), 234.

relationship—commitment, trust, self-expression—and have made them feel agentic and powerful in their sexual lives, women in contexts like that of Botswana are less likely to benefit in the same way, given the gender gap and prevailing sexually liberal culture. Women like Naomi and Neo hold out hope for a marriage to a committed man who understands and respects Mormon sexuality norms and who takes responsibility in helping to rear children, but the likelihood of them finding that person is low.

Several single women I spoke with described chastity as a huge challenge in Botswana. Part of the challenge centers around the undesirable (in both Mormon and Tswana contexts) possibility of living a chaste single life until death, and part of the challenge centers around the undesirable prospect of never having children. Since motherhood is so essential to women’s identities in Botswana, it is far preferable to many of them to get pregnant outside of wedlock and raise the baby without a father’s presence, rather than never have any baby at all. Musa, a single woman who converted to the church as a teenager, spoke to me about how even Mormon women would pull her aside and advise her to just get pregnant and then repent later—so essential and important is it to have at least one child in this culture.<sup>56</sup> With their choice to join the LDS church and adhere to Mormon chastity standards, many face lifetimes without male partners and even more difficult for them, without children. Yet for those Botswana women who do find husbands committed to their marriage and children, Mormon chastity norms and the general ubiquitous emphasis on the importance of the family does help to mold committed and

---

<sup>56</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 3, 2015, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B, p. 5. Musa said, “Even in the church, there is pressure coming from members. Some would say, ‘Yeah, you can have just one child.’ Women would say to you, ‘Your biological clock is ticking; come on, you can repent later.’ ... It’s even more painful and harder to be a single sister who doesn’t have children. It’s really, really, really hard.” I do not have a sense as to how widespread this attitude (get pregnant now, repent later) is, but these were significant moments for Musa, who saw this attitude as evidence of just how much pressure there was for women in Botswana to become mothers.

present male partners, a highly desirable outcome for them. The final section of this chapter explores with more depth the way Mormon teachings engender more satisfactory male marital partners, even as these teachings reinforce patriarchal norms.

While sacrificing romantic relationships is a significant challenge for unmarried Batswana Mormon women, these same women have often found within the church other opportunities that expand agentive opportunities and invite connection and relationality. This drive to create community and form enriching relationships with others dovetails with what African scholars often call Ubuntu, a Southern African notion of a communal self.<sup>57</sup> These African scholars have pointed out that Western notions of the self—often more individualized, more focused on rights and autonomy—do not always translate so well in non-Western contexts. In Africa, particularly, scholars have pointed out an entirely different worldview, one that does not privilege the singular self and her goals, dreams, principles, but instead one that focuses on the community and communal becoming. John Mbiti famously coined this dictum to explain traditional African concepts of community and self, “I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am.”<sup>58</sup> Proverbs encapsulating this idea are found in many African languages, but for our purposes here the Setswana proverb is “Motho ke motho ka batho.”<sup>59</sup> Mbiti considers this notion of self and community to be the hallmark of the traditional African worldview.<sup>60</sup> The self is thus inextricably combined with others, and many African scholars have echoed this idea that this communal notion of the self is a distinguishing factor that separates African thought from

---

<sup>57</sup> See Munyaradzi Felix Murove, ed., *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009). Many essays in this book touch on the concept of Ubuntu.

<sup>58</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108.

<sup>59</sup> Kipton E. Jensen, “The Politics of Faith-Based HIV Prevention Policies and Programs in Botswana,” in *The Faith Sector and HIV/AIDS in Botswana: Responses and Challenges*, eds. Lovemore Togarasei et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 62.

<sup>60</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions*, 108.

Western thought. African feminist ethicist Fainos Mangena describes the practical ramifications of an Ubuntu worldview: “In this intricate social network [encapsulated in the idea of Ubuntu], the individual finds him or herself related almost to everybody else in the community as father, mother, uncle, cousin, niece, aunt, etc. Their well-being is supposed to be his or her well-being as well. Any misfortune that befalls any of them affects him or her as well. . . . His or her identity is caught up in the social identity.”<sup>61</sup> With this Ubuntu idea so rooted in many southern African communities, women, Mangena argues, have been pressured by this worldview to take in and nurse sick husbands or partners who have often given them AIDS, as well as other sick relatives and children in need of care. Mangena finds this problematic and potentially damaging to women, who are pressured to perform intensive care tasks, often at the expense of their own health and well-being.

Mangena argues for a refined sense of Ubuntu, one which protects women’s health and welfare, but which retains women’s networks of care and relationality, particularly with children, so that women can enculturate a new generation with less patriarchal ideas. In some ways, the Mormon community in Botswana functions in this refined Ubuntu space, as women choose to turn aside from non-marital romantic relationships and instead maintain and develop networks of care and friendship. Mormon women participate together in Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary, assume stewardship over one another through visiting teaching, and teach and minister to various members of the congregation on Sunday. This work of creating community within women’s networks in the church is not always easy given the high rates of inactivity and some cultural resistance to programs like visiting teaching, but for women who persist within the

---

<sup>61</sup> Fainos Mangena, “The Search for an African Feminist Ethic: A Zimbabwean Perspective,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 11, no. 2 (September 2009): 24.

Mormon framework they do eventually create relationships and bonds that sustain.<sup>62</sup> Naomi ultimately became a Relief Society president and important minister and caretaker in her community, visiting non-practicing Mormon women and communing with them about the challenges of their lives.<sup>63</sup> Naomi's narrative arc—finding the Mormon church at a low point in her life after losing her bursar job and having to move back home with her parents, but then finding the space and confidence to rise within the Mormon community to become a leader, minister, and friend to other Mormons in her town—is striking. Even within the Mormon church's patriarchal and Western frameworks and restrictive teachings on chastity, Naomi has risen to the challenges of lay ministerial church work, and in so doing, developed and deepened her connections within the community.

Naomi and Neo deeply internalize notions of care for children and community. They have simply channeled their focus of care away from expectations from boyfriends and have drawn lines that honor their new personal senses of morality and God's wishes for them, even if these lines are personally difficult, painful, and frustrating for them. This dilemma they face—whether or not to privilege the stability of personal romantic relationships over their newfound faith and convictions about God's law about chastity—highlights them as active agents, deliberately negotiating their new path in life. These are not passive women who simply went along with a religious tradition that was handed to them, as some earlier depictions of

---

<sup>62</sup> The church-wide visiting teaching program, in which ward women are assigned to visit other ward women once a month, officially ended in March 2018. It has been replaced by a ministering program which is very similar to visiting teaching.

<sup>63</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #26 (2015), 11. Naomi said, "I got to know the sisters and got to love them. And if they are less active you learn why they are not coming to church. And at times you find out that some are having the very same challenges that you have, and I can share with them how I manage to assist in those things and try to explain to the sisters. I then realize that I am solving the problem I have by helping another sister."

Christianity among African women sometimes emphasized.<sup>64</sup> Rather, these women actively fought for this new faith and this new life, and they enacted it in their lives, sometimes at great personal cost to themselves and their romantic relationships. Yet within the Mormon church, these women have created other sustaining relationships that tie them to one another in networks of care.

Given the realities of navigating LDS notions of chastity in a wider social context that does not understand or support this choice, it is important to note that local branches and wards are often loving and kind towards LDS women who do not choose to abstain from sexual relationships outside of marriage. In the same branch as Neo, a woman named Kefilwe who had held a calling in the Young Women program spoke of the way they handle pregnancies of unmarried teenage girls in the branch:

If a girl is pregnant, we started a group visiting this girl. And after we invite her to come to church with that baby. We will be supportive so when she comes she knows she is part of the Church. We encourage each other to be supportive if somebody falls pregnant, to know it is not the end of the world. We need to support her so that she can be able to come back to church and continue on the path of the gospel.<sup>65</sup>

In other words, these Mormon women and girls would collectively put their arms around these young women and wholeheartedly invite them to continue coming to church. Musa, a former Relief Society President, used to go to inactive sisters and say, “I don’t care what you have done or what you are doing. Just come [to church]. We’re not all perfect.”<sup>66</sup> Limiting sexual relationships to only within marriage is such an unusual norm for Botswana that church members and leaders have, according to many of these oral histories, tended to show much love and

---

<sup>64</sup> Andrea Cornwall, “Introduction: Perspectives on Gender in Africa”, in *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. Andrea Cornwall (Oxford: James Currey, 2005), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Anonymous, interview by Heather Sundahl, June 7, 2015, interview 57 p. 7, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>66</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B (2015), 11.

understanding towards those that do not always live up to these standards.

Naomi and Neo's experiences with attempting to live the law of chastity—at the expense of relationships with the fathers of their children—highlight the enormous price some members in the global church pay for membership. While sexual relationships exclusively within marriage are such an important feature of Mormon morality, one cannot help but wonder whether there is room in Mormonism for possible accommodations for women like Naomi and Neo, so that they could have both their membership and their relationships intact. Anecdotal evidence from missionaries around the world suggest that different mission presidents establish different rules on the subject of baptizing converts in common law marriages, or marriage-like relationships that are unofficial but long term, monogamous and committed.<sup>67</sup> Because some countries make divorce almost impossible, these common law marriages are often widespread for people who have been previously married, and pose real problems for missionaries, who find families eager to convert, only to realize that couples are not legally married. Some mission presidents, such as a recent one in the Philippines, allow couples to be baptized if they have lived together monogamously for five years.<sup>68</sup> Other mission presidents insist on baptism only for legally

---

<sup>67</sup> "Cohabiting Opposite-Sex Couples Can Now Be Baptized," *Nearing Kolob* (blog), July 2, 2015, accessed July 14, 2016, <http://www.nearingkolob.com/cohabiting-opposite-sex-couples-can-now-baptized/>. The author of the blog, a missionary in the Philippines, writes, "We have had more success in our work and our numbers are improving. The area presidency recently released a new rule that as long as two people have been living together for 5 years or more, they are allowed to be baptized, just because it is really hard for people here to get married or to get a divorce. Which means that one of our investigators who has really been wanting to be baptized is now able to. It also means that we will probably be having about 5 baptisms this month."

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* Additionally, Spencer W. Kimball's 1977 biography discusses how Kimball helped to devise a new policy that allowed common-law couples to be baptized, given the difficulties of obtaining divorce in some South American countries. "Elder Kimball helped to establish as Church policy that such couples could be baptized if they showed that they had done what they could to legalize their relationship, had been faithful to one another, had met responsibility to their previous family, and had conformed to the expectations of custom." Edward L. Kimball and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr., *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977), 316.

married couples.<sup>69</sup> In the case of Botswana, local church leaders appear to be adhering to a “legal marriage only” concept of chastity, but in practice, church members and leaders on the ground appear to be trying to make room for women like Neo who are in the very difficult position of trying to navigate long-term relationships and Mormon activity. Long-term monogamous non-legal relationships are a topic that church leaders seem to be wrestling with in different parts of the world and potentially open to considering adaptation depending on particular cultural and legal situations.

A concomitant issue which Mormon leaders and members must confront is how to assign a meaningful identity and space within Mormonism to women who are not mothers. With Mormonism positing such a strong stance against sexual relationships outside of marriage while at the same time so closely intertwining women’s identities with that of mother, LDS women who are not married are left in a no-[wo]man’s land, unable to fulfill either their faith’s conceptions of womanhood or, in many cases around the world, their culture’s conceptions of womanhood. It is therefore not surprising that so many single LDS women in Botswana have trouble maintaining activity in the church.

### ***Adoption***

Given the strong cultural norms and emphases on motherhood for women, a number of Botswana Mormon women do choose to have children outside of wedlock. As mentioned above, this familial and cultural pressure to have children is a product of larger ideological patterns and understandings of self rooted in African traditional thought that emphasize the community over

---

<sup>69</sup> RJH, “Common-law Marriages,” *By Common Consent* (blog), January 17, 2006, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2006/01/17/common-law-marriage/>. See comments by Karl and Eric Russell, among others.

the individual.<sup>70</sup> Naomi's parents pressure her to have children, even out of wedlock, because they see it as good for the community and for the larger extended family to have young people, as well as good for Naomi personally. Musa tells of ward members advising her to just have a baby out of wedlock and repent later, so important is it to perpetuate intergenerational bonds and ties. Choosing to not have children is seen as unwise (since children are caretakers to elderly parents) and possibly selfish in the more traditional world view of Batswana. That some unmarried Mormon women therefore choose to have children is not surprising, even in the face of strong institutional Mormon norms against this. This choice, however, brings into stark relief a tension between Mormon policies which advocated adoption for babies born to unwed Mormon mothers and the Batswana culture and practices where giving babies up is seen as untenable and unethical. This topic of adoption exemplifies issues of cultural accommodation, resistance, and agency within Mormonism.

Musa, former Relief Society President and a devout member of the church, spoke of one such incident, in which the Relief Society as a whole vocally and forcefully rejected a certain practice they just could not, as women of Botswana, embrace. She said:

We were told that if a single sister falls pregnant, the advice or encouragement was for that sister to put that baby up for adoption. I didn't like that. I found the teaching hard to swallow. I still do, though I'm not sure what the stance of the church is anymore on that. One day our bishop came to Relief Society to tell the sisters about this principle coming from the First Presidency. Before the bishop even finished what he was delivering the sisters were up in arms, saying all sorts of things. They were like, "No!" I remember the bishop just walking out, without finishing what he had come to deliver. He just walked out. It was my first time seeing Saints, for that matter, women, opposing the prophet in such kind of a setting. Maybe our minds and hearts were not prepared. That's why it is such a hard saying to us. Or maybe we feel this way because we are Africans and we are taught that a child is a gift from God, and it doesn't matter if they come out of wedlock or not, that one has to treasure them and keep them. Because in Botswana, you fall pregnant, you might not be working, and relatives and siblings will pitch in and help here and there,

---

<sup>70</sup> Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy, an Introduction*, ed. Richard Wright (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 171.

and life goes on! That's how we're raised.<sup>71</sup>

This account reveals a dissonance between Batswana values and Mormon injunctions. In the early 2000s, when this incident took place, Mormon leaders advocated adoption for babies born to unwed mothers since they felt strongly that babies should be raised in two parent families and sealed to these families.<sup>72</sup> An unwed mother would be unable to provide either of these things, thus adoption was strongly encouraged.<sup>73</sup> For these Batswana women, however, giving up their babies was unthinkable. It went against their culture, which has little experience with adopting out babies, and it also ignores the particular social practices which characterize Batswana, who tend to have tight bonds of reciprocity and expectation between extended family members. As Musa described, family members are expected to help a new mother through child care and funds.<sup>74</sup> These women in Relief Society therefore vocally rejected this advice, actually driving the bishop out mid-message, because this practice was simply incompatible with their tradition, their sense of morality, and their conception of family responsibilities. We can therefore see in this incident a moment of hybrid identity, as these Mormon women attending Relief Society and actively embracing their new faith in so many ways, asserted their rejection of a stance that seemed wrong to their conception of morality and unworkable in their society. As Rita Abrahamsen explained in her discussion of hybrid identities in postcolonial societies, “Hybridity is seen to signify the creative adaptation, interpretation and transformation of Western cultural symbols and practices, and shows that formerly colonized peoples are not simply passive victims in the face of an all-powerful Western culture.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, these Relief Society women were quite

---

<sup>71</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B (2015), 12.

<sup>72</sup> This attitude is based on an American middle-class model of nuclear family as moral and economic unit.

<sup>73</sup> LDS Family Services, “Adoption and the Unwed Mother,” *Ensign*, February 2002, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/02/adoption-and-the-unwed-mother?lang=eng>.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B (2015), 12.

<sup>75</sup> Rita Abrahamsen, “African Studies and the Postcolonial Challenge,” *African Affairs* 102, no. 407 (April 2003): 206.

willing and capable of selectively embracing which (Western) Mormon practices work for them and which simply do not. Interestingly, the Mormon Church's official website, LDS.org, now features a far more nuanced discussion of women's options when they find themselves pregnant and unwed, compared to the clear directives from the early 2000s. The lds.org article ultimately encourages women to pray and find personal guidance as to how they should best deal with their situation.<sup>76</sup> One cannot help but wonder if the Church's shift on this issue might be due in part to the negative reactions of non-American members of the church to this policy, who simply could find no place for it in their worldview.<sup>77</sup>

Musa's story also highlights the active choices Mormon women in Botswana are making to either comply with dictates originating from Church headquarters, to resist them, or to do both simultaneously. It's notable that this one area of resistance that Musa noted—it was the first time she had ever seen Mormon women so clearly and wholehearted reject a church injunction—was that of how they should behave as single mothers. Motherhood and child rearing are arenas, in the Botswana point of view, very much under the stewardship of women. Thus men (and white American men at that) instructing these women to give their babies away was seen as unpalatable. It struck at the heart of who these women were as mothers or potential mothers, but also who they were as Africans who, as Musa said, were raised to treasure every single child and to expect help from family members to raise their children, whether or not the children were products of wedlock. This bishop's message was seen as a space of overstep—not only overstep by men telling women what to do with their babies, but also by Western church leaders who

---

<sup>76</sup> "Unwed Pregnancy," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 24, 2016, <https://www.lds.org/topics/unwed-pregnancy?lang=eng>.

<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, the Mormon church also abandoned its full-service adoption agency in 2014, due in part to increasing numbers of unwed mothers choosing to keep their babies. See Ryan Morgenegg, "LDS Family Services No Longer Operating as Adoption Agency," *Church News*, July 1, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/lds-family-services-no-longer-operating-as-adoption-agency?lang=eng>.

perhaps did not understand the tight bonds of extended family networks in Africa that help single mothers raise their children. We see in this incident a clear indication that the subject of adopting children out to strangers is one area Batswana women will rise up and forthrightly reject certain Western cultural practices that have little place within their more communal society.

While Musa's story was striking in the way it highlighted a moment of resistance on the part of Relief Society women, a careful reading of Musa's words shows the way she was trying to balance her initial repugnance toward the idea with her faith and loyalty to her church and her leaders. She mentioned the possibility that she and her sisters might have been wrong to feel as they did: "Maybe our minds and hearts were not prepared." She went on to wrestle with the idea more, trying to understand the church's position. "I mean, I understand that it's for the baby's best interest to be raised by two married parents and sealed and all of that. That makes perfect sense. But I think because of how I was raised ... someone instilled in me this idea. Even if you are able to take care of your child—to just give it away?"<sup>78</sup> Musa is engaging in a complex grappling with this idea of adoption, wanting to honor and respect both her own culture's sense of morality and that of her chosen church. While in the moment, Musa and her Relief Society sisters rose up and verbally rejected the notion of adoption, Musa is actually struggling to come to terms with the church's position, trying to give it and church leaders the benefit of the doubt. She is attempting to accommodate both the church and her own/her culture's sense of morality and good in this situation. In some ways, Musa is displaying a kind of agency that not only resists authority—the kind of agency most women's and feminist historians emphasize—but also accedes to authority at the same exact moment. Amy Hoyt, who studied LDS women in the United States, described this kind of agency that simultaneously resists and accedes to authority

---

<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B (2015), 12.

or social norms.<sup>79</sup> Musa vocally resisted church adoption injunctions, but she simultaneously worked to honor and respect those same injunctions and to find room for them in her moral framework. As such, this Mormon Batswana woman is engaging in a complex negotiation between different sources and forms of morality, community, and family.

Musa's story of reacting to Mormon leaders' counsel regarding adoption sheds further light on Hoyt's conception of simultaneous agency and the constant renegotiations between self and community, since it brings it to focus another realm of norms that converts to Mormonism from different countries must negotiate within an LDS framework: that of loyalties to local communities and concepts of morality. Hoyt's study, which so helpfully moved discourse on agency beyond dichotomous notions of either resistance to or support of norms, could not take into account the additional layers of loyalty and negotiation that are thrown into the mix when Mormon women's conceptions of morality and selves are formed in a non-Western culture, in which the self itself is often thought to be tied inextricably to the community.<sup>80</sup> Musa is thus negotiating between multiple loyalties and conceptions of morality, including that of her Western-based church, that of her culture in Botswana, and her own visceral reaction, which as she acknowledges is probably deeply tied into moral conceptions of her home culture.

Musa's grappling with this incident, and her clear desire to honor and understand both the perspective of her American general church leaders and her own native Setswana sense of right, exemplifies her development of a multiple consciousness, which requires "understanding multiple, often opposing ideas and knowledges, and negotiating these knowledges."<sup>81</sup> Scholars see this plural consciousness as a source of strength because of the concomitant ability to

---

<sup>79</sup> Amy Hoyt, "Reconceptualizing Agency," *Element* 5 no. 2 (Fall 2009): 75.

<sup>80</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies*, 108.

<sup>81</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 80.

transcend simple dualistic thinking and binaries.<sup>82</sup> This ability to inhabit multiple consciousness allows Musa to maintain loyalty to the culture that nurtured her and the church that has given her a sense of purpose, community, and personal relationship with God.

This incident ultimately illuminates a multi-faceted type of agency, one that incorporates not only multiple consciousness and a complicated mix of accommodation and resistance, but one that points toward a constant and specific end result: relationality. For these women, so many of whom have emerged from fractured families with absent parents, relatives who have died from AIDS, and separations from their ancestral villages and ties, their agentive actions are often geared toward the result of nurturing human ties and relationality. Forming and maintaining relationships, values at the heart of Joseph Smith's theology, are constant features of their moral centers. Thus, the idea of severing the bond between mother and child born out of wedlock was seen as ultimately incompatible with their moral framework, though Musa was able to step back from her immediate repugnance and recognize that adoption, though it entailed the severing of certain bonds, enabled the creation of other bonds between child and adoptive parents.

This moral center focused on relationality helps to explain why Batswana women like Musa have chosen to make their faith home in the Mormon church. While there are specific issues like adoption that do not resonate with these women's moral centers, other aspects of Mormonism do. A glimpse of Musa's larger story helps illuminate this central moral focus on creating and maintaining relationships and why the Mormon church felt empowering to her. Musa was the product of a fractured marriage. As a young girl, her father took her and her sister

---

<sup>82</sup> Gloria Anzaldua refers to this as a "mestiza consciousness." Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1987), 79-80. Alarcon calls it a "plurality of self." Norma Alarcon, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo -American Feminism," in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152.

to live with him in the city. Her mother stayed in the village with the other six children. She found Mormonism as a teenager and loved the community and relationship she was able to develop with a God who saw her as a beloved daughter. This relationship with God and Mormon community members was emotionally and spiritually fulfilling, particularly in the face of her father's eventual death from AIDS and two of her brothers' deaths. The vision and goals that were promoted in Mormonism—tight families who care about each other, men who are present and helpful as husbands and fathers, even families who could be sealed together in life or after death to cement these bonds—were hopeful and resonated with her own desire to create the bonds she herself lacked to some degree as a child. She went on to serve a mission and served as a Relief Society President. She has taught institute, been in countless ward council meetings, and more. In this Mormon community she has found a new family and village, one in which to minister to others, assume certain clerical roles, give sermons, and teach adults. This Mormon community, so often in flux with high rates of inactivity, needs and appreciates her skills and devotion. She has found a home and family here, a context in which to nurture her spiritual relationship with God and also her social relationships with other LDS members.

Of course, Musa's opportunities to grow and progress and serve in the LDS community are not limitless. As a woman her authority is bounded within the congregation, and as an African, she must face and confront Western notions that creep into Mormon practice. While she recognizes these challenges and has found agentive ways to navigate their complexities—including resisting, complying, and developing multiple consciousness—she feels she is ultimately more nurtured than constrained in her Mormon practice in Botswana. When asked about the all-male priesthood, she did not emphasize the limitations of her opportunities as a woman. Rather she emphasized her capacity for action and the possibility of thinking and acting

beyond limits and constraints: “I feel that half the time as women we don't really appreciate the powers and effect that we have in the church and in communities we live in.... I think if we understand that, then we'll be able to understand bigger things that Heavenly Father has in store for us.”<sup>83</sup> Musa acknowledges that women do not have the same opportunities for leadership and that the lack of those opportunities does sometimes lead women to take more passive attitudes, but she wants women to resist that. She says, “Women turn to seat [sit] at the back and not actively take part in issues that affect them, maybe with the fear of how they would be viewed. We don't have to always prove ourselves; we just have to be ourselves.”<sup>84</sup> Mormonism, even with its patriarchal priesthood-led framework that leads some women to assume a passive role and to be wary of speaking up, has given Musa a sense of possibility, capability and space to be her authentic self as she agentively participates in the work of the congregation and develops relationships with her fellow congregants.

### ***Bridewealth***

Bridewealth, also known as bride price or lobola, is a traditional wedding practice of Botswana, as well as several other African countries, in which the groom gives money (or traditionally in Botswana, cows) to the bride's family. These negotiations are typically conducted by the groom's and bride's uncles, and they might, as mentioned above, involve considerable time and effort. It might also take the groom and his family years to accrue an acceptable amount.

I first learned about just how difficult this issue of bridewealth is for some Batswana Mormons when I spoke with Sister Warona one day after church. Warona, a confident eloquent woman in her thirties, had a beautiful straight posture and melodic voice. She converted to the

---

<sup>83</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview in Botswana, #1B (2015), 8.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

church at fourteen and she is deeply dedicated to it, having served in many leadership positions. Her relationship with God is strong and close: “One thing that won’t change is that He loves me. I know that for sure.”<sup>85</sup> She has needed that strong close relationship with God to cope with difficult decisions and experiences, particularly the death of her newborn. Warona, a professional in the health sector, is ambitious and capable, a born leader in every way. Her leadership skills were recognized by her government as she became one of the very first women in the country to be a captain in the military. She has thrived in this position, though it has taken some effort for her to balance her prestigious career with the needs of her husband and children.

Warona, the wife of a chief who later converted to Mormonism, spoke at length about the important role the church has played in her life, as it has centered her and balanced her throughout her career path and family formation. She has found the church and its teachings to be empowering and enabling, as is evidenced by this anecdote in which she speaks about her intuitive and sensitive spiritual powers and her bishop’s encouragement to her to use them:

I get so in tune that Heavenly Father reveals specifics to me in dreams.... However, when I do that, sometimes I get scared because I think it’s a glimpse of what I just might be capable of.... The counseling my bishop gave me at that time, was, it doesn’t matter who you are when you are spiritually in tune, your spiritual blessings come to the surface and therefore it was for me to learn not to be afraid to use them, or go back to my heavenly father and say, “What would you like me to do with this information?” Trust in the answer... therefore Heavenly Father has provided that I am able to meet those needs of people that he has let me see.<sup>86</sup>

Mormonism has given Warona space to nurture a profound sense of her own potential and powers—such a profound sense that she is sometimes scared of her enormous potential and spiritual intuition. Her bishop’s counsel has enabled her to use her gifts with confidence and assume responsibility to see to the needs of others. Warona’s dedication to the church is evident

---

<sup>85</sup>Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #30 (2015), 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

throughout her oral history, and her ultimate wish is to one day go to the temple with her husband and children.

This dedication to the church, however, does not lead to a passive acceptance of all church policies and dictates. She pointed to the issue of lobola or bridewealth as a place in which she had to carefully navigate between loyalty to her Setswana culture and loyalty to the injunctions of Mormon church leaders:

I personally struggled the very first time it was said—the particular situation of the lobola. It happened to be done away with. This is the bride price, my dear, where we take cows to get married. It’s a very big part of my culture. I’m going to use these words. I felt offended that somebody white, somebody who doesn’t understand why that has been institutionalized, can say, “Do away with that.”<sup>87</sup>

Warona explained that a white Area Authority from the church had recently come to Botswana and told them that bridewealth practices should be ended.<sup>88</sup> This was an enormous point of struggle for her, made more painful since her husband was chief and therefore responsible for protecting and perpetuating customary Setswana culture.

Church leaders, such as Dallin Oaks, have critiqued lobola practices as one of a few “negative cultural traditions” in Africa that church leaders would like to see end.<sup>89</sup> He explained that his objection to the lobola centers around the fact that it delays marriage for returned missionaries: “When a young returned missionary must purchase his bride from her father by a payment so large that it takes many years to accumulate, he is unable to marry or cannot do so until he is middle-aged.”<sup>90</sup> With celibacy before marriage such an important marker of Mormon morality and with marriage as a central theological concept in Mormonism—men and women

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>88</sup> An area authority in the LDS church is a leader appointed by church headquarters in Salt Lake City to have regional responsibilities over a part of the world.

<sup>89</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “The Gospel Culture,” *Ensign*, March 2012, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/03/the-gospel-culture?lang=eng>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

must be married or sealed in the temple to achieve the highest level of exaltation—it is not surprising that Elder Oaks would find this practice problematic. However, as Walter Van Beek explains, such a critique is rooted in a “Deseret model of membership” that church leaders are thrusting onto people in cultures that differ significantly from the culture in which American Mormonism is enmeshed.<sup>91</sup> Van Beek argues that “a blanket condemnation of bridewealth is culturally uninformed, especially when coupled with admiration for the African family,” since bridewealth in Africa is a symbol of the supreme importance of the family and women’s fertility.<sup>92</sup> Perhaps church leaders have recently come to understand that African members like Warona find critiques by white leaders of such important cultural elements at least somewhat problematic. In 2015, the church produced a short video that features black African Area Authorities and leaders critiquing lobola practices. While Elder Oaks’s words of critique are also featured, and in fact quite central to the video, the very fact that so many black African Mormon leaders are echoing these critiques might make injunctions against the practice slightly more palatable, since these African leaders clearly know and understand the cultures from which lobola practices spring.<sup>93</sup>

Oaks’s words describing lobola, “purchase his bride,” indicate a common Western understanding of this practice, which has been criticized by Westerners and some feminists, both Western and African, as dehumanizing women and treating them as property. Caroline White’s study gives some support to this interpretation, as some of her informants told her that lobola in South Africa leads men to think they own their wives and the products of their labor, and gives

---

<sup>91</sup> Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 78.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>93</sup> Aleah Ingram, “Church Leaders Speak About Dowry in Africa,” *LDS Daily*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.ldsdaily.com/church-lds/church-leaders-speak-about-dowry-in-african-culture/>.

them the right to beat their wives.<sup>94</sup> Recent scholarship on lobola and gender based violence in Zimbabwe confirms the link between the two.<sup>95</sup> Motswana feminist scholar Godisang Mookodi believes the problem of male violence goes deeper than bridewealth, though bridewealth is a part of the problem. She finds that male breadwinning ideology, ideology which particularly developed with the advent of the capitalist economy in the 1960s and 70s, to be the primary root of male violence and gender inequality. She argues that women's lesser access to resources contributes to the problem of male violence toward women in Botswana.<sup>96</sup>

The critique of lobola as a justification for domestic violence is a serious one that should not be lightly put aside. Yet also important, as many postcolonial feminist scholars have said, is to interrogate Westerners' impulses to "save brown women from brown men," as postcolonial scholar Spivak discusses.<sup>97</sup> Importantly, she and other postcolonial feminist scholars have pointed out that far too often, white people liberating "brown women" from patriarchal cultural traditions has been used to justify colonial impositions.<sup>98</sup> These impositions have often led to war, increased vulnerability for women, and cultural changes the women themselves were not seeking. While lobola has in some situations led to the commodification of women and men's feelings of entitlement to violence toward their wives, postcolonial scholars warn Westerners wanting to charge in and fix the situation that caution is in order. As is discussed later in the section, other approaches, such as letting communities themselves devise adaptations that honor

---

<sup>94</sup> Caroline White, "'Close to Home' in Johannesburg: Gender Oppression in Township Households," *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 2 (1993): 160.

<sup>95</sup> Nogget Matope, Nyevero Marunzani, Efirtha Chauraya, and Beatrice Bondai, "Lobola and Gender Based Violence: Perceptions of Married Adults in Gweru Urban, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Education Research and Behavioral Sciences* 2 no. 11 (November 2013): 192-200.

<sup>96</sup> Godisang Mookodi, "Male Violence Against Women in Botswana: A Discussion of Gendered Uncertainties in a Rapidly Changing Environment," *African Sociological Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 122.

<sup>97</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 296-297.

<sup>98</sup> Miriam Cooke, "Saving Brown Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2002): 468-470.

the best of cultural traditions, should be considered.

Additionally, some postcolonial feminist scholars emphasize the importance of listening to and highlighting the voices of global southern women and their perspectives on various cultural practices like lobola.<sup>99</sup> As Marnia Lazreg questions in her article about the ethnocentric and cultural imperialistic dangers of Westerners writing about global southern women, “Is it possible to do scholarly work on women in the Third World that goes beyond documenting existing stereotypes? How does one put an end to the fundamental dismissal of what Third World women say when they speak a nonstereotypical language?”<sup>100</sup> In other words, is it possible to hear and respect global southern women’s voices and perspectives, even when their words don’t resonate with Western or feminist worldviews? As intersectional feminist scholars have argued so cogently, what is dehumanizing to one group of women from a certain race, class, and nationality, might very well not be dehumanizing to another, given their particular social location and unique experiences.<sup>101</sup> For Warona, and for Naomi as well, who also mentioned the lobola positively, bridewealth is not about dehumanizing women or purchasing women. It is about respecting them and honoring them for the enormous contribution they make to families. It is also about bringing families together. Warona explains the practice in this way:

When a man and a woman decide to get married, when families decide to join through their children, a family is made one big main thing. Culturally, women used to plough fields, you know? So therefore, the strongest woman, not necessarily beautiful, the strongest, hard-working, the most obedient was the one who would be the first to get

---

<sup>99</sup> Spivak is pessimistic that perspectives of Third World women can actually be recovered, given the power of colonization and patriarchy. But other scholars, like Benita Perry, believe that the native woman’s voice can indeed be heard at times. Benita Perry, “Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,” *Oxford Literary Review* 9, no. 1/2 (1987): 39.

<sup>100</sup> Marnia Lazreg, “Decolonizing Feminism,” in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyeronke Oyewumi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 75.

<sup>101</sup> White, “Close to Home,” 149-150. White lists three central concerns of white feminists are marriage and family, lack of work opportunities for women, and sexism. She then describes why each of these topics do not necessarily resonate with black women – marriage is sought after since racism and colonization have prevented black people historically from forming families, work is drudgery, not liberation, for black women, and men are not oppressors, but brothers in the struggle against oppression.

married—the hard working one. The concept behind it would be “She’s going to plough our fields and bear our children, so we need her to be strong to do this.” Two families could not equate how strong that would be. Therefore, they would give an appreciation in those cows for the exchange of this caliber of person who they were getting. The man’s family gives the cows to the woman’s family.

My thing is this. Lobola becomes offensive when a white person is explaining it to you ... how they interpret it. For them, it is just bride price. For me, it’s a connection of families, it’s a token of appreciation. And it’s who I am. I was married on the 21st of December, 2012. In the Philippines, in Utah and South Africa, anywhere in the world, someone in Africa, somebody shares that date as a marriage date, somebody in the States. But, what makes my marriage significant is that on that day, we saw that token of appreciation go from his family to my family. The relations we make, the sounds we make of joy, of appreciation, of gladness, makes my 21st of December, unique. I attach it to that, therefore, it was different.<sup>102</sup>

To Warona, bridewealth is a beloved cultural tradition which symbolizes how utterly valuable women are in families. To not have this property change hands would actually have been an affront to her dignity and worth as a woman.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, as Warona explains, bridewealth also brings two families together. For her, bridewealth is not about purchasing a wife. Rather it is a “connection of families” and is indelibly tied to the formation of bonds between the bride’s and groom’s families. Warona’s sense of the importance of forging connections between families and within her own family (her desire to be sealed in the temple) is a driving moral force for Warona, and it has led her to push against Mormon injunctions to abandon the practice.

At the same time, Warona has worked hard to reconcile her deep loyalty to the church and church leaders with her personal experience that lobola honors women. An additional difficulty is that her husband is chief and thus beholden to perpetuate Tswana cultural traditions:

Now I’ve prayed to Heavenly Father to soften my heart in obedience. That’s the most important. The Prophet, whoever he sends, his servants, are the soldiers, the people who sit on the tower and watch for the enemy coming. I had to literally think that he’s seeing and therefore, he’s sounding the alarm. I cannot see that far. Can I just trust that?

---

<sup>102</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #30 (2015), 17.

<sup>103</sup> Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 84. Van Beek writes, “Western feminism has had its problems with the custom [lobola], but was confronted with a massive African female response that Western values should not be imposed and that African women were perfectly capable of deciding on their own what was important in their culture and what was not.”

Another dimension to our particular story—my husband is the Chief. He’s very connected to his cultural past. He’s the spokesperson of culture. I think he struggled a little more. He thought, “Honey, what am I going to say to the people”? I said to him, “I don’t know, but maybe it comes to you because you are the Chief, and because you can stand here and your voice can reach a greater number of people.” And I had to trust. And pray for wisdom. My husband listens to me, Sister Caroline. To be able to say, “You need to trust the very Heavenly Father who gave that commandment and let us not see the white man before we see the commandment, the servant of God, who says this is right.”<sup>104</sup>

Much like Musa, Warona had to navigate a middle path between her Tswana identity and loyalty and her identity and loyalty as a Mormon. As a product of a formerly colonized land, she clearly is aware of the issue of Western imperialism and “the white man” asserting power over black people. At the same time, she believes in church authority structures which have placed mostly white men in positions of ultimate authority and power. She can also see the ways lobola practices can, in fact, be problematic at times. She explains, “The thing with lobola, it is so commercialized, Sister Caroline. These principles I’m teaching you matter to me, but not to everyone. Some people are going to look at it this way: my daughter does not have a child. She grew up in the church. She is CEO. She’s student body president, so that makes her more expensive because your daughter is quiet, humble. So you are putting price tags on people.”<sup>105</sup> Like Musa and her grappling with the church’s stance on adoption, Warona has worked to see lobola from the perspective of church leaders and others who are critical of it. She too has developed a multiple consciousness that allows her to see and understand both perspectives. After much effort and prayer—she mentioned discussing this with her husband continually for a week—she and her husband carved out a path forward on this issue. Her solution involved a complex negotiation between her various loyalties to church, community, culture, and self:

After the heated conversations that ended in the evening, the following week is when we told them [our children] what we had decided. At eight years old, she [my daughter] knows that if her husband can give the lobola, fine and good, but we’re not going to stop

---

<sup>104</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #30 (2015), 17.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

them from going to the temple.<sup>106</sup>

The lobola is thus still a possibility if the prospective groom is able to pay it, but the temple has become the paramount consideration for this Mormon woman. She has shifted her focus away from lobola and towards the Mormon temple, with that now standing as the most meaningful part of the wedding. However, she is also open to (and probably hoping for) lobola to be paid because of the concomitant meaningful traditions of two families coming together, if the groom and his family can find a way to do so. She has therefore, as Hoyt has explained in her concept of simultaneous agency, found a way to navigate between her own desires and understandings and those of her church leaders. This navigation is especially complicated because of the additional moral world of traditional Batswana culture that she is simultaneously working to honor. Rather than dichotomous frameworks of agency that highlight resistance or accommodation to authority, we see Warona enacting a kind of agency that simultaneously upholds and pushes against the injunctions of her church leaders, just as it also entails both upholding and pushing against this cultural tradition of Botswana. In this complicated dance to make room for both sources of authority, Warona holds fast to a particular moral center: that of the centrality of creating bonds between individuals and families. She treasures traditional practice of lobola because it brings families together. Likewise, she treasures Mormon teachings that focus on the temple because of the sealings ordinances that bind families together eternally. This focus on the importance of creating and maintaining relational bonds grounds her navigation and decision making.

Warona's story highlights the active (and sometimes tense) meaning making, negotiation, and thought in which African Mormons engage as they navigate their loyalties to their chosen religion and their home cultures. It also highlights some of the additional burdens Mormons in

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 19.

the rest of the world shoulder when the “gospel culture” they have been led to embrace springs from Western or American culture.<sup>107</sup> As van Beek mentions in his article on African Saints, the LDS Church must do careful work to “define what is core and what is periphery—in its doctrine, ritual, and life of the ecclesia.... It might well be that for any type of second harvest—or first in the African case—local cultures will have to be allowed in.... Cultural forms as a way to muster local agency have to be given their proper place.”<sup>108</sup> Similarly, feminist Mormons of color, who critique both colonialist and sexist tendencies in the LDS Church, also suggest that before calling Africans out on their traditional culture, it might be more prudent for church leaders to take a careful look at their own Western traditions. Gina Colvin, an LDS scholar of Maori descent, says this regarding the church’s critique of bride wealth: “I think the LDS church needs to ... [not critique] the practices of other cultures and instead allow the local people to explore their own cultural adaptations. I also think the church needs to look in their own backyard for cultural practices that are out of step with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, Colvin recommends caution when criticizing the beloved practices of other cultures, practices which do not resonate with most church leaders’ Western or American cultures and understandings. It is imperative, she notes, for Western Mormons to allow local Mormons to themselves adapt their cultures as they find appropriate and meaningful. Colvin’s vision of an inclusive Mormonism that is actively working to limit Western and first world cultural imperialism includes international Mormon communities being “empowered to draw on their own dialogues, rather than being dependent on Salt Lake City, to make sense of who they are and the limits and

---

<sup>107</sup> See Dallin H. Oaks, “The Gospel Culture.”

<sup>108</sup> Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 95-96.

<sup>109</sup> Gina Colvin, comment on Feminist Mormon Housewives Society Facebook group, January 25, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fmhsociety/search/?query=dowry>.

boundaries of their community engagements.”<sup>110</sup> This inclusive Mormonism would also “involve American-born Mormons listening to unfamiliar voices, and being open to new ways of thinking, making sense of the world, and remaining open to critique from those at the margins.”<sup>111</sup>

Warona’s voice is a prime example of a marginal voice expressing an understanding of the value of a cultural tradition that is foreign to Westerners. Creating space for her and others to live out their cultures and values as they see fit might indeed prove to strengthen the church and its reach, since these communities will see space for them to embrace their traditional identities as well as their Mormon ones.

With Mormonism’s highly hierarchical structure and centralized teachings, it is inevitable that American culture and values are exported to international Saints. However, to dismiss Mormonism as a whole as simply a vehicle for cultural imperialism, as some scholars have done with Christian missionary work in the global south, does not do justice to the complex negotiating and navigating international Saints do as they meld this new faith with their unique contexts and values. As Ryan Dunch argued, dismissing missionary efforts by Westerners in the third world as simply cultural imperialism actually invalidates the agency of those in those cultures deliberately choosing these religions and actively grappling with their doctrines and policies.<sup>112</sup> These converts, like Warona, are very aware of the possibility of Western culture encroaching on them in the form of church dictates, and they engage in tough internal wrestling as they work to hold space for their values and culture as they simultaneously adopt a new religious worldview.

---

<sup>110</sup> Gina Colvin, “The Future of Global Mormonism: Decolonization and Inclusivity,” *Exponent II* 34, no. 2&3 (Fall 2014 Winter 2015): 40.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Ryan Dunch, “Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity,” *History and Theory* 41, no. 3 (2002): 307.

### *Companionate Marriage*

While some LDS Batswana women embraced certain cultural traditions in the face of church opposition—like keeping babies born out of wedlock and lobola— these women were also willing to critique other cultural patterns in Botswana they that felt were not helpful or life enhancing. One theme that arose repeatedly was these women’s attraction to the companionate, romantic, unified marriage that they heard Mormon church leaders espouse. These Western conceptions of marriage as romantic and loving were somewhat at odds with traditional African marriages which they described as less affectionate and less unified. In their willingness to critique traditional marital patterns in Botswana, these women were engaging in what African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes as a cultural hermeneutics, a cautious approach to culture which sees both its possibilities to be “a tool for domination” and its possibilities to sustain and enhance life.<sup>113</sup> Oduyoye sees her cultural hermeneutics as combining both a hermeneutics of suspicion (towards dehumanizing cultural practices) and a hermeneutics of commitment (toward the uplifting and enhancing): “The cultural hermeneutics being proposed combines both, as it shows African women taking a critical stance on African culture as well as promoting its commitment to wholeness and enhancement of life in the community.”<sup>114</sup> This cultural hermeneutics is thus a way of “taking seriously the issues of continuity and change.”<sup>115</sup> In other words, this cultural hermeneutics enables a revisioning away from African practices women find damaging, while simultaneously holding fast to African myths, symbols, and ways of being that sustain life.

A cultural element which Batswana Mormon women were willing to critique was

---

<sup>113</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *African Women’s Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

traditional Setswana marriage dynamics. These women who converted to Mormonism, with its Western emphasis on loving companionate marriage, wanted to step away from cultural practices of less unified, less affectionate, and less egalitarian marriage. Scholars of gender roles in Botswana have noted that there are traditional elements in Botswana's culture which lead to inequitable marriages. In Sibonile Edith Ellece's study of traditional marriage advice ceremonies in Botswana, she found advice patterning for women which "constructs marriage, as experienced by a woman, as a series of duties that she has to perform and sacrifices she has to make."<sup>116</sup> In contrast, grooms received advice which was "characterized by contradictions in that while the advisers may seek to promote partnership and equality, they still predominantly articulate 'male dominance' discourse which promotes male superiority at the expense of women."<sup>117</sup> These traditional advice ceremonies therefore have both egalitarian and non-egalitarian elements, but for Ellece, they ultimately "generate unequal power relations between spouses."<sup>118</sup>

Mormon teachings on marriage contain a similar mixed messaging of equal partnership and male predominance, as is evident in the previously mentioned "The Family" proclamation which enjoins men to "preside" over their families while they simultaneously act as "equal partners" with their wives.<sup>119</sup> Mormon temple rituals also subordinate women to husbands, though this subordination is qualified by the man's righteousness.<sup>120</sup> Despite these patriarchal vestiges that are undeniably part of Mormon marital rhetoric, recent emphases over the last generation have drastically downplayed male decision making and have emphasized instead

---

<sup>116</sup> Sibonile Edith Ellece, "'Be a Fool Like Me': Gender Construction in the Marriage Advice Ceremony in Botswana – A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Agenda* 25, no. 1 (2011): 47.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>119</sup> "The Family," 102.

<sup>120</sup> Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*, 170 and 178.

unified, loving, equal partnership-oriented marriages.<sup>121</sup> Batswana women who converted to Mormonism tended to see Mormon marital emphases on affection, love, romance, and unity as principles that enhanced their marriages and improved their relationships. Such ideas of affectionate companionate marriage are canonized in LDS scripture. D&C 42:22 states, “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shalt cleave unto her and none else,” and many church authorities constantly emphasize the importance of building and maintaining strong, affectionate, unified marriages. This emphasis has been particularly strong in the twentieth century, as the nuclear loving two-parent family rose to prominence and replaced earlier Mormon notions of polygamous marriage, grounded more in faith and obedience than love and affection. President Spencer W. Kimball described such companionate marriage and love in this way: “The love of which the Lord speaks is not only physical attraction, but also faith, confidence, understanding, and partnership. It is devotion and companionship, parenthood, common ideals and standards.”<sup>122</sup> Kimball’s description of marital love from 1949 is still highlighted and quoted generations later, such as a 2000 General Conference talk by Lynn G. Robbins and a 2015 *Deseret News* article.<sup>123</sup> This kind of devoted unified marital partnership is a centerpiece of Mormon teachings, affecting not only how couples treat each other now but also how couples conceive of eternity. Mormon doctrine teaches that couples who are married and sealed for eternity through Mormon priesthood rituals will be able to maintain their marriages and families in the next life and for all eternity. Establishing strong, loving marital bonds in this life is

---

<sup>121</sup> Kline, “Saying Goodbye to the Final Say.”

<sup>122</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 248. “An Apostle Speaks About Marriage to John and Mary,” *Improvement Era*, February 1949, 76; also “John and Mary, Beginning Life Together,” *New Era*, June 1975, 7–8.

<sup>123</sup> Lynn G. Robbins, “Agency and Love in Marriage,” *Ensign*, October 2000, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2000/10/agency-and-love-in-marriage?lang=eng> and Rachel Sterzer, “BYU Professor Teaches How to Take the Fear out of Dating,” September 10, 2015, *Deseret News*, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865636457/Taking-the-fear-out-of-dating.html?pg=all>.

therefore an important step towards building an eternal loving family unit. Married Batswana Mormon women in general described such teachings as helping them to create closer, more loving marital bonds, and even more equitable and partnership-oriented relationships with their spouses.

Sasha was one Batswana woman who spoke at length about her Mormon marriage and the ways she sees church teachings affecting her relationship. Sasha was a stylish woman in her forties wearing big hoop earrings and long hair. Her English, with its British accent mixed with a slight African one, was perfect—not surprising since she was raised by a white British stepfather. Sasha, who had a daughter with a boyfriend in her early twenties after she dropped out of university, converted the church only a few years ago. She has recently married a divorced Mormon man.

Sasha found the church at a time when she was looking for a change in her life. “Ten years of my life were basically intoxicated,” she told me as she described her twenties filled with alcohol and marijuana.<sup>124</sup> Before she joined the church, she had started to experience dark and malignant manifestations, and when she talked to the LDS missionaries, she felt they had a kind of benevolent spiritual power. Baptism, when they explained it to her felt exactly right - -a new beginning in a strict church that emphasized no alcohol and chastity. She also found comfort in the Book of Mormon: “I had spent so many months of turmoil, spiritual, emotional, mental confusion of things around me happening that I couldn't talk to anybody else.... So when I was reading the Book of Mormon, I felt so much at peace. And I just felt like soothed.... Then I got to 2 Nephi where it talked about how having faith in Jesus Christ, how our faith makes us alive

---

<sup>124</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 3, 2015, interview 34, p. 4, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

in Jesus Christ. And I just began to understand then.”<sup>125</sup> This was a new path she was looking for, a complete change from the life she had led before.

After converting to the church, Sasha met and married a Mormon man. Their marriage has been difficult, which she attributes to different cultures. She explained, “By cultural differences, I am referring to the fact that I grew up in a Western lifestyle, because my father is Western. He [my husband] grew up in an African lifestyle.”<sup>126</sup> When asked about her expectations and his expectations for the marriage, she said:

I expected him to hold my hand and kiss me and tell me he loves me and look me in the eye and say thank you. Not to tell me that the food is not cooked properly. But I learned later that in his culture, that they do those type of things. I still think they are wrong. He expected me to cook cook cook cook cook. My father is the one who cooks at home. He [my husband] expected me not to talk openly about my feelings. Also things like telephones. I wanted to know what was going on in his phone. I didn't care about him going into mine. Just little things like that. Money issues too.<sup>127</sup>

Sasha was hoping for a romantic, affectionate marriage, in which she and he would make unified decisions regarding money and in which there would be little secrecy. He, however, had envisioned a less emotive and more separate relationship, the kind of relationship that was, according to Sasha, common among more traditionally African Batswana.

This clash of expectations was difficult, at one point leading her to think that she might have made a mistake in marrying him, but they have recently begun to find a better equilibrium. A major factor in this new equilibrium is church teachings, which have seemed to lead her husband to treat her with more affection:

He's a very stubborn guy. Pretty controlling. When I was talking to the Stake President, he felt like it was probably because he was protecting himself from the previous disappointment. So he wants to be in control so he doesn't experience that again. But something happened at some point. I remember it was a Tuesday. He was coming home from a [church] meeting. When he came home, he was different. The difference made me

---

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

nervous. I was like, "I hope it's not a woman making him happy!" But he was different. And I tried to trace the difference -- he came from a meeting. He came with a *Strengthening Marriage* manual from the meeting. So I've just been observing and praying. He's being easier to get along with.... I fear him less now. I got to a stage where I was afraid of him, saying anything, because he would blow at anything.<sup>128</sup>

Sasha therefore found that LDS teachings were having a softening effect on her husband. This meeting in which marriage was evidently discussed and in which he acquired the *Strengthening Marriage* LDS manual prompted him to be more affectionate and less angry with his wife. It is also notable that the Mormon ecclesiastical structure gave Sasha an acceptable place to turn to communicate her worries about her marriage. Her stake president listened to her concerns and offered theories to explain her husband's difficult behavior. In Sasha's recounting, the stake president did not condemn her husband's behavior, but simply tried to explain it, though in his explanation there is present an implicit critique. The Mormon practice of discussing difficult issues with church leaders therefore provided Sasha with a meaningful sounding board and hope that perhaps in time, her husband's behavior might change and become more affectionate.

Sasha is now actively engaging in ways to create this better equilibrium in her marriage, an equilibrium in which she feels heard, respected, and an equal partner. She found in church teachings support for a more egalitarian, more unified marriage, though other Mormon teachings also lead her to put her husband first in a way that her husband does not always reciprocate. This lack of reciprocity became clear as Sasha spoke of covenants she has made to put her husband first. She said, "For me, I have covenants to keep. I know that I put my husband first. Whether he does it or not, whatever the Lord expects of him, it shouldn't affect me keeping the covenants I've made at the end of the day."<sup>129</sup> While Sasha did not elaborate on which covenants she was referring to, it is possible that she has the principle of sacrifice at the forefront of her mind, as

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

she navigates difficult moments of her marriage.<sup>130</sup> Particularly difficult for Sasha is her husband's tendency to be generous with his children from his previous marriage and restrictive and less generous with her and her child. She is willing to endure the marital challenges that are before her, if that is what the Lord wants, but as she says, "I want it to be a confirmed thing that it [these marital challenges] was from the Lord. Not just this guy thinking that he can just do whatever and put me second."<sup>131</sup> Thus while Sasha understands religious covenants to emphasize her duty to, as she says, put her husband first, church teachings have also simultaneously taught her that she can expect God to confirm to her that his treatment of her is right. She also finds comfort in scriptures about marriage that instruct "that nothing should come before me [a wife]." Church teachings have led Sasha to believe that she should sacrifice for the sake of the marriage and prioritize the well-being of her husband, but they have also simultaneously empowered her to expect similar sacrifice and prioritization on her husband's part, as well as divine confirmation to know if God does indeed want her to patiently endure her husband's unaffectionate behavior. Ultimately, Sasha felt that equality, affection, and unity are what God wants for them in this marriage. Sasha's own connection to God and her own sense of healthy relational reciprocity and affection are important checks on both church and cultural traditions that emphasize the husband's preeminence in the family.

Sasha exemplifies an agentive, creative, proactivity as she worked to establish this more unified and egalitarian marriage, often using church teachings as evidence that a unified and egalitarian marriage is ultimately in line with God's desire for them and their relationship. She explained:

I believe in us being united in absolutely everything. I automatically think that our

---

<sup>130</sup> Sasha might also have been thinking of the covenant of consecration, which on p. 11 she described as leading to unity and "not just for us out there at church. It starts in families and in marriages."

<sup>131</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #34 (2015), 8.

accounts should be joint. When he was difficult with money, I felt like going out to make money, but I felt like that wasn't going to solve what I knew was the right thing, which was for us to be united in everything. To be equal. To consult one another. To consider one another. So I felt, no, I'm not going to get out and get a job. We need to sort this out. So that when I do go and get a job it won't make things worse, make me more independent. So I managed somehow, I don't know how. It was inspired. We got a loan to get another car. He had to wait for my consent. There was that meeting with the bank, and I asked about joint accounts. I wasn't trapping him. It just came all of a sudden, and we got a joint account, and I got inspiration that the Lord will bless us when we are united, when we strive to live a celestial law. Unity, the law of consecration, it's not just for us out there at church. It starts in families and in marriages. When the prophet talks about spiritual dimension, I'm just beginning to understand what he means about that, and how to apply it in every single way -- not just as theory, not just as a canvas over a tent, but even the air inside that tent, the gospel penetrates and impacts.<sup>132</sup>

Within Mormonism's patriarchal framework which places husbands as both leaders and partners with their wives, Sasha has found gospel teachings to support her conviction about unity and egalitarianism in marriage. In particular, she has found in the principle of consecration inspiration to live a completely unified life with her husband, even to the point of making sure they had a joint bank account, thus giving this non-employed mother open access to their funds and ensuring open communication about expenditures in the marriage. Interestingly, she has also found in this ideal of marital unity a reason to not become a breadwinner, feeling that unity is more likely to come if they together navigate, discuss and compromise over expenditures, rather than earning separate funds and maintaining separate bank accounts like so many other couples in Botswana. Sasha has a difficult road to navigate as a stay-at-home mother working for equal financial say and access in her marriage, but she has found in some church teachings support for creating this kind of companionate and equal partnership-oriented marriage.

Sasha's words, and those of other women I spoke with, give us a window into the ways that Western Mormon familial expectations—stay-at-home mothers, breadwinner fathers, and affectionate, unified relationships with mostly egalitarian decision making—are not always an

---

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

easy overlay on various African cultures. Sasha herself, who self-described as more Western than African, is actively and with some difficulty working to make this Western conception of affectionate companionate marriage with husband as primary breadwinner a reality in her life. Other women I spoke with articulated why there are few stay-at-home mothers among Batswana church members. Charity, a woman who converted to the church as a teen and then became inactive and had a baby with a boyfriend, said this about why stay-at-home motherhood is not always ideal in for African women:

There is this fear. As African[s] we have an issue of women being abused and needing to be on their own and needing to work so they are seen as independent. That comes through working so we don't have to depend on [a man]. It seems if you talk to most women being a housewife is least desirable because of her circumstances. Work makes us independent, out of oppression and self-reliant.<sup>133</sup>

Her words resonate with Mookodi's observation that male breadwinning notions, which came somewhat into play in Botswana when the country adopted a cash economy, have led more towards oppression than away from it, as they often put women in a dependent position and at the mercy of husbands who may or may not be benevolent.<sup>134</sup> Even apart from worries about oppression within single income earner marriages, circumstances are also such that many Batswana LDS families simply need two income earners to have a measure of security in their lives. Pearl is a Motswana returned missionary married to an LDS man. She works full time because her family needs her income. It has been hard for her, since she has a young son, and she would actually prefer to be at home with him, but at this point in time that is not possible. Perhaps one reason Pearl feels comfortable with the idea of being a stay-at-home mother is the egalitarian relationship she and her husband have established. Unlike so many other couples that

---

<sup>133</sup> Anonymous, interview by Jennifer Platt, June 7, 2015, interview 22, p.2, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California. Punctuation has been changed.

<sup>134</sup> Mookodi, "Male Violence Against Women in Botswana," 122.

separate finances and do not openly communicate about money, Pearl and her husband lay everything out on the table:

You know, a friend of mine came to me and asked, “Pearl, how do you deal with finances in your house?” I’m like “OK, when we met, I wasn't working. He was working. So every time he would put the money on the table, or his pay slip, and say, ‘OK, this is it. Let's just do it.’” When I started working, that's what I learned... We do that all the time. We've been doing it for 7 years now. A friend of mine came to me and said, “You know what, I just have a hard time with this.” So I said to her, it's because you are separated with your finances. That's why you are fighting over finances. Put it together on the table. Because if you don't earn much, it's hard to expect your husband to go buy you a car.<sup>135</sup>

Pearl has also established an egalitarian relationship with her husband in other ways. When asked whether she feels like her husband and she are equal partners, she replied:

This one is not the hardest part for us, despite me being African. I know people get shocked a lot with the things that we do in our family. Because my friends will come to me and ask, "How do you get him to do this?" I don't get him to do anything. He just does things for me. Because when I do laundry... before the mission, he wouldn't do it, now he will just put it in the machine and we come and fold it together. We'll clean together, we'll bathe the baby. We do everything together. Even yesterday, he was busy with the car, and I just came and helped. We were laughing about how much we do together. He has those parts where he has to be a man. He knows he is expected to be, especially in leading the family in the gospel way.... He tries. He's really soft, not loud. Even if he was to correct us in the home, we can clearly see, ok, we can separate our duties very well -- as a mom and a father, and as a leader and presider in the home. At the same time we can clearly do things together.<sup>136</sup>

Though Mormonism has taught Pearl and her husband that her husband is leader and presider in the home, they have in practice established a helpful, companionate relationship. Her husband, after serving his mission, is proactive with household chores, and they constantly find ways to work together as a couple. Her husband’s presider role has not, for Pearl, translated into an oppressive situation. While Mormonism perpetuates gendered norms and hierarchies within marriage, particularly in its preside rhetoric and temple obedience covenants, it also on a

---

<sup>135</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 14, 2015, interview 32, p. 10-11, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

practical level encourages men to helpful investment and cooperative behavior in the home. It has also, in Pearl's case, helped them to choose unified approaches toward finances and goal setting.

Even within the overarching frameworks of cultural and ecclesiastical patriarchy, women like Pearl and Sasha are calling upon and finding elements in Mormonism that they feel are leading them to establish more unified and cooperative marital relationships. These women acknowledge men's leadership role in the home, yet in practice they are actively cultivating equal regard marriages. These emotionally intimate and unified marriages may be more Western than traditionally African, but Pearl and Sasha feel little conflict in cultivating these marriage patterns which they see as productive and more satisfying. Tellingly, they tend to attribute more egalitarian elements of their relationships to church principles and attribute less egalitarian elements to cultural factors. This echoes the words of many other interviewed Batswana Mormons, one of whom explained cultural patriarchy and church teachings this way: "Traditionally you accept everything he [your husband] says with no questions. Gospel-wise that is not the case... I am not commanded to obey. Sometimes people use scripture to justify this behavior but that's not the way. Love is the way to lead your home.... I started to realize that we are true partners."<sup>137</sup> This interview, as well as those of Pearl and Sasha, indicate that Mormonism is often providing men with new forms of masculinity that empower men as leaders and priesthood holders, but that also direct that empowerment, ideally, to helpful affectionate behavior towards their wives, children, and ward family. With colonialism and globalization having often ravaged traditional modes of masculinity, Mormonism seems to be providing

---

<sup>137</sup> Anonymous, interview by Jennifer Platt, June 2, 2015, interview 23, p. 4, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

Batswana men with a different, softer and more amenable male leadership role to inhabit.<sup>138</sup>

While many Batswana women found within Mormonism support for establishing primarily egalitarian marriages with their priesthood-holding husbands, it is notable that sometimes church teachings lead Batswana women to assume clearly subordinate positions to men within the family. Meldrad, a woman in her fifties, responded in this way when asked if women and men are equal partners in Mormonism: “I know they [my sons] have the priesthood. They hold the priesthood, so as they are right now I know I have to listen to them. I know I have to listen to what they say. Because now they have the power I cannot have as a woman.”<sup>139</sup> Meldrad’s understanding of men’s preeminence in the family—and women’s subordination within it—stem at least partially from Mormon notions of priesthood as providing special and particular access to God’s authority.<sup>140</sup> It is likely that patriarchal Setswana notions which promote deference to men have also contributed to her assuming this subordinate position in relation to her sons. Meldrad’s reflections about women’s role and position in the home provide a glimpse of the starkly male-dominated family dynamics that might result when Mormon patriarchal notions are layered upon African patriarchal notions. In the double discourse that Mormonism employs regarding gender roles in the home—women are both partners and those

---

<sup>138</sup> For more on the ways colonialism has disempowered men in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Margarethe Silberschmidt, “Poverty, Male Disempowerment, and Male Sexuality: Rethinking Men and Masculinities in Rural and Urban East Africa,” in *African Masculinities*, eds., Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 189-204.

<sup>139</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline, June 6, 2015, interview 27, p. 6, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>140</sup> American church authorities have in fact rejected notions of mothers deferring to priesthood-holding sons and have asserted mothers’ roles to preside over sons and daughters in the family when a husband is absent, but this idea has received little attention compared to the repeated emphasis on husbands and wives functioning as equal partners. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 2005. He said, “When my father died, my mother presided over our family. She had no priesthood office, but as the surviving parent in her marriage she had become the governing officer in her family.”

presided over—there is space for women like Sasha and Pearl to work for greater partnership and shared power in the home. However, there is also space for women like Meldrad to believe that their duty as women is centered in submission and deferral to the priesthood-holding men in their lives.

### ***Conclusion: Mormonism and Women's Empowerment***

Studies of women in Africa done by Westerners have often emphasized women's victimhood and oppression at the hands of men.<sup>141</sup> This focus has been critiqued by African women scholars and American womanists, who feel that such focus on women's oppression ignores the important sources of creativity, strength, and flexibility that African women can call upon as they hold up those elements of African life that enhance life and critique those that do not. My analysis finds that Mormon women in Botswana are proactively grappling with both cultural and church norms. As these women negotiate between these two moral authorities, they often find ways to honor both Mormon church injunctions and home culture.

This negotiation between (Western) church culture and home culture is complicated by the LDS church's strong centralized control which discourages local adaptation. This one pole of Mormonism, a strong emphasis on authority and hierarchy, is paired simultaneously and paradoxically with another hallmark of Mormonism: a strong focus on agency.<sup>142</sup> While these women in Botswana embraced notions of priesthood authority, both in marriage and in church hierarchy, they also were passionately dedicated to concepts of choice, agency, and personal revelation. Over and over again, women with whom I spoke emphasized that one of the most important things Mormonism has given them was a deep connection to the Spirit, which

---

<sup>141</sup> Robert Morell and Lahoucine Ouzgane, "African Masculinities: An Introduction," in *African Masculinities*, eds. Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 5.

<sup>142</sup> See Givens, *People of Paradox*. His first chapter, "The Iron Rod and the Liahona: Authority and Radical Freedom," elaborates on this paradoxical Mormon pairing of authority and agency.

consistently helped them to make choices in their lives. Although the Utah-based church hierarchy inarguably determines so many aspects of Mormon worship and morality throughout the world, this tight control is balanced out by teachings that personally empower Saints to pray and figure out for themselves the best way to manage and lead their lives. This personal revelation does not facilitate changes to church policy, but it does enable Batswana Saints to exercise a flexible agency that sometimes privileges church injunctions, sometimes upends them, and sometimes does both simultaneously. Warona, for example, left her husband and eight-month-old baby with her parents for nearly a year when she became convinced that pursuing officership in the military was right for her personally and right for her family. Thus, even within Mormonism's gendered framework which emphasizes nurturing duties for mothers and breadwinning leadership duties for fathers, she found space, through personal revelation, to do what she had to do to take her career in the direction she strongly felt it should go. This theological emphasis on personal revelation is a strong counterweight to institutional focuses that impose Western or American understandings onto these Saints. One of the most powerful moments in our oral history collection occurred when a teenage Mormon from a small village told her interviewer that she believes God has black skin like hers and that God speaks Setswana. Despite overwhelming institutional LDS artwork that depicts God as a European bearded male, her personal spiritual connection to God, so emphasized and prized within Mormonism, gave her room to envision a God who looks and speaks like her.<sup>143</sup>

Warona's determination to succeed both professionally and spiritually was mirrored by many other women I spoke with. Mormon Batswana women as a whole were strivers, eager to

---

<sup>143</sup> Anonymous, interview by Heather Sundahl, June 7, 2015, interview 59, p. 5, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

succeed professionally and personally. Part of this may be due to the fact that Mormonism is primarily accessible to Batswana who have some degree of education, since church leaders have determined that meetings be conducted only in English. Thus, Batswana who live more rurally and more traditionally, without education in English, are not able to participate in the church easily. Upward social mobility was therefore a theme in many of my interviews, as women either developed through their church membership greater English fluency, discipline, and leadership skills, or as women who were already drawn to these traits were attracted to Mormonism.

Meldrad, for example, said that when she first joined the church, “my English was very poor.” However, as she began to give talks, teach lessons and work in various leadership capacities, “I started to see myself being able to speak. My tongue was very loose now to speak.”<sup>144</sup>

Confidence and skills she gained through her Mormon church service translated to confidence and skills in her work. She described her coworkers’ respect and reliance on her at work, as they now prefer to “wait for her to come and decide” when difficulties arise.<sup>145</sup> Given that many of her friends and family members gave her a hard time for her decision to join a “white people” church, she feels proud and joyful that this decision has given her skills to succeed professionally and a close sense of connection with a God who loves for her and cares for her.

For many of these women, emphases on striving, development, and progression not only enhanced their work lives, but also enhanced their communities and relationships. Some Mormon women had outward orientations, as they worked to help their communities in various capacities. Naomi, for example, has led workshops for parents of children with HIV, and Mary became an adult educator, believing strongly that the women in her village needed to become empowered through education. Mary, in fact, dreams of running “a woman’s empowerment

---

<sup>144</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #27 (2015), 9.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

center,” in which women share their traditional knowledge about plants and trees with one another and “entrepreneur it [this knowledge] into a sustainable project.”<sup>146</sup> Mary sees church teachings as liberating for women: “The church has taught me that women don’t have to be oppressed. And I’ve taught myself too, that I don’t have to be oppressed. The exciting thing about being a Mormon woman, is that you are able to express yourself.”<sup>147</sup> Rather than being shut down by church systems that privilege male leadership, Mary has experienced Mormon teachings and systems as empowering. This sense of liberation has translated into her dream and passion for teaching and empowering other women in her community. This devout Mormon exhibits a woman-centered orientation and perspective that might surprise secular feminists. Paradoxical as it may sound, Mormonism, with its gendered theology and America-based organization, has given Mary space and inclination to devote herself to women’s opportunities and uplift in the greater community. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has commented that women can often create powerful and far-seeing projects and institutions when they have separate female-led and female-focused spaces.<sup>148</sup> While contemporary Relief Society has maintained a female-focused space, it has lost much of its financial, directive, and curricular autonomy to male-led priesthood direction in the twentieth century.<sup>149</sup> It therefore makes sense that Mary has found in Relief Society’s female-focused space the inspiration, energy, and desire to work and advocate for women in her community, but that this effort is taking place outside of church-sponsored forums.

---

<sup>146</sup> Anonymous, interview by Caroline Kline June 1, 2015, interview 24, p. 8, transcript, Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>148</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Stirring Up LDS History,” Lecture sponsored by Sunstone and Friends of the Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, December 11, 2011, <https://stream.lib.utah.edu/index.php?c=details&id=8263>.

<sup>149</sup> Marie Cornwall, “The Institutional Role of Mormon Women,” in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, eds. Marie Cornwall et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 250.

While so many of the Mormon women in Botswana have found in Mormonism an empowering sense of personal connection to God and the Spirit, and a community with which to commune and minister, these women do constantly engage in a complex navigation of their Mormon identities and their cultural identities. As black Africans who are familiar with the injustice of colonialism and white Europeans asserting their will over them, these women are wary of Western cultural elements intermingling with church teachings. As one Motswana Mormon said in her interview, “I look at how people want to change themselves and become little Americans [in the church]. It pains me.... I don’t want to lose my identity because of the Church. I need to be seen as a Latter-day Saint of Botswana.”<sup>150</sup> When confronted with church teachings that are in tension with certain cultural understanding or ways of being – such as the issue of lobola or adoption -- many of these women often actively work to find ways to honor both their home cultures and church teachings. They also are willing to reject certain elements of their home cultures—such as less unified and affectionate marriages—in favor of Western conceptions when they feel those Western conceptions are healthier and more beneficial. As such, these women are far from passive pawns, hoodwinked by either traditional culture or Western authoritarian religion. Rather they are deliberate thinkers and actors, carefully weighing out where their loyalties lie and finding creative ways to combine those loyalties.

While LDS Botswana women at times choose to either modify or reject what they consider to be Western cultural practices or understandings within the church, it is clear that their modification and rejection take place predominantly on a personal rather than institutional level. As women primarily outside decision-making structures above the congregational level, these women have little opportunity to shape more culturally sensitive approaches and injunctions

---

<sup>150</sup> Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #22 (2015), 3.

within the Mormon church structure. They may choose to react to church teachings and injunctions in a variety of ways, from full acceptance to outright rejection, but reality of a priesthood-led church structure places most policy and doctrinal shaping in the hands of men. Much like wives who, as temple covenants indicate, have the space to determine whether or not they ought to hearken to the words of their husbands, Mormon women have the space to determine whether or not or how much to accede to the instructions of their church leaders. But the ability to set agendas remains firmly in the hands of men, particularly above the congregational level. Thus, structural constraints that privilege men on the local level and white Western men on the institutional level cannot be ignored. In their Mormon marriages, however, despite the theoretical agenda-setting power of husbands, Batswana women are finding resources within church teachings to establish more egalitarian marital relationships. The overwhelming modern emphasis from church leaders on cooperation, affection, joint decision making, and unity within marriage create a counter-narrative to patriarchal marriage notions, a counter-narrative that many women and men are using to create stronger and more unified partnerships.

The creation of non-oppressive and vitalizing relationships in marriage, motherhood, friendships, town, and church, as well as with the divine, is an undergirding theme in these Batswana women's oral histories. As these women engage in complicated navigations of various loyalties, moral authorities, and worldviews, their agentive choices often lead to the formation or maintenance of relational bonds. Senses of responsibility and concern for others in family and community center these women's moral lives, and when Mormon church practices or policies enhance those bonds, the women work to embrace them. Ultimately, these women have found in Mormonism, with its patriarchal and Western-based worldviews, a framework which often helpfully supports their spiritual, social and personal desires. Sometimes alterations, nuances,

and resistance play a part in their interactions with that framework, but for those women who are able to maintain their activity, they develop expansive senses of their own spiritual abilities and social connection within and without their Mormon communities. In the face of societal change over the last few decades, change which has weakened traditional practices and relational bonds, Mormon communities in Botswana function as new villages, giving Batswana women connections, frameworks, purpose, and rootedness in a rapidly shifting society

**Chapter Four**  
**Resisting Oppression, Embracing Complexity:**  
**Mormon Women of Color in the U.S Navigating Race and Gender**

The blond woman said, “I’m sorry, but I am not a racist. I have black friends. And all you women of color are just making yourselves victims by focusing on the ways you’re being oppressed!”

It was the summer of 2015, and I along with a few dozen other Mormon feminists had gathered in the mountains of Utah to discuss the issue of race in the church. White Mormon feminists had over the previous years started to grapple with issues of feminist intersectionality, the idea that gender is only one of many oppressions which are inextricably linked in the lives of women of color. These white Mormon feminists had begun to reach out and create bonds of trust with Mormon feminists of color, inviting them to write in blogs and publications about issues of race and class in their lives. This meeting in the mountains, while dominated numerically by white feminists, included eight or nine women of color. We had just begun the conversation and were going over concepts of white privilege and racism as a system of oppression from which white people benefit. The moderators had asked about white people’s unconscious privilege and how we could set out to be better allies to women of color.

The blond woman’s words made my breath catch in my chest. Dread filled me as I heard her defensive words. One moderator, a woman of Pasifika heritage, spoke personally about how this blond woman’s words made her feel like her experiences and perspectives were not being heard. Yet the blond woman cut her off again and again, insisting that the whole premise of this conversation was flawed and that she herself was colorblind. Eventually an older black woman demanded that the blond woman stop talking and listen, to no avail. What proceeded next was

one of the most uncomfortable hours of my life as this woman aggressively refused to listen to the women of color's perspectives.

In an extreme form, this incident reflects a common experience for women of color in the U.S.—the sense not being heard by the privileged white majority. These feelings of invisibility take on an increased resonance for some American Mormon women of color, particularly those who are sensitive to questions of structural power and privilege. These Mormon women observe not only women's exclusion from sites and circles of institutional Mormon power, but they also see exclusion from those same seats of power because of race. They confront the reality of a double exclusion and disappearance within their faith communities, as Mormonism's highest positions of power, that of Prophets, Seers, and Revelators, remain overwhelmingly in the hands of white men.<sup>1</sup> But this concern about invisibility goes beyond the current institutional hierarchies of Mormonism. They extend into theological and cultural realms. As Janan Graham-Russell recounted, seeing LDS depictions of Jesus surrounded by hordes of all white angels made her, a woman of African descent, feel invisible. "This is how my fellow saints see the eternities," Graham-Russell said. "I felt that my brothers and sisters didn't see me—not only on a cultural level but on a theological level."<sup>2</sup>

Black Mormon women like Janan Graham-Russell also confront the troubling history of the LDS church with respect to race. While Mormon founder Joseph Smith did ordain a handful

---

<sup>1</sup> On March 31, 2018, an Asian American man and a Brazilian man became two of the Twelve Apostles, thereby adding some racial and ethnic diversity that the body had previously been lacking. At the time of my interviews (2015-2017) with Mormon women of color, these most powerful positions were held only by white men.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Feeling Excluded, Black Mormon Women Ask: 'Do They See Me?'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 9, 2015, <http://www.sltrib.com/home/3048039-155/feeling-excluded-black-mormon-women-ask>. Graham-Russell discusses the invisibility of Mormon black women—as well as their hypervisibility given rampant stereotypes of black women as Mammys and Jezebels—and how these two forces combine to silence black Mormon women. Janan Graham-Russell, "On Black Bodies in White Spaces: Conversations of Women's Ordination and Women of African Descent in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, eds. Joanna Brooks et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 268 – 270.

of black men to the LDS priesthood before his death in 1844, his successor Brigham Young in 1852 initiated a practice of denying both ordination to black men and access to crucial temple rites to black women and men.<sup>3</sup> This policy remained in place until 1978, when what is commonly referred to as the “priesthood ban” was lifted. During that 126-year span, however, disturbing rationalizations for the ban made their way into Mormon discourse and writings.<sup>4</sup> These rationalizations often posited that black people had been cursed as the “seed of Cain,” or that they were less valiant in their pre-earth life.<sup>5</sup> While black Mormon men gained access to the priesthood in 1978, the LDS church has only recently and with little fanfare repudiated the teachings on the church’s official webpage, and it has never apologized for them.<sup>6</sup> Thus black members even today might be confronted with these troubling justifications for the ban, which live on in old but popular Mormon-authored books and in the minds of some church members.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written on blacks and the Mormon priesthood, the vast majority focusing on the priesthood ban for black men. What some American black Mormon women today

---

<sup>3</sup> See Lester Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring, 1973): 11-68. Max Perry Mueller discusses the effect of this practice on Mormonism’s most famous nineteenth-century black female convert, Jane Manning James, who sought but was denied access to the temple endowment. Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 119-152. W. Paul Reeve discusses Joseph Smith’s and other early church leaders’ thoughts and actions towards people of African descent, finding that distaste for miscegenation was an important driver of Brigham Young’s ultimate decision to exclude black men from ordination and black women and men from certain temple ceremonies. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 106-139.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* See also Armand Mauss’s chapter, “The Curse of African Lineage in Mormon History,” in Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*.

<sup>5</sup> Newell Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 171. Bringhurst writes that in the early twentieth century Joseph Fielding Smith “further developed and gave prominent publicity to the preexistence hypothesis, that is, the concept that the black man’s inability to hold the priesthood was a consequence of his behavior during a premortal existence.” Bringhurst notes that Joseph Fielding Smith in *The Way to Perfection* said that blacks “did not stand valiantly” and “sympathized with Lucifer” in the premortal war between God and Satan. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City, 1931) 43-44, 97-111.

<sup>6</sup> “Race and the Priesthood,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine, 2nd Edition* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1966), 527-528.

emphasize, however, is that this ban denied black women temple blessings and thus cut them, as well as black men, off from exaltation in Mormonism's highest heavenly realm. One writer suggests that constant references to the "priesthood ban" make invisible the suffering of black women under this policy. She suggests renaming it to "the priesthood-temple ban" or the "exaltation exclusion" in order to reflect the breadth of exclusion fostered by this policy.<sup>8</sup>

While black American Mormon women have a particularly heavy burden to carry, other women of color in America, including those of indigenous American descent, sometimes also feel the weight of American Mormon history as well, which saw nineteenth-century white Mormon expansion into Native American territories. Interestingly, Mormonism did offer those of American indigenous descent a place in Mormonism's cosmology, as a branch of the house of Jacob known as the Lamanites, whose skins were turned dark in their unrighteousness.<sup>9</sup> In earlier decades and centuries, Mormons tended to believe that all people of American indigenous descent sprang from this branch of Jacob, and many Native American, Mexican, and other Central and South American Mormons embraced the promises given to the Lamanites in the Doctrine & Covenants, namely that they would ultimately "blossom as the rose."<sup>10</sup> The Book of Mormon also gave them stories of noble ancient Lamanites to hold up as exemplars. Mormonism's theological perspective on indigenous Americans therefore has both empowering and disempowering aspects.

This mixed history regarding Mormonism and race is reflected in the mixed experiences of people of color in American Mormon congregations. For those non-white people who attend predominantly white wards, questions of power and privilege might arise if people of color are

---

<sup>8</sup> Kiskilili, "Renaming the 'Priesthood Ban,'" *Zelophehad's Daughters (blog)*, June 8, 2008, <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2008/06/08/renaming-the-priesthood-ban/>.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Nephi 5:21 in the Book of Mormon.

<sup>10</sup> D&C 49:24. Other groups, such as Polynesians, have also claimed a Lamanite identity. Aikau, *A Chosen People*, 1.

not fully embraced and incorporated into ward leadership and fellowship. For those non-white people who attend American language/ethnic wards, however, these members often find space to combine ethnic pride and Mormon beliefs, as they see people of color take leadership positions and find spaces to foster and perpetuate their native languages and some cultural elements.<sup>11</sup>

Mormons of color may find elements in Mormonism's mixed history and theology that are troubling, but they also find theological and elements which empower. The Book of Mormon asserts that "all are alike unto God," and Mormon scripture holds up as ideal a Zion community, characterized by unity and righteousness with "no poor among them."<sup>12</sup> However, for some of these Mormon women of color in the U.S., questions about all being alike unto God present themselves when they see that the most revered and powerful general leaders are white males. Separated by gender as well as by race, these women sometimes wonder if they have a valued and honored place in the white-dominated church. Despite these questions, many Mormon women of color persist in their church activity, finding certain social and theological elements of the church so compelling or transformative that they downplay questions of race and gender.

This chapter explores the intellectual and spiritual navigation that LDS women of color in the U.S. perform as they find ways and reasons to embrace this historically white Mormon tradition as their own.<sup>13</sup> It also explores how Mormon teachings, particularly those focusing on gender and race, impact Mormon women of color in America. As many intersectional feminist scholars have pointed out, policies and emphases that affect middle or upper class white women in one way might very well have different impacts on women of color, who often must navigate

---

<sup>11</sup> See Aikau, *A Chosen People*, 185-186.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Nephi 26: 33 and Moses 7:18. One American woman of color I interviewed named the Mormon concept of Zion as the most compelling and inspiring idea in Mormonism.

<sup>13</sup> This chapter focuses on the lives and thoughts of women in the U.S., as opposed to American women. A significant minority of the women I interviewed in the U.S. have lived in the U.S. for years but are citizens of other countries.

racial and class oppressions, as well as those relating to gender.<sup>14</sup> Patricia Hill Collins describes the interlocking nature of oppression, noting that “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”<sup>15</sup> This chapter considers the intersecting forms of oppression that Mormon women of color in America have faced, and how the LDS church helps or hinders Mormon women navigating lives without white or class privilege.

Using the twenty-one oral life histories conducted in the U.S. as well as other published narratives of Mormon women of color, I argue that a dominant moral priority of Mormon women of color is the elimination of oppression, rather than the creation of sameness gender equality—though gender equality is also a concern for some women, particularly those who identify as feminists. Many Mormon women of color in the U.S. have found in the LDS church spiritual, theological, and social resources to resist oppression, while others have found that the church has at times contributed to oppressive rhetoric, ideology and practices. As these women discuss race, class, and gender, they describe the ways in which church rhetoric and policies affect them differently than their white brothers and sisters, thus underscoring the issue of white and class privilege that inevitably undergirds some LDS discourse. A key coping mechanism for many of these Mormon women of color who recognize problematic issues within Mormonism is to reject black and white thinking, embrace ambivalence, and affirm the humanity and fallibility of Mormonism’s leaders who are, they believe, on a journey towards greater understanding and love. Another key coping mechanism for ambivalent Mormon women of color is to prioritize their own spirituality and divine connectedness, which may at times lead them away from typical LDS understandings or practices. For them, the Mormon concept of personal revelation is

---

<sup>14</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.

paramount, and they privilege their own spiritual connections and understandings. Ultimately, a sense of resilience permeates many of these women's stories, as they embrace the good of the church, reject or downplay the negative, and creatively navigate the various tensions and loyalties that characterize their lives.

### *Privileging Freedom from Oppression Over Sameness-Equality*

On a cold December evening in New England, I stopped by Samantha's apartment to interview her. She had been attending the same small ward I attended during my five-month stay on the East Coast. Her apartment was tidy but happily chaotic as her two-year-old ran around, sometimes with no diaper on, and her husband wrangled the boy to finish up his dinner while also juggling their newborn daughter. Samantha and her husband Thomas had been in the U.S for several years for her husband's graduate degree, but they were originally from Cape Town, South Africa. Samantha is what is known as Cape Coloured, a person of mixed African, white, and Asian descent. She had grown up in the LDS church because of her mother's conversion when Samantha was a small child. Thomas was a white adult convert who eventually, after years of investigating and dating Samantha, joined the church before their marriage.

A dominant theme in Samantha's oral history was her experience of and concern with oppressive societal structures – no surprise given South Africa's brutal past as an Apartheid government. This was a theme she returned to repeatedly in her oral history. As she discussed her parents living in Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa, she noted the societal inequities that kept her parents poor: "They worked very hard their whole lives but they will always be poor because they were born at a distinct disadvantage. No amount of hard work will ever make up for those huge disparities and structural inequalities."<sup>16</sup> For her mother, joining the church in

---

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 2, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

the 1980s was an act of self-determination. She had felt that other churches were not a good match for her, but hearing the discussions from the LDS missionaries gave her a sense of peace and authenticity that she has not experienced for a long time. That the missionaries were both white was not a problem for her mother, particularly since the tiny branch itself was filled with Coloured people. The family's move to an area where the local ward included white people brought more challenges. Though most white Mormons were kind, the family could sense the preference for white people, and tellingly, the ward leadership was almost always white.<sup>17</sup> This dynamic led at times to situations in which the congregants felt misunderstood, not appreciated, or not heard by the white leadership, when black or Coloured people would talk to the bishop about some issue they were struggling with. Samantha mentioned that her mother's choice to embrace the Mormon gospel was not always easy and that sometimes, racial tension prompted her mother to not take her daughters to church. She said, "There were periods where she didn't take us. I can see now that racial tension was definitely one of the issues, especially when we moved from the Coloured ward into the mixed ward."<sup>18</sup> Samantha has lived most of her life in a context of racial prejudice, both within and outside of the church, and she freely acknowledged the negative effects it has had on her and other black or Coloured people. She placed great hope in the younger generation which is calling out racism when they see it: "I'm so thrilled by the 30 years and youngers who are ... calling it [racism] for what it is. They are seeing it and they are acknowledging it. They are saying this happened. This is a real thing. Let's stop not talking about it. This is very encouraging. We are moving in the right direction."<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

Samantha's dedication to her Mormon faith and to her desire for less oppression in the world did not produce much tension for her. She found Mormonism "quite liberal, compared to other Christian faiths. And other faiths in general too."<sup>20</sup> She located this liberality in much of the way gender is approached in the Mormon church. She explained, "In Mormonism, generally speaking, men and women have the same dress standards, the same modesty standards, same chastity standards. So I like that. That's kind of liberating."<sup>21</sup> She spoke out of personal experience—she spent months dating a Hari Krishna who wore sweat pants and sneakers to their religious meetings while she accompanied him wearing saris and jewels, in accordance to dress expectations for women.

But more than anything, Samantha found Mormonism's focus on a strong nuclear family hopeful, liberating, and likely to lead to a less oppressive situation for women. Coming from a context of poverty and systemic racism in which state policies affected the ability of people of color to form stable families, Samantha saw how male abdication and unwed teenage pregnancies mar both the lives of mothers and the lives of children:<sup>22</sup>

Growing up I've seen many single-parent families. Within my own extended family, I've seen people having babies when they are teenagers, not getting married, not staying married. I've just seen so many discarded children. I've seen so many children without a place. I've seen so many women so overwhelmed by their responsibilities of having to do family life all by themselves. So many. Especially in my extended family. These children often they get raised by granny, and mom drops out of school more times than not....

These moms are stuck because they need to stay near their own mothers to help raise the children. So they end up just never being able to go and find their own way, their own path. I feel like there's freedom in marriage relationships in that you when you have the burden to share it, it frees each other up to do more than just the children. I see the wisdom in that. I know it's not always possible. We're talking about an ideal here. I know it's not always possible. And I know in some cases it's not always the best choice to be married just for the sake of marriage. But I do see the wisdom and the freedom that

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Rabie, P. J. "Family Structure and Support Systems in Coloured Communities." *Marriage and Family Life in South Africa: Research Priorities* (1987): 88-110. Cited in <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1615/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Colored-Families.html>.

having that permanent shared responsibility gives to both the parents. I see the wisdom in children having a strong sense of roots and knowing who they belong to.<sup>23</sup>

Samantha was keenly aware of the suffering that often arises when parents abdicate responsibilities. Both her own parents were discarded children who suffered from not having invested parents looking out for their children's wellbeing.

Samantha's words about women finding freedom in stable marriages are striking and reflect the point that so many intersectional and third world feminists make—that oppression and liberation are experienced differently by women based on their particular positionality and experiences. Samantha's sense of liberation in her strong marriage is born from her specific context in which she saw women trapped when they did not have a helpful male partner dedicated to raising children. Her sense of liberation in her steady marriage mirrors the experiences of women in other contexts where poverty and male abdication are common. Columbian women whose husbands converted to charismatic evangelicalism, for example, reported a distinct increase in their quality of life, as men became far more invested in the welfare of the family.<sup>24</sup> In Samantha's experience, Mormon emphases on strong, involved, loving husbands and fathers lead to more freedom and possibility for women. This stay-at-home mom might now be inundated in diapers and caretaking, but she knows the day will come when her children will be in school and she can pursue her own professional dreams to be a choral conductor. As she said above, a good marriage in which two people are dedicated to the wellbeing of the children gives mothers the opportunity to dream big and pursue personal goals for themselves. She is determined to restart her musical career, and she has utter confidence that her husband will support her in that goal: "I know that when this [raising small children] is done he

---

<sup>23</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 123.

will fully support me doing whatever I need to do, whatever that is, whatever that might look like. So it's okay. There will be an end.”<sup>25</sup> Single parenthood, on the other hand, is in her experience an oppressive situation, which stifles women’s dreams and opportunities.

Critiquing oppression and finding liberation—even in institutions like marriage that are not sometimes viewed as liberating—is an overriding theme in Samantha’s oral history. She has worked to ensure that her marriage is non-oppressive, even as she embraces the theoretical LDS positioning of husband as presider over wife and children. For her, this presiding position of the husband has nothing to do with ultimate decision making; rather, it has to do with ultimate responsibility before God:

I don't find the man presiding as a threat to me. It doesn't threaten my authority in the home. It does not mean he has ultimate decision-making power in our marriage. I have heard him say that he doesn't have the ultimate say in everything. But he feels like he's going to have to answer for things in a different way than I will have to. He feels like his stewardship is slightly different, that the way he's going to be held responsible for us is different than the way I will be held responsible for us.... I can see that.<sup>26</sup>

Samantha explained that she felt that her husband’s presiding responsibility entailed him needing to ensure her personal happiness, as well as that of her children, while her main stewardship was the children’s wellbeing. In that way, Samantha interprets her Mormon marriage with a male presider as egalitarian in practice, with the presiding portion a primarily theoretical idea of greater responsibility before God for the entire family’s success.

Samantha does not love traditional LDS gender roles, but she understands that they, as set forth in the Proclamation on the Family, “are most likely to bring the most benefit to society.”<sup>27</sup> And she has found a certain amount of flexibility in these Mormon gender roles. She believes that Mormon gender roles do not (or should not) constrain or limit women’s abilities and

---

<sup>25</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

potential. She said, “Fathers providing for the physical needs of the family first and foremost and spiritual leadership, that does not feel like an absolute to me, not even slightly. Nope. My mother was a spiritual leader in my home growing up, so I have grown up with an example of a spiritual leader being the woman in the home.”<sup>28</sup> Mormon gender roles position men as providers and spiritual leaders, but Samantha sees flexibility built into that system, and she also sees men as being highly capable nurturers, saying that nurturing is not “exclusively a woman thing. Not even remotely.”<sup>29</sup>

There’s something of an ambivalence apparent in her discussion of gender roles—a certainty that the husband’s presiding does not infringe upon her, but also a clear desire for flexibility in how those roles are carried out. But one clear takeaway in her entire discussion is her commitment to critiquing oppression, while at the same time believing that liberation can be present in situations in which men and women do not have the exact same roles and opportunities.

This particular moral orientation—the focus on freedom from oppression over the focus on sameness gender equality—is echoed by Claire, an American woman of African and European descent. I met Claire also during my stay on the East Coast. Claire, a bubbly stay-at-home mom of four young kids, was in her thirties. She grew up in Southern California in a troubled family. Her Mormon Samoan step-father, who introduced her and her mom to the church when she was very young, was physically abusive at times. He also prevented her from acknowledging her own African American heritage, insisting that she present herself as Samoan. She said, “I was told my whole life to be Samoan, act Samoan, and tell everybody I was Samoan.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14.

And I was never allowed to be who I was.”<sup>30</sup> It was a rocky childhood, but she now sees the good in this man who at twenty-two married a woman with three kids. As she said, “He has this huge heart, a huge willingness to love, but the reality of it was he was twenty-two and he married a whole family. His parents were very physical and their parents were very physical and there were nine siblings in his family. Of them he was the least physical, the kindest, and the gentlest.”<sup>31</sup> “Physical” is Claire’s euphemism for physically violent.

Coming as she did from a difficult situation which was oppressive both in its violence but also in its insistence that she bury her African American heritage and assume a Samoan one, Claire has found happiness and a sense of liberation in her Mormon marriage to a nice reliable man. She said, “It’s been a phenomenal marriage. Every dream came true. He is old Mormon stock. He is really unexciting to the outside person, but he has this huge wonderful heart. People didn’t understand how I could marry such a boring guy. But he is everything I never had—stable, peaceful, loving, supportive, kind. He’s just an incredible friend and partner.”<sup>32</sup> In her traditional marriage in which she has assumed the caretaking role and he the provider role, she feels respected, appreciated, and nurtured by her husband, who “does everything I do at home. Laundry, dishes, etc. He respects the lifestyle I lead at home. There’s nothing that is above him. There’s nothing that he doesn’t encourage me in. I’m part of a gourmet cooking group; he encourages me to get out. I do yoga at night. He sends me out the door. He’s totally supportive and helpful with the kids.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, unarchived oral life history interview by Caroline Kline, November 13, 2016, interview 1C, transcript, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Given her very happy marriage, Claire has no problem with male leadership roles in family and church as laid out by the Mormon church, so long as they are carried out with love and benevolence. She likewise has no problem with the idea that women should be the primary nurturers. For her, this arrangement has given their family peace and balance. The desire for women's equality—as defined by men and women having the same breadwinning and ecclesiastical roles—does not resonate with her. She said, “I know some people really have issues that women aren't the bishops or aren't the stake presidents or aren't the financial clerks or whatever. I think they are fully capable of all those things. I think, just like the scriptures we have, it's a patriarchal society.”<sup>34</sup> Claire accepts this fact and stated that she is more interested in balance than equality. “I don't think we need to do everything they do to feel—I surely don't, maybe some people do—to feel appreciated and fulfilled and sustained. I think that we do have different roles. I think we do have different strengths and talents and I think we enjoy doing different things.... So I think it's not so much equalness as balance that's important to me. And uplifting each other.”<sup>35</sup> Within Claire's gender complementarian framework—which privileges men with types of leadership that are unavailable to women—is ample space for her, like Samantha, to reject oppression and violence. She rejects a world in which people put down other people because of their identities, race or gender. As she said at the end of her interview, intolerance or verbally “bashing” others is totally unacceptable. She has profound respect for two gay men who stepped in and took care of her sister's kids when her sister was going through a rough time in her life. Claire explained, “Her two best friends who are gay took care of her kids for six months. In my eyes they are more kind and loving and they have incredibly good nonjudgmental Christ-like souls, and I don't understand why people need to gay bash or race

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

bash or any bash.... People are allowed to have their own ideas and feelings and own lives and are allowed to be who they want to be. That's why we're here. We're here to choose our own path.”<sup>36</sup> Tolerance, the importance of authenticity, and a rejection of abuse or oppression center her oral history—alongside her belief that true partnership and power sharing can exist in complementarian marriage, without embracing sameness-equality.

The complexity of Claire’s positioning on gender roles is evident when she discussed her dreams for her own future. She envisions someday working with an empowerment organization for girls. She had recently discovered the Girls Rule Foundation and loved their vision and activities: “They teach them about a lot of important women in history and what they did. They teach them self-affirmation, how to build yourself up when people are putting you down, how to own who you are and how to embrace it. They have an entrepreneur class as well—how to make a plan and follow it through. It sounds really awesome.”<sup>37</sup> Claire may embrace gender traditional Mormon roles in home and church, but her allegiance to those roles and that ideology has not prevented her from embracing feminist-friendly organizations that uplift, empower, mentor and encourage girls to become leaders in the community. Claire’s enthusiasm for this organization is undergirded by her commitment to reject oppressive situations and work against them. Organizations like this, ones which lift up and mentor vulnerable teen girls, align with her convictions. Notably, Claire, who is clearly aware of issues of oppression and abuse in family and society, does not experience Mormonism’s gendered practices as oppressive. Rather than focusing on issues of power and equal opportunities for women in the church, she emphasizes the way the church has helped her to build uplifting and cooperative relationships. Like other women I spoke with in Mexico and Botswana, Claire’s moral priority is to foster non-oppressive

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 4.

connectedness. In her loving and supportive marriage, she has experienced a freedom, happiness, and stability that she had never known before.

Beth, a woman I also met in my East Coast ward, likewise emphasized her concern with and experience of oppression. Beth was a black woman in her sixties, and she was seen by many as a well-loved matriarch in the ward. I interviewed her one Sunday after church, and we sequestered ourselves away in the Family History room of the ward building, while her adopted teenage children hung out and played in the hallway. Beth came to the U.S in 1990 from the Caribbean, where she experienced a devastatingly abusive marriage. Her husband, she said in her thick accent, “used to beat me up. Once he punched me in my stomach. I was pregnant and I lost the baby.”<sup>38</sup> The abuse became so awful that at one point, she said, “This thought came to my head: feed him rat poison. And when that came into my thoughts, that's when I realized I needed to get down on my knees and pray. I wasn't going to let him kill me. I was going to kill him first.”<sup>39</sup> She did not use the rat poison, but on the next day she did determine once and for all to escape the marriage. She explained, “I was sitting on the couch and he just called my name. You know when you are afraid of someone? He called my name and I was sitting on the couch, and I jumped so hard that the baby went up in the air so I had to catch the baby. With that I turned around and put the baby on the couch, and then I kneeled down and prayed. I just prayed and prayed. When I got up I knew I had to leave because this calm came over me and the Spirit said, “You have to go.” So I started packing up things, things he wouldn't notice.”<sup>40</sup> Beth soon ran away from her husband. She then moved to the United States to become a domestic worker for a wealthy family.

---

<sup>38</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #152 (2016), 3-4, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 4.

Beth found the LDS church in the early 2002. It was not an easy conversion since she had been raised in various other Christian faiths on the islands and had a difficult time believing everything that was being taught to her about Joseph Smith. Yet a dream convinced her that she needed to get baptized, despite some of her reservations. What she appreciates most about the church, she said, is “how simple it is. You can tell the leaders love Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father so much. But they are not loud about it. They are not boastful about it. It’s just the way they carry themselves and the ways they speak. If you listen to General Conference, they are so humble. So much humility. For example, Brother Eyring. Since I joined the church, I don’t think he has spoken once without crying.”<sup>41</sup> One of her primary attractions to the church, in addition to the peace and Spirit she felt inside the church building, was the demeanor of its male leaders, whom she saw as gentle, humble, and loving. Given her experience with her domineering and violent husband, these Mormon men struck her as the opposite of oppressive and cruel—in touch with their feelings, concerned about kindness, and Christ-centered in their testimonies. Like Claire above, freedom from oppression and violence, as well as the freedom to be herself, are dominant moral concerns: “I always say that you have to be yourself. I don’t want to change who God made me. I want to be exactly what He made me.”<sup>42</sup> In her ward, dominated at the leadership level by white men, she feels she has found space to embrace her authentic self and to feel God’s love. Gender roles and even issues of race are not factors that concern her. As she said when asked about being black in the church, “You don’t come to serve the church. You come to serve Jesus Christ.”<sup>43</sup> For Beth, power structures and hierarchies within that church are secondary to developing that connection with Jesus.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 9.

Beth, Claire, and Samantha’s focus on rejecting various forms of oppression in homes and societies—rather than only fixating on sameness gender equality—is a priority which womanist scholars have long promoted. In 1983, Alice Walker coined the term “womanist” to describe a black feminist or feminist of color.<sup>44</sup> Rather than embracing the term black feminist, womanists like Walker wanted their own term which would allow them to self-define and articulate goals and visions particular to women of color’s experiences and priorities. A key element of womanism is its commitment “to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female.”<sup>45</sup> This concern for both men and women in communities of color, particularly black communities, and the concurrent desire to oppose “all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical ability, and caste” necessarily involves focusing not just on gender inequities but on the varieties of oppressions that characterize the lives of various women of color.<sup>46</sup> This sweeping focus on various oppressions and the desire to resist oppression are likewise echoed in ethicist Katie Cannon’s description of her own womanist writings, which are “a call for action wherein the individual social-self as well as the larger collective community can break out of brutal cycles of misery and violence.”<sup>47</sup>

Breaking out of cycles of misery and violence is a theme within the oral histories I conducted with women of color in America, and it is also a theme in the writings and speeches of American Mormon women of color who have spoken publicly about their primary moral concerns. Catherine Stokes, a black woman who joined the church in 1979 in Chicago, believes that racial violence is a more critical issue than gender exclusion. In her opinion, racial violence must stop in order for women and men to rise together as a community. Journalist Peggy

---

<sup>44</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Mariner Books, 2003), xii.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xiv.

<sup>47</sup> Katie Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 24.

Fletcher Stack quoted Catherine Stokes in her article about Mormon women of color's thoughts about racism and sexism: "The war on young black men is 'documented by dead bodies,' Stokes says. 'And if black men are not free, then we—men and women—are not free.'"<sup>48</sup> Stokes went on to say that comparisons between the way LDS women are treated in the church and the way black people were treated—"lynching, the rape of the black women from the time they got off slave ships, burning crosses, the death of [those] who were struggling for the rights of black people" is "deeply hurtful." As Stack concludes, "racism is a greater priority" for black Mormons like Stokes.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, white feminists who compare their experience of marginalization and inequality in the LDS church with the experiences of black people deeply, according to Stokes, miss the mark.<sup>50</sup> For Stokes, as for many of the women I interviewed, issues of oppression and violence take primacy over gender role constraints.

In my interviews, Mormon women of color often described mixed feelings about working for gender equality within the Mormon church. The issue of oppression and violence tended to be more pressing for them, though the small handful of feminists I interviewed were committed to gender equity alongside the elimination of other oppressions. Women like Claire and Beth worked to eliminate and escape from oppression, but the scope of that gaze tended to be on the personal relationship level, not societal. They felt Mormonism, with its gendered teachings and policies, gives them tools on the personal level to reject oppression and expect/require non-oppressive interactions with men in their lives. Samantha also appreciated these tools within

---

<sup>48</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, "For Many Black Mormons, Racism is a Bigger Issue than Sexism," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 4, 2014, accessed June 21, 2017, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/58361569-78/women-says-black-church.html.csp>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Janan Graham-Russell supports this point, writing that within a church context, white women have had access to temple and therefore priesthood for far longer than black women (and men). Thus, comparisons between the experiences of the two groups fall somewhat flat for her as well. Graham-Russell, "On Black Bodies in White Spaces," 269.

Mormonism to foster equal partnership with her husband, but she saw some larger structural issues in both society and church that lead to some oppressive interactions and situations. As Paulette Payne mentioned in her work on a community of black Mormon women in the South, Mormonism has appealing features for women of color.<sup>51</sup> It promotes an intense if non-enthusiastic religiosity, promotes strong families, and gives them their own women's space to enact that religiosity. However, as Payne points out, contemporary Mormon practice and rhetoric tend to not emphasize the larger issues of social justice and the elimination of structural oppression, a topic and moral focus which some black women missed.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, these women's stories and perspectives serve as important checks on white Mormon feminists who focus on gender equality to the detriment of more comprehensive analyses of oppression.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Privilege and Standpoint***

While many women of color in America spoke of the ways Mormonism gave them tools to reject oppression and helped them to foster healthy connections, some also spoke about the times Mormon discourse led to feelings of marginalization and alienation. Often, these moments centered around recognition that their realities were not acknowledged in the discourse of their fellow Mormons, and that embedded in that dominant discourse were privileged assumptions.

---

<sup>51</sup> Paulette Payne, "Hallelujah and Amen: the African-American Religious Aesthetic and Black Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia" (Master's thesis, Clark Atlanta University, 2009), 81-82.

<sup>52</sup> Paulette Payne, panel participant at the Black, White and Mormon Conference in Salt Lake City, October 9, 2015, <http://thc.utah.edu/lectures-programs/bwm-conference/raceandmormonwomen.php>. In this panel, Payne explicitly mentions the lack of attention to contemporary issues of social justice in Mormonism. It is important to point out, however, that within Mormonism there are religious narratives that promote social justice. As Grant Hardy writes, the Book of Mormon, like the Bible, features several passages about what constitutes a just society. Pride, costly apparel and inequality are repeated concerns of religious leaders in the Book of Mormon. Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon and Social Justice," *Meridian Magazine*, March 20, 2011, <https://ldsmag.com/article-1-7677/>.

<sup>53</sup> Maori womanist Gina Colvin calls attention to this danger of focusing on patriarchy and ignoring the other inequities present in the LDS church, such as those based on race, class, and Americentrism. Gina Colvin, "I'll Be at the Ordain Women Event, But ..." *KiwiMormon*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/kiwimormon/2014/04/ill-be-at-the-ordain-women-event-but/>.

Paying attention to these moments and stories is valuable, since they illuminate the particular vulnerabilities Mormon women of color face in homes, wards, and larger society, vulnerabilities that might not be immediately obvious to many white church members, leaders and feminists. Importantly, the stories and insights of women of color uncover the privilege—white and class—that sometimes underscores contemporary Mormon gender discourse. This section focuses on exploring some of the ways institutional Mormon rhetoric, particularly gender rhetoric, falls short for some women of color in America, as they navigate diverse racial and class landscapes.

According to Peggy McIntosh, white privilege is “the invisible package of unearned assets” of which white people are so often unaware.<sup>54</sup> These are unearned privileges extended to white people beyond what is extended to non-white people in similar political circumstances. These privileges include things such as expectations to see people of one’s own race represented in text books, not needing to coach children about systemic racism to protect their lives, and entrance into better schools. W.E.B. Dubois noted the phenomenon of white privilege in the early twentieth century calling whiteness “a sort of public and psychological wage” that accrued to white people.<sup>55</sup> This wage was a largely unrecognized (by white people) set of advantages they enjoyed because of their race, including expectations of courtesy, admittance to all public functions, and access to good schools.<sup>56</sup>

Other forms of privilege—including class, nondisabled, and heterosexual, among others—have also received attention over the last several decades. As sociologist Allen Johnson

---

<sup>54</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, Ninth Edition, edited by Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2015), 74.

<sup>55</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 700.

<sup>56</sup> Joe Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2008), 62. For an extended treatment of white privilege, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

writes, whatever its form, privilege “allows people to define reality and to have prevailing mainstream views fit their own experience. Privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who gets attention, who is accountable to whom and for what.”<sup>57</sup> Because privilege has often made people in power positions less aware of the realities of people in vulnerable positions, feminist standpoint theorists have pointed out the importance of listening to marginalized voices. Abigail Brooks writes, “Building knowledge from women’s [particularly marginalized women’s] actual, or concrete, life experience is acutely important... if we hope to repair the historical trend of women’s misrepresentation and exclusion from the dominant knowledge canons. And only by making women’s concrete, life experiences the primary source of our investigations can we succeed in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents women.”<sup>58</sup>

Speaking with Mormon women of color—and learning about the experiences they must navigate, coming as they do from diverse and often less advantaged contexts—does indeed highlight issues that are less likely to affect privileged Mormon women and men. As the following stories illustrate, their experiences, insights, and the way they have learned to navigate teachings and advice that do not represent their reality give a glimpse into some limitations of traditional Mormon discourse and teachings. They also point towards new ways of thinking about race and gender issues within Mormonism, ways which are expansive in their scope and often more resonant with the lived lives of women on the margins.

On one frigid day on the East Coast, I drove two hours north to meet Bianca, a woman to whom Claire had referred me. I waited in the church hallway as Bianca finished teaching her

---

<sup>57</sup> Allen G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2018), 31-32.

<sup>58</sup> Abigail Brooks, “Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women’s Lived Experience,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 56.

youth Sunday School class, and then went inside to introduce myself as she gathered her materials and erased the chalk boards. Bianca had long straight black hair, brown skin, and a bright pink professional dress with pumps. She was in her early thirties and spoke with what I originally thought was a Spanish accent, but it turned out to be Portuguese. We found a quiet corner outside, and I turned on my tape recorder, asking her to tell me about her background and life experiences.

Bianca was originally from Cape Verde, a country in Africa colonized by the Portuguese in the nineteenth century. She explained to me that she was ethnically a mix of all sorts of things. Her father was of Middle Eastern descent, and her mother was part Asian and Portuguese, among other things. Bianca came from a middle-class background, but her father had some business pursuits fail when she was a child. That financial crisis, along with the dissolution of her parents' marriage, prompted her father to bring her to the U.S. when she was fifteen years old. She thought she was going to the U.S. temporarily, but actually, her father had planned to leave her there permanently with his brother.

Living with an uncle and aunt who were not excited about having this teenager thrust upon them was difficult. From the moment her father left her in the U.S., she had to take care of herself: "I was on my own. Just so you have an idea, I went in and got myself enrolled in high school. No one enrolled me. I took the bus—good thing I learned English in Cape Verde.... [I] went in and said, 'I need to enroll in high school.' They gave me a paper, and I took it back to my uncle to sign. I got myself enrolled in high school. Then I had to get my vaccines. They told me to go to this clinic. I did everything alone."<sup>59</sup> Self-sufficiency and proactivity are the

---

<sup>59</sup> Anonymous, unarchived oral life history interview by Caroline Kline, November 13, 2016, interview 2C, transcript, 3.

hallmark traits of Bianca, who figured out how to navigate a new country without much help from her aunt or uncle.

One crucial resource for friends and mentors was the LDS church. She had joined the church as a twelve-year-old in Cape Verde, and the Portuguese branch was her main support system. She said, “So the Portuguese branch was essentially my life. They were my family basically.”<sup>60</sup> She needed their support when she graduated from high school with high grades, was offered several scholarships, and then realized that she could take none of them because she was undocumented. She had not realized that she was in the U.S. illegally. She said, “I was able to take none of them [scholarships] because when I was applying for college, I realized I had no documents. Now I'm not undocumented, but back then I was. I was like, ‘What do you mean?’ They said, ‘You need a social security number and green card.’ I had no idea what that meant. It was devastating for me.”<sup>61</sup>

Bianca eventually obtained documents when she married her husband, also originally from Cape Verde. But it has been a struggle to survive and thrive in the U.S., separated as they are from the support of family. Bianca has fought and worked continually to find ways to achieve a college education so that she could find a job to help support her family. Because she did not have parental financial support when she graduated from high school and because her husband works for the government and does not make a lucrative salary, Bianca has always worked: “I've worked all along. I've been working since eighteen, and I've never stopped working.”<sup>62</sup> The fact that Bianca, a mother of young children, works full-time sometimes causes some tension for her when gender roles are discussed in a Mormon context. For over the last half

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4.

century, Mormon leaders have advocated women avoiding paid employment in order to be full-time mothers. This is held up as an ideal, along with the idea that it is the father's role to provide materially for the family, though in recent decades Mormon leaders have expressed support for mothers who work because of financial need.<sup>63</sup>

Bianca, coming as she did from a less than privileged class position—undocumented status for many years, no parental support, a husband that does not earn a lucrative salary—sheds light on the class privilege that Mormon gender role prescriptions assume:

I had such a conflict because it [teachings about mothers staying home] gave me a guilt trip. I felt, ok, I've always had to work for survival. I always thought that it was wrong for someone to just completely stay home with kids. I'm not judging those who do that, it's great if you can do it, but the reason I feel this way I guess is because my reality is different. I don't have a support mechanism. If my husband and I get divorced, where do I go? I have no education and I have nowhere to go? Why would I leave my job? I've met women who have dedicated their whole lives to their husbands and families and then at the end of it when they are 50 or 60, the husband takes off and gets a young woman and she's left without much. She can't even retire because she has nothing. Since I was a kid, I had to figure out how to survive on my own. So it's very hard for me to just say, "Oh, now I will just stay home, and my husband will take care of it, and I'm going to trust that everything will be ok." It's very hard for me. But there were times that I was willing to do it, but we couldn't afford it even if we wanted to. My husband is a social worker. He doesn't make enough. So it's always been that my salary was important for the survival of the family. There's no way I can just stay home. If you just put it on the paper, it's not going to work. Right now it's a struggle. Imagine if I'm not working.

Another strong reason I work is for my children. They don't have \$20,000 sitting somewhere from a great grandparent. Most of my American friends, their parents will give them \$50,000 or a car or let them live in the home for a year to save money. I don't have any of that. So, if I don't work, my kids won't have any of that. If I don't work my kids will not be able to go to good schools. So it's a different reality.<sup>64</sup>

Bianca pinpoints the class privileged assumptions inherent in the stay-at-home mother rhetoric that is common in Mormonism. As an immigrant to this country with no family here, she has no parents or siblings to help her financially if the marriage fails. She must be her own support mechanism and backup plan. Her concern for her children's future is paramount since there is no

---

<sup>63</sup> See Miles, "LDS Family Ideals Versus the Equality of Women," 101-134.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview, #2C (2016), 4-5.

nest egg or cushion from grandparents available to them. In order for her kids to go to a good school in the neighborhood they live in, she must work in order to pay the Catholic school fees. She also wants to save money so that her children will never be as vulnerable as she has been, with no family financial support available to her. As she stated, coming as she does from her years as an undocumented immigrant scrambling to find work and gain education, her reality is different. She has none of the structural privilege that many more established American families have, and moreover, none of the deep roots and family support structure waiting in the wings to help her out. She and her husband alone are working to carve out some security for their children. In her discussion of her own financial vulnerability as an immigrant, she never once mentioned the church as a possible support mechanism in the wake of a failed marriage. This is due to the fact that Mormon congregations excel at helping on short-term basis with family disasters (death, disease, emergency financial help), but Mormon congregations are not structured to help with long-term need or assistance.

Bianca's decision to work, in part due to concerns about her future and that of her children, show her resisting cultural pressure to trust that her husband can find a way to fully support the family financially. Because Bianca has lived without a strong economic support system and understands the worry and concern that engenders, she refuses to put herself in a position where she is "one man away from welfare." She is actively resisting a system in which, as *mujerista* Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz says, women's "economic status and privileges are, in great part, determined by whose daughters, sisters, and wives we are."<sup>65</sup> Bianca is determined to not place herself or her children at the mercy of other people, who may or may not be able to support or help her in times of crisis.

---

<sup>65</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 43.

Interestingly, Bianca goes on to express her understanding as to why the church promotes stay-at-home motherhood, even if it does not fit her reality:

I understand why they counsel a mom to stay home because it's hard for a woman to do everything. It's like beyond hard. To fulfill your work responsibilities and then take your work hat off and put your family hat on and then still be happy for your husband -- it doesn't work like that. It's very hard and stressful. So, I understand why the church encourages moms to stay home if they can because it would make everything much easier. In some ways. Because I can also see it the other way where a mother will feel like, "Ok, who am I? All I am is for my family."<sup>66</sup>

Bianca spoke from her own reality, which is a standpoint of less structural privilege than many white Americans. Bianca recognizes value in a gendered division of family labor because it allows women to concentrate on the home front; however, she also recognizes that that value does not map so well onto her life. But she is still able, as the quote above exhibits, to see the issue from the perspective of Mormonism's generally affluent American church leaders. These leaders see gendered division of family labor ideal, as it allows women the time to concentrate on the home and encourages men to productively contribute materially to the family. Her ability to understand the issue from both her own reality and that of her church leaders exhibits what feminist standpoint theorists call a "double consciousness," which is a "working, active consciousness of both perspectives."<sup>67</sup> This double consciousness is an "awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group ... as well."<sup>68</sup> Scholars speak of this double consciousness as helping vulnerable women to protect themselves and ensure their survival since understanding the perspective of the dominant actors help them to navigate and manage from positions of less structural privilege.<sup>69</sup> In Bianca's case, her double consciousness allows her to

---

<sup>66</sup> Anonymous, unarchived interview, #2C (2016), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Dorothy Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>68</sup> Brooks, *Feminist Standpoint Epistemology*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

view the gendered counsel of privileged Mormon leaders as based in their own different reality, and she can thus view them with compassion, coming as they do from their context, in which they experienced the ease and sense of bifurcating gender roles. Her life, however, has produced its own truth, and she knows that such a division of labor for her family could very well be disastrous, particularly for her vulnerable children. Both staying at home and working incur costs for women like Bianca, but on the whole, she sees greater safety and a better outcome stemming from having a dual income family. Bianca's reflections provide a poignant understanding of the risks women, particularly less-privileged women, face when they eschew the workplace.

Bianca's double consciousness, born from her place of structural vulnerability, gives her a unique lens from which to view the hot button Mormon topic of stay-at-home motherhood. It also may, as Brooks argues about women's double consciousness, enable women like Bianca, the less privileged actors in society, to see and understand certain realities "from which others [white and/or male] are obscured."<sup>70</sup> Mormon leaders have in recent decades articulated moral space for mothers to choose to work in cases of financial need, an important development which nuanced earlier discourse on the topic. But Bianca's reflections show that concerns beyond the immediate feeding and clothing of her children drive her decisions—and that those concerns are born from trying to ensure her family's long-term survival in a system in which she has few financial recourses. Ultimately, her reflections highlight the hidden assumptions of class privilege that undergird some Mormon cultural attitudes toward gender roles.

White privilege embedded in certain Mormon practices and discourses involving gender and family became apparent to me when I interviewed Sita, a woman who was the product of a marriage between a white Mormon mother and a Tongan Mormon father. Sita is a single mother

---

<sup>70</sup> Alison Jagger, "Feminist Politics and Epistemology: The Standpoint of Women," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 60.

of five children. She divorced their father, who was in a Tongan gang and committed homicide by assault, after he went back to prison a second time. Her Mormon community has been a support to her throughout these tough years as a single mother to young children, giving her a few hours of child care a week and in general embracing her as an individual.

However, her life has been severely and negatively impacted by old Mormon teachings that discouraged interracial marriage. These teachings against interracial marriage—and their concomitant disparagement of people of African ancestry—are nearly as old as Mormonism itself. Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founding prophet, feared racial black/white miscegenation, and Mormonism’s second president and prophet of the church, Brigham Young, vociferously condemned the union of black and white people, saying in 1863, “Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty under the law of God is death on the spot. This will always be so.”<sup>71</sup> Like many American Protestants at the time, Mormons believed that the “curse of Cain” or “mark of Cain” mentioned in the Bible meant the black skin of those of African descent. Such teachings against interracial marriage persisted into the twentieth century, becoming near-canonized in Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine*, a book often considered by members to be authoritative. McConkie stated, “The whole negro race have been cursed with a black skin, the mark of Cain, so they can be identified as a caste apart, a people with whom the other

---

<sup>71</sup> Young, Brigham, “The Persecutions of the Saints—Their Loyalty to the Constitution—The Mormon Battalion—The Laws of God Relative to the African Race,” *Journal of Discourses* 10 (1863): 110, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/4266>.

Joseph Smith, Jr. stated on January 2, 1843, “Had I anything to do with the negro, I would confine them [sic] to their own species.” D. Michael Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 636. For more on Brigham Young’s opinions on interracial marriage with those of African descent see W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 128-139. Notably, Reeve shows that early Mormon leaders like Young had a far different reaction to the idea of interracial marriage with those of Native American descent – Young actively encouraged those marriages. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 77-87.

descendants of Adam should not intermarry."<sup>72</sup> Statements by church presidents into the 1960s and 70s discouraged any kind of interracial marriage, and these quotes crop up at times in more recent church teaching manuals.<sup>73</sup> Because such authoritative sources in the past have denounced interracial marriage and because current Mormon leaders have not widely refuted these old statements, ideas against interracial marriage live on in the minds of some Mormons. Women like Sita, themselves products of interracial unions, feel like they still suffer from these teachings, since they are viewed as by their male peers as less desirable marriage partners. She describes these teachings as causing the most pain and tension in her Mormon life:

I think the thing that has most impacted my life tension-wise about the church is that I remember being taught that we were not supposed to marry outside of our race. As a biracial person, hearing that meant to me that no matter who I married, it wouldn't be pleasing to God because I'm bringing that into the marriage no matter what. So that's something I struggled with.... When I got to college, I had four different relationships within about a six-year period that were all fairly long -- like eight months to a couple of years. And they were all with Polynesian men. And all four of them after that long period within the next few months ended up marrying white women or full Polynesian women. So it felt to me at that time like they don't want you because you're neither. So that was a really hard thing for me to deal with and for me to try to grapple with because I felt like I was unmarriageable. And it wasn't something I could correct.

I hate it when people are like it's not that big a deal that they are teaching outdated material. But it is. Because it directly impacted my understanding of myself. I felt like it directly impacted my marriage choice. Part of why I married my ex—I don't think it was a conscious decision and I've done a lot of counseling to try to get past a lot of this stuff, but I do remember telling my therapist, “You know, I feel like I can go into a room and there will be a room full of guys that are moderately interested in me, and I will pick out the one with the most baggage. And be like ‘that's the guy for me.’” And he was like, “Yeah, because their baggage makes yours feel ok.” I really thought about that and I feel like that's accurate. So it makes a difference in people's lives when they hear things like that.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 114.

<sup>73</sup>In 1977 Boyd K. Packer said, “We’ve always counseled in the Church for our Mexican members to marry Mexicans, our Japanese members to marry Japanese, our Caucasians to marry Caucasians, our Polynesian members to marry Polynesians. ... The counsel has been wise.” Boyd K. Packer, “Follow the Rule,” *BYU Devotional*, January 14, 1977, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer\\_follow-rule/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer_follow-rule/). A 1995 Aaronic Priesthood lesson manual for adolescent boys features a quote which discourages interracial marriage. See <https://www.lds.org/manual/aaronic-priesthood-manual-3/lesson-31-choosing-an-eternal-companion?lang=eng>.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, *Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection*, #160 (2015), 4-5, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

Sita describes these Mormon teachings against interracial marriage as leading to pain and self-doubt. These feelings then led her to marry a highly problematic man because, as her therapist pointed out, his problems and issues made hers, stemming from feeling unwanted and displaced, feel manageable.

Sita's oral history shows us how past Mormon racist teachings, which so infamously affected black people by denying them priesthood ordination and temple blessings, also affect a whole other subset of Mormons—namely biracial Mormon women. These Mormon women, like all other youth, are taught from childhood about the importance of marrying. In a competitive Mormon marriage market, past teachings against interracial marriage put biracial Mormon women, as well as women of color, at a disadvantage. For Sita, this played out in devastating ways.

While the contemporary Mormon church condemns racism, it generally avoids condemning past racist statements and teachings of church leaders, preferring instead to let these old ideas slip away into the past. The clearest refutation of past racist teachings occurred in the 2013 Gospel Topics essay available on LDS.org, which states, “Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”<sup>75</sup> Even with this 2013 essay, however, the refutation was limited in power and scope since it appeared online with little

---

<sup>75</sup> “Race and the Priesthood.” Even more recently, in the wake of the 2017 Charlottesville, VA white nationalist rally, the church issued a statement condemning racism, saying, “White supremacist attitudes are morally wrong and sinful, and we condemn them. Church members who promote or pursue a ‘white culture’ or white supremacy agenda are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church.” See “Church Releases Statement Condemning White Supremist Attitudes,” *Church News*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-releases-statement-condemning-white-supremacist-attitudes?lang=eng>.

fanfare and was not read over the pulpit at General Conference or in local wards, ways important pronouncements are made public in the LDS church. Recently, however, there have been some efforts made to raise awareness of these Gospel Topics essays, including incorporating links to them in online Sunday School manuals.<sup>76</sup> It is therefore probable that with time, more LDS members will become aware of the church's disavowal of past racist teachings through familiarity with these essays. Moreover, over time, it is probable that younger Mormons will become increasingly less familiar with older Mormon ideas about race, as books like McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* become less available.<sup>77</sup> While Sita has felt the far-reaching tentacles of these old teachings in her life, perhaps her own children will not experience similar feelings of displacement and marginality, given these recent efforts by the church.

Sita's story is a testament that old racial teachings and ideas about the inappropriateness of interracial marriage can have grave consequences on the self-worth and sense of belonging of contemporary Mormon women of color. Her story illustrates the inadequacy of "the past is the past" rhetoric that some church leaders have employed when asked about these old Mormon teachings and practices regarding race.<sup>78</sup> The past had the power to make Sita doubt her worth, positioned as she was without the privilege of whiteness, and thus the privilege of not being personally affected by these teachings. Happily, church leaders over the last five years have made important strides toward clearly refuting these old ideas.

---

<sup>76</sup> Tad Walch, "Essays on Mormon History, Doctrine Find New Visibility in Official App, Sunday School," *Deseret News*, December 26, 2016, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865669945/Essays-on-Mormon-history-doctrine-find-new-visibility-in-official-app-Sunday-School.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Landmark 'Mormon Doctrine' Goes Out of Print," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 21, 2010, [http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci\\_15137409](http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci_15137409).

<sup>78</sup> Note President Gordon B. Hinckley's 1996 response to Mike Wallace when asked about past Mormon teachings about black people having the cursed mark of Cain: "It's behind us. Look, that's behind us. Don't worry about those little flicks of history," he said. "Former President of Mormon Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, Gives First Ever Interview," *World Religion News*, accessed June 22, 2017, <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/former-president-of-mormon-church-gordon-b-hinckley-gives-first-ever-interview>.

Experiences of women of color in the U.S. also offer important intervention in typical Mormon emphases and understandings of agency. Moral agency, or free agency in typical Mormon parlance, has been a central concept in Mormon cosmology throughout the church's history. Terryl Givens wrote that according to Mormon theology, "In God's conception of human existence, moral agency is the bedrock value, and the capacity for independent virtuous activity is a crucial part of eternal moral development."<sup>79</sup> Mormons celebrate this agency and often feel a profound sense of ability to carve out their future. The ability to choose in Mormon thought can reap outstanding rewards, as righteous choices lead to exaltation and divine potential in the next life, while negative choices lead inevitably toward negative consequences, such as stagnation in moral development and unhappiness. As Givens states, in this cosmology, "choices are allowed, inexorably, to bear their own fruit."<sup>80</sup> Because the idea of choice is so central—and that choices reap their just rewards—there is in Mormon discourse an underlying confidence that humans have a great deal of power in determining their own paths. Societal structures and systems that constrain choice and path-determination (poverty, racism, sexism) are not typically emphasized in Mormon rhetoric.

The reflections of Samantha, the woman originally from South Africa, offer some important nuance to the Mormon discussion of agency. In her experience, this profound Mormon confidence in self-determination has led to lack of understanding and distance between privileged white leadership and ward members of color. Reflecting on her experiences in South African wards, she stated:

So pretty much all of our leadership was white and pretty much all the people coming to the ward were not white. There had been quite a few instances where there was a lack of

---

<sup>79</sup> Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 45.

<sup>80</sup> Terryl Givens, "Christ, Atonement and Human Possibilities in Mormon Thought," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, eds. Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 265.

understanding between people, and I think it's sometimes been hard for leadership to empathize with people properly because they honestly don't have a frame of reference for where black people and coloured people are coming from. They have no idea of the conditions in which they live. They have no idea about the schools the children go to. It's much easier for a bishop to say, "You've got to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get to work and get yourself out there and find a job." It's like, "Yes, but you from your privileged private high school that you went to during Apartheid years, you've benefited from that. You can just do that. You have no idea what these people [of color] have dealt with."<sup>81</sup>

Samantha does not explicitly use the word agency, but the attitude of the bishop that she's describing—this confidence that people can choose their course and improve their material well-being—is tied theologically to Mormon emphases on agency and choice in life. When in a privileged position unimpeded by structural inequities, life and its possibilities may indeed seem expansive. But when trying to carve out life in a system of rampant racism that has systematically deprived people of color from achieving good educations and finding good jobs, the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality does not work as well. American Mormon womanist Janan Graham-Russell and Maori Mormon womanist Gina Colvin, in a podcast devoted to the topic of Mormonism and womanist theology, likewise noted that Mormon emphases on agency might sometimes negatively affect people of color working within systems of oppression. Graham-Russell believes that agency discussions within Mormonism need to be better nuanced:

Graham-Russell: We [Mormons] talk about agency like it's the next fashion trend. If you are in this [negative] situation, it's something you chose and did and came to yourself. But that's a gross misunderstanding of how oppression and homophobia work.<sup>82</sup>

Graham-Russell, like Samantha, thus points to the idea that contemporary Mormon agency discourse, often tied to one's ability to choose and shape one's life, tends to not adequately

---

<sup>81</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 5.

<sup>82</sup> Gina Colvin, “#110: Mormonism, Liberation Theology and Womanism: A Conversation with Fatimah Salleh and Janan Graham,” *A Thoughtful Faith*, podcast, August 24, 2015, <http://www.athoughtfulfaith.org/mormonism-liberation-theology-and-womanism-a-conversation-with-fatimah-salleh-and-janan-graham/>.

recognize societal constraints and oppressions that impact choice and opportunity for vulnerable populations. A reworking of this key Mormon concept is in order, these Mormon women indicate, one that better acknowledges societal sins and oppressions which constrict vulnerable people's agency. A more robust acknowledgment of societal oppressions, rather than the emphatic focus on personal sin and righteousness that generally permeates Mormon discourse, might very well bridge some of the distance people of color sometimes feel when Mormon discourse does not represent their distinct realities.

The experiences and standpoints of Bianca, Sita, and Samantha illuminate the ways Mormon discourse sometimes inadequately represents the realities of Mormon women of color and even at times, weakens their sense of self-worth and their sense of belonging in the church. For these women in America, as for women in Mexico and Botswana, non-oppressive connectedness is a moral imperative they value. When privileged assumptions are embedded in Mormon discourse, assumptions that do not reflect these women's experiences, feelings of alienation and marginalization can arise. Discourses of privilege result in fissures to the vitalizing connections they seek with church leaders and members.

### ***Surviving and Thriving in the U.S. Mormon Church as a Woman of Color***

When Nadine agreed to speak with me, I was elated. A fifty-something black lawyer in the South, Nadine had lived long enough to experience significant overt racism, and I was very interested to hear her discuss her decision to join the LDS church. Nadine was a relatively recent convert to the church, having found it in 2008 after seeing singer Gladys Knight bear her testimony on BYUtv. Mormon theology made sense for this religious woman who had never found satisfactory answers to some of her questions in her Baptist faith. Getting answers to questions she had always had—like “what happened to Enoch?”—was she said, “like a Claritin

commercial. You know the commercial where before you take it there's like a film over everything and you can see it and see parts of it, but then when you peel back the film, you can see clearly. That's what it felt like to me."<sup>83</sup>

However, despite that clarity that Mormonism offered her on some of her questions, choosing Mormonism was not easy. As a proud feminist black woman, Nadine had serious issues with two aspects of the church: the priesthood-temple ban and polygamy. These two practices, which she found disturbing, were serious impediments to her deciding to join the church. She eventually, however, found peace with these two things after she received personal revelation:

What I eventually used was the principle of personal revelation, which I had believed as a Baptist and which was key to me in looking at the LDS faith. I prayed and the answer I received was that neither the priesthood ban and the temple ban nor polygamy had been of God. So I was like, ok.... There was a quote from Joseph Smith. He was asked one time to explain our religion. He said the key part of our religion is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And that everything else—everything else—was all just appendages to that key tenet. And I was like, I can go for that. And you know, all these other things, they are appendages, so I don't really have to worry my head about that. I had already received clear revelation to me that the priesthood ban and the temple ban and polygamy were not of God—so I could join the church.<sup>84</sup>

Nadine's understanding, born from her own personal connection to God, that the Mormon practices of polygamy and priesthood-temple bans for black people were "not of God" ultimately gave her the peace of mind to be able to get baptized and join the church. Nadine could accept that fallible humans could devise practices that were oppressive and harmful. Her life growing up as a poor black girl in the South was a living testament to that truth. What she could not accept is the idea that these oppressive practices were desired and authored by God.

Nadine's experience with personal revelation allowed her to bypass the multitude of explanations, justifications, rationales for these practices—some as disturbing as the practices

---

<sup>83</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #166 (2016), 2, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

themselves—that have been offered by Mormons over the past century and a half. Using personal revelation, which she had embraced as a Baptist and continued to embrace as a potential Mormon, she was able to cull problematic teachings, embrace the good things the church was offering her, and choose membership in the church. This process—rejecting certain aspects of Mormonism in order to ultimately embrace it—flies in the face of how many Mormons think of membership and belief.

This willingness to be led by the Spirit through personal revelation—even if it leads to belief or behavior not supported by institutional Mormonism and its leaders—is a strategy that has allowed Mormon women of color in America to survive and often thrive in the American Mormon church. Personal revelation provides an important counterweight to institutional Mormon authority and hierarchy. Mormons tend to have a profound respect for religious authority and hierarchy, as they have been taught that God and Jesus Christ directly lead the church through communication with the fifteen male prophets and revelators of the church. The centralized institutional church headed by these fifteen men exerts considerable power over individual Mormon congregations and claims the privilege of receiving revelation for the church from God. Yet personal revelation is also a revered concept within the faith. Members believe that God can personally communicate individuals and provide specific and individual direction for their lives. The LDS emphasis on both personal revelation from God and the centralized hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the church is a paradox that many members grapple with.<sup>85</sup>

Many Mormon women of color particularly call upon personal revelation and their own connection to God and the Spirit to sustain them and guide them within a religious culture that

---

<sup>85</sup> Givens, *People of Paradox*, 3-19. Givens devotes an entire chapter to the paradox of authoritarian hierarchy and individual agency in Mormonism.

does not always reflect their most pressing concerns and values. Using personal revelation and the Spirit, these women are able to bypass male mediators proclaiming problematic or non-relevant things and find inspiration by going directly to God. As Nadine said of Mormon leadership, “They are men. They put their pants on one leg at a time, so I sustain the prophet, sustain the members of the First Presidency, I sustain the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. But I don’t, as part of sustaining them, give up my ability to ask or to claim the promise of personal revelation and to ask God, ‘Is this true?’ And receive an answer for myself.”<sup>86</sup>

This ability to reject all or nothing thinking is a hallmark of the women of color in the U.S. with whom I spoke, as well as a survival strategy. They have learned to embrace ambiguity in the form of a church that offers what they acknowledge as problematic history, current policies, and/or cultural aspects, but which simultaneously inspires them, connects them to God and others, and gives them a profound sense of their own power and worth. Karen, a left-leaning salty-tongued musician of Japanese descent in her forties, embodies this ambiguity. She has had a rocky and complicated faith journey—raped by a fellow ward member in her teens, invited in her twenties to not come to church by an overwhelmed bishop, and, after a ten-year break from the church, coming back to embrace the best of Mormonism and reject that which did not resonate with her. Like Nadine, Karen rejects an “all or nothing” or “black or white” approach to the church, and she recognizes the humanity of leaders who are bound to make mistakes in their church stewardships. She told me, “This is how I manage the church. I take this here, I take that there, and I don't feel like I have to hold onto that over here.”<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #166 (2015), 9.

<sup>87</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #157 (2017), 9, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

Nowhere is her ability to embrace ambivalence and ambiguity more apparent than in Karen's attitude toward the Mormon temple. When I first got in touch with Karen via email, she wrote, "I might say that my time away from the church was some of the best years for my spirit. Except ... I can't live without the temple."<sup>88</sup> She loves the temple, and the experiences she has had in the temple have grounded her in Mormonism, despite her struggles with the church's position on LGBTQ issues and women's issues:

The thing that has been the most interesting has been that truly, every single time I've been in the temple, it has changed who I have been. It has, in a certain way, erased the person going in and cleared whatever was going on in the brain so that I can actually see ahead how to progress. It's been really amazing to have that sense. I never thought that sitting through a couple hours of whatever was going to ever do that for me. But the more I've gone, it's been such a way of dealing with stuff. It's been really amazing. Recently I haven't gone as much. I used to go every week.

I've been trying to figure out what is so powerful about the temple because it's been clawing at me. What is it? I was talking to a friend of mine who is a career coach. He was saying how our bodies are set up so that when we sleep, we are restoring our bodies so that we can function again. When we go to the temple, it's kind of like we're going to sleep and then restoring our spiritual selves.<sup>89</sup>

In addition to a sense of vision, peace and rejuvenation, Karen has had profound spiritual experiences which have connected her to a different spiritual realm. At the end of our interview, she said, "I sometimes feel like God responds when I pray.... It's weird, but I'm really in tune with beings. Anytime I'm in the temple, I see people. I think, 'Ok, what's up with you?'"<sup>90</sup> Mormonism has opened up space for Karen to develop a mystical worldview in which it is possible to have interactions with the spiritual realm. Her faith not only connects her directly to God, but it also opens up a world to her in which the transcendent and the divine are present in her daily life. The temple plays an important part in enabling her access to this transcendent realm.

---

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, email message to author, May 22, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #157 (2017), 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Simultaneously, however, Karen acknowledges aspects of the temple that she finds damaging and hurtful to women. Specifically, she mentioned the ritual subordination women undergo in the temple, in which women promise to hearken unto their husbands as their husbands hearken unto God.<sup>91</sup> She deals with these aspects by relegating them to the cultural historical context in which these ceremonies arose. She said, “You’ve got a whole bunch of . . . backward thinking about women—that was the norm for the [nineteenth-century] time. That’s how I deal with the hearken covenant.”<sup>92</sup> Thus Karen brushed aside this covenant as a product of its sexist time, confident that it is, as Nadine would say, “not of God.” This ability to mentally disregard rituals or teachings she has found problematic has, like Nadine, enabled her to remain affiliated with the church and devoted to those parts of it that do uplift and feed her soul.

Nadine and Karen, live with their ambivalent feelings about the Mormon church, feeling simultaneously nourished and excluded by it. Mary Bednarowski has elaborated upon women’s religious ambivalence which she describes as “grounded in a deep sense of belonging, familiarity, and commitment and an equally strong sense of alienation and distrust. This distrust is not so much of their traditions’ most central insights, but the traditions’ failings particularly in regard to women.”<sup>93</sup> Nadine and Karen do not describe their ambivalence as distrust exactly, but they do readily ascribe human failings and shortcomings to church leaders, which result in decisions and policies that inevitably lead the organization as a whole to fall short in its treatment of not only women, but also of people of color and LGBTQ folk.

Mary Bednarowski theorized that religious ambivalence is actually a virtue to be cultivated since “there is a vitalizing quality to its manifestations.” This willed ambivalence

---

<sup>91</sup> For a brief discussion of this covenant, see Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness*, 178.

<sup>92</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #157 (2017), 7.

<sup>93</sup> Mary Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 19.

“requires women always to be vigilant, always to be critical of their communities’ inclinations toward exclusion and distortion and at the same time to be open to new possibilities to hold up and reform or transform or dig up, from wherever they have been hiding, their traditions’ most liberating and healing insights.”<sup>94</sup> Bednarowski saw creative thought and practice arising from this ambivalence, as women work to sort out their contradictory experiences within the faith. Certainly, for Karen, her ambivalence has led to creative theologizing about Mormonism’s Heavenly Mother, who is reputed to be the consort and equal of God the Father, but who is paradoxically absent from nearly all Mormon God-discourse and totally absent from all Mormon liturgy and ritual.

Note how Karen describes her Mother in Heaven and the expansive sense of women’s potential that she connects with The Mother. Mormonism might produce rhetoric and practice which sideline women institutionally, but Karen found power in Mormonism’s nearly buried feminine divine:

My thought is that we can’t handle the power of the Goddess. You’ve got women who bring life into this world. The kind of power that female humans have is extraordinary. I am not sure that we could even handle that power, that level of deity, of the Heavenly Mother. That idea that God is protecting her from people badmouthing her—oh f-off!! She don’t need no protecting! If truly, we were to have been made in her image, then why wouldn’t that be? It’s not to say that men aren’t strong—they have their own strengths and their own things—but if you look, time and time again, you see women of every culture being totally squished to the core, and yet how do they prevail? It’s the most inspiring thing to see how over time, women have been able to kick ass. I can only imagine what the power of women could be if they didn’t have a foot on top of them. I feel that it can’t be any different. If truly we were made in their image, then why not?<sup>95</sup>

Here Karen upturns folk doctrinal explanations for Heavenly Mother’s invisibility in Mormon God-discourse and worship, which characterizes Her as needing protection from the curses and

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>95</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #157 (2017), 7-8.

insults that humans might direct her way.<sup>96</sup> Rather than her invisibility stemming from a need for protection, Karen envisions the Mother as so supremely powerful and awesome that humans could not “even handle that power, that level of deity.” In seeing such power in the Mother, she sees extraordinary power in Her daughters as well, who prevail despite patriarchal culture putting “a foot on top of them” and “squish[ing] them to the core.” Even within a context of patriarchal Mormon practice and teachings, Karen has developed a profound sense of female capacity and authority. Karen has incorporated into her belief system aspects of Mormon thought that can empower women—a focus on divine nature and divine potential for all humans, a feminine divine, a close relationship with a personal deity who loves, guides and directs, etc.—while rejecting those aspects that she finds disempowering. Moreover, she has rejected traditional restrictions which deter women from healing and blessing. She told me that when she went to the temple for the first time, “It made 100% sense to me that women were doing blessings [in the temple]. I didn’t ever have any doubts that that was the way it was supposed to be. I have given blessings. I have done healings and all sorts of things.”<sup>97</sup> She later explained that it was the temple and patriarchal blessing that taught her that she had both the gift to heal and the priesthood power with which to bless others’ lives:

I feel that with the power given to me in the temple, I have power to utilize my priesthood in daily life, which I do. So I will bless my family because I am the priesthood holder in my house. I will uphold the priesthood in my home because I am the priesthood holder in the house. So in that way, I am probably not your typical woman in the church. But if you [church leaders] are not going to give me the power, then don't expect me to toe the line. I was thrilled to receive the blessing to heal, and if I have this blessing then I need to be able to use it. I have, definitely.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> Melvin R. Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1960), 309–10.

<sup>97</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #157 (2017), 7.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Karen's spirituality and closeness to God and divine power, nurtured in her through her upbringing in the LDS church, have enabled her to transcend some gender constraints within the Mormon church, constraints which posit priesthood and blessings and healing as the province of men, not women. She sees some Mormon women as "torn away from their own roots, from their own power, stripped of identity, stripped of dignity."<sup>99</sup> But for the Mormon woman "who steps into the power and does, does, does," Karen sees enormous ability and potential.<sup>100</sup> She describes these Mormon women in this way:

But they know themselves to be powerful women. They just get it. They so get it. And they don't need men to say, "You are allowed to do this. You are not allowed to do that." They will just ... do it anyway. Because they know their own strength, they know their own power, and they know what it's about. They know it's their own choice. There is something called choice and accountability that is the very baseline fundamental root of the entire religion, and these women exercise it.<sup>101</sup>

These women of color who have found power in Mormonism have been able to develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves, their own power, their own divine nature, and their own connection to God. Like so many women in Christian history, from medieval Catholic mystics to American women preachers in the 1800s, they recognize church authority but also develop a self-confidence and authority, grounded in personal revelation and their own connection to God.<sup>102</sup> This self-sufficiency and self-authorization sometimes put women at odds with male ecclesiastical authority, as black women preacher Julia Foote experienced in the 1800s, but God's call outweighed their society's gender expectations for women's compliance and

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> See Petroff's discussion of female Catholic visionaries, whose spiritual experiences authorized women to speak. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, "Introduction: The Visionary Tradition in Women's Writing: Dialogue and Autobiography," in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6. For American women preachers' self-authorization, see Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

silence.<sup>103</sup> Mormon women who are publicly outspoken on issues of gender also at times face punishment for challenging male authority and asserting the primacy of their conscience and spiritual connection.<sup>104</sup> But more common are women like Karen who quietly self-authorize to move forward in their religious and private lives as they see fit. Since, as Karen indicates, they do not ask for permission to bless, heal, and more, they can often stay under male authority's radar. Mormonism might constrict women's institutional opportunities and promote specific female gender roles, but it also simultaneously teaches these women that their eternal potential is limitless and they have the right and responsibility to commune with God personally over the great questions in their lives.

### ***Conclusion***

The voices of Mormon women of color in the U.S. illuminate specific priorities, vulnerabilities, and realities that are sometimes not reflected in institutional Mormon and feminist Mormon discourse. Their stories, which so often reveal a moral orientation toward vitalizing, non-oppressive connections to deity and humans, introduce important interventions into both of these discourses. Concerning Mormon feminist discourse, a shift in emphasis toward denouncing all oppressions rather than only gender inequality—and to recognizing the ways in which Mormonism does create some liberating spaces for different groups of women—would create a more inclusive and robust Mormon feminist movement. Likewise, attention to issues of systemic injustice could offer institutional Mormon discourse productive avenues for discussing

---

<sup>103</sup> William Andrews, "Introduction," in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1-22.

<sup>104</sup> Maxine Hanks, Margaret Toscano, Janice Allred, and Kate Kelly are Mormon feminists who were excommunicated for their writings and speeches on Mormon gender issues. See Philip Lindholm, *Latter-Day Dissent: At the Crossroads of Intellectual Inquiry and Ecclesiastical Authority* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2010).

agency, sin, and race in nuanced ways that could especially resonate with the experiences of people of color.

These women's experiences of race and gender in the Mormon context also bring to light the issue of privilege, which at times leads to institutional discourse which does not reflect their experience and leads to feelings of marginalization. Despite the challenges of navigating membership in the church for some women of color, however, many have been able to thrive within the tradition and embrace it as their own. Their strategies of rejecting all or nothing thinking, embracing ambivalence, and developing their own intimate connections with deity offer a potential model to all Mormons who grapple with historical, social, and theological issues within the tradition.

## Chapter Five

### Toward a Mormon Womanist Theology of Abundance: Insights from the Margins of Mormonism

Several women have produced and published theology in Mormonism's 200-year history. Eliza R. Snow famously theologized about Heavenly Mother—thus near-canonizing the idea of this divine feminine personage—in her poem turned hymn, “Invocation, or the Eternal Father and Mother.”<sup>1</sup> The *Woman's Exponent* newspaper (1872-1914), whose masthead slogan read, “The rights of Women of Zion and the Rights of Women of All Nations,” featured various commentaries on scripture and Mormon thought, often from a first-wave feminist perspective.<sup>2</sup> In their own Relief Society conferences and meetings, Mormon women in the twentieth century interpreted scripture and spoke of deity, and in the church's biannual General Conference during the last two decades two women have been routinely numbered among the thirty or so male General Authorities sermonizing on various topics. Sheri Dew's reading of the Adam and Eve story stands out as one seminal moment of Mormon women theologizing at General Conference, as she postulated that every woman, whether she has a child or not, is ontologically a mother.<sup>3</sup> Women outside church hierarchy have also produced theology. Of particular note are Janice

---

<sup>1</sup> Eliza R. Snow originally called this poem “My Father in Heaven” when it was published in *Times and Seasons* on November 15, 1845, but she later renamed it “Invocation, or the Eternal Father in Mother” when she published a collection of her poems in her 1856 poetry volume, *Poems: Religious, Historical, and Political*. This poem is now the text for the LDS hymn, “O My Father.” Jill Mulvay Derr. “The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1996): 85-126. Linda P. Wilcox also discusses its origins. Linda P. Wilcox, “The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, eds. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992), 65. See also David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido. “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven.” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71.

<sup>2</sup> See Martha Sonntag Bradley, *Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2005), 12-13; “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse – Excerpts,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992), 69-86.

<sup>3</sup> Dew, “Are We Not All Mothers?”

Allred and Margaret Toscano, who were both excommunicated—at least in part—because of their refusal to stop publishing theology about Heavenly Mother.<sup>4</sup>

While these women’s theologies have variously reaffirmed standard Mormon doctrine, gently stretched Mormon teachings to include or take into consideration women in innovative ways, or advocated for a theological revolution that would impel Heavenly Mother into the Mormon Godhead, all these theologies share the almost entirely non-diverse positionality of their producers. Mormon women who have produced and published theology have been uniformly white, middle class and often tightly entwined with the elite men of Mormonism. One notable exception to this pattern is the widely beloved general Relief Society presidency member Chieko Okazaki, who in the 1990s and 2000s wrote and theologized from her own life and experiences, often drawing on her own Japanese Buddhist upbringing. Outside of Okazaki, there is a notable dearth of theology produced and published by Mormon women of color in the U.S. and around the world. These voices and God-talk from the margins of Mormonism have overwhelmingly remained buried, unheard, or forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

The oral history interviews I conducted with Mormon women of color in Mexico, Southern Africa, and the U.S., however, begin to fill this gap. The theological priorities and imperatives of Mormon women on the margins emerged in these interviews, as women discussed their religious values and conceptions of God and humanity. While there was wide variation in the responses, I highlight in this chapter one theological thread that appeared in several women’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Peggy Fletcher Stack, “A Mormon Mystery Returns: Who is Heavenly Mother?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 2013, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/56282764-78/eternal-female-god-heaven.html.csp>; Janice Allred, “Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother,” in *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997); Margaret and Paul Toscano, “The Divine Mother,” in *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990), 47-59; Margaret Toscano, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power,” *Sunstone* 133 (2004): 14-22.

<sup>5</sup> A very recent exception is the edited volume of theological expositions by Mormon women, including a small handful by women of color, *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, eds. Jennifer Reader and Kate Holbrook (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2017).

oral histories. This theological vision centered on a worldview in which God's love was vast and abundant, in which spiritual powers could be highly developed, and in which the opportunity to connect with God personally was unbounded and took on varying forms. As in earlier chapters, non-oppressive vitalizing connectedness to God and others characterize this worldview, but in this chapter, particular attention is also paid to women's connections to their own authentic and best selves. In their religious imaginations, women saw an abundance of female ability and strength in themselves and others, and they advocated operating from a framework of abundance rather than a framework of scarcity. God was a source of inestimable generosity and grace who has endowed each of God's children with profound potential. In contrast to this perspective, fear, competition, and exclusivity were the byproducts of a misunderstanding of optimal humanity and God's structuring of the world. Based on these reflections from Mormon women of color in Southern Africa, Mexico, and the U.S., I examine various iterations of a theological perspective that could be constructed into a Mormon theology of abundance. The second half of the chapter discusses possibilities for further directions and development for a Mormon theology of abundance, based on the methodology of womanist theologians. Womanist theology is my prime inspiration in setting out this framework for a theology of abundance, given that it is based on the complex realities of women of color's lives, privileges their experiences of God and theological reflections, and challenges the multiple forces of oppression that characterize the lives of women of color.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), ix, 5. In setting out a framework for a womanist theology of abundance, I recognize that I am treading a fine line. As a white woman, I am not a womanist because it is a term reserved for women of color working to end multiple oppressions. However, I greatly admire womanist thought, and I recognize that the term womanist is appropriate for this theological framework, since it arises from the lives and thoughts of women of color.

It is important to note at the outset that this theology of abundance is distinct from prosperity theology, which has swept across various U.S. Christian charismatic and evangelical communities, and more recently internationally, in the last half century. Prosperity theology promotes the idea that wealth, health and success are divine gifts from a God who wants His people to prosper materially. It holds that if people express their faith in certain ways, they can overcome poverty and ill health.<sup>7</sup> This theology has its roots in early twentieth century ideas about the power of individuals' minds to change their circumstances, often called the New Thought Movement. The combination of this movement with American ideas of individualism and upward mobility and with Pentecostalism resulted in the emergence of prosperity gospel in the late twentieth century, when television personalities and mega churches started to arise.<sup>8</sup> Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson are notable prosperity preachers who have inspired countless Christians to adopt this worldview. In 2017 when U.S. President Donald Trump was inaugurated, two of the six religious leaders he invited to pray were prosperity gospel advocates.<sup>9</sup>

While Mormonism has within its resources for its own development of a form of prosperity theology—particularly Book of Mormon promises that people would “prosper in the land” if they obeyed the commandments—Mormon women of color did not play up the connections between wealth, health and righteousness.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, Mormon teachings about self-reliance, financial providence and clean living might in fact lead to members improving their finances and health. However, Mormon women of color seldom conflated wealth and health with righteousness. These women, so many of whom had personally experienced structural inequities

---

<sup>7</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Gjelton, “With His Choice of Inauguration Prayer Leaders, Trump Shows His Values,” *National Public Radio*, January 13, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509558608/with-his-choice-of-inauguration-prayer-leaders-trump-shows-his-values>.

<sup>10</sup> See 2 Nephi 1:20 in the Book of Mormon.

which disadvantaged racially or economically marginalized people, were not comfortable with simple equations of financial prosperity and faith.<sup>11</sup>

### *American Women: Rejecting Scarcity, Embracing Abundance*

The theological import of the concept of abundance was most clearly articulated by Nia, who took the concept of abundance in the most revolutionary direction out of all the women with whom I spoke. Nia was a tall and slim woman in her twenties with long black dreadlocks and a great sense of humor. The child of a white mother and black father who divorced when she was young, Nia was raised in the LDS church, often living with her white grandparents. She was typically the only black person in her ward growing up. Nia is the first person in her family to go to college, and she has been academically driven her whole life. During the course of her undergraduate and graduate work, Nia transitioned from politically conservative to liberal. She is now particularly attuned to microaggressions, structures of power, and patterns of behavior that diminish racial minorities and women. For instance, people often tell her she is articulate, but she now understands “what the undercurrent there is when that’s said—I’m an exception, you didn’t expect for this black woman to be articulate. I’d say those are daily things [I deal with].”<sup>12</sup> Within the church she is also becoming adept at sifting out comments and ideas that she finds problematic: “I am constantly having to parse things out. If I sit in church, where is the actual gospel of Jesus Christ? Where’s the truth? Because what I just heard was sexist, homophobic, racist, and anti-intellectual. And so I have to say to myself, ‘Ok, is there a kernel of goodness?’ I have to constantly sift and find what there is to hold onto.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Such equations did not appear to be a dominant message at church or in these women’s informal Mormon networks.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #164 (2015), 6, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Despite the problems she hears in Mormon rhetoric and teachings, Nia is determined to keep and maintain a place for herself within the church. Mormonism is her spiritual home, or as she says, “Mormonism is how spirituality has been packaged for me, how religion has been delivered, how Christ was delivered.”<sup>14</sup> Yet in order to be spiritually fed and find applicability and significance in Mormon teachings, she has had to develop and embrace readings of scripture that promote justice and affirm the full humanity of all people.

Particularly striking to me were Nia’s reflections on the importance of operating out of a place of abundance, rather than out of a place of scarcity. When asked about her favorite scriptural figure, she pointed to Jesus and particularly to the stories of him miraculously feeding thousands with only a few loaves and fish. In both the incident of him feeding the five thousand in Matthew 14 and the four thousand in Matthew 15, his apostles, according to Nia, were “so concerned with him not being able to feed everybody. And yet he does it, and there’s an abundance and more than enough.”<sup>15</sup> Nia then went on to reflect more on what this story conveys to her theologically—and what it conveys is a critique of focusing on scarcity and the importance of thinking in terms of abundance:

[This story conveys] this idea that we all struggle with this idea of scarcity. There's not enough. There's not enough salvation, there's not enough blessings, there's not enough. But there's always enough. There's always enough. Always more than enough. And I love that because I think that story exemplifies that.<sup>16</sup>

In Nia’s reading of this Jesus story, the apostles are working within contexts of scarcity, worried about not having enough to satisfy the hunger of the multitudes and reluctant to try. Even after Jesus performed the first miracle of feeding the five thousand the apostles were still not letting go of the scarcity mindset, worried once again about feeding the next multitude. Yet as Nia

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

states, Jesus is working out of an entirely different framework, a framework of abundance, in which God's blessings and compassion pour out over multitudes. Instead of holding back sustenance because of worries of there not being enough, Jesus gives what there is and it proves to be more than enough. In Nia's reading, life on earth is not a zero-sum game. All can take part in the metaphysical bounty that God offers. What God and Jesus offer cannot be exhausted, so there is no need to hold back blessings, privileges, and opportunities to certain segments of the population.

Nia's thoughts on focusing on abundance rather than scarcity were sparked by an address that Fatimah Salleh, a Mormon theologian of African American, Malaysian, and Puerto Rican descent, gave in 2015.<sup>17</sup> In this address, Salleh passionately preached about the dangers of using religion and scriptures to exclude certain people. "If we are always looking at texts and theology from [the perspective of] who is in and who is out, that's bad theology. We should not be engaged with questions of who is in and who is out. We should be engaged in who is not here, who is not at the table."<sup>18</sup> Good theology for Salleh is theology that identifies the marginalized and works to include them. The stories of Jesus feeding the multitudes, in Salleh's theologizing, are stories that emphasize Jesus's desire to pour out goodness, salvation, and blessings on all humanity, in the face of other worldviews (embodied by the disciples) who believe there is simply not enough for all:

We think there's a scarcity of salvation, when there is none. You perceive in your mind there can only be so much. There can't be more than this. God can't encompass more than this. We can't bring in more than this. It's the scarcity that scares the disciples. They are counting. They are like, "Jesus, you can't do this. We don't have a lot." The power in Jesus is that there is always enough. In fact, there's leftovers. I want to challenge us not

---

<sup>17</sup> Fatimah Salleh, "God of the Gentiles, Theology from the Margins," paper presented at Sunstone's 2015 Theology from the Margins Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, March 2015." Audio available at <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/2015-theology-from-the-margins-conference-keynote-speech-by-fatimah-salleh/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

to see God in a scarce manner -- that there is not enough of God's love, not enough of God's embrace, not enough for xyz people. Don't come to God and say, "We only have this much to give." You come to God and say, "Multiply." You come to God as the brother of Jared did and say, "Touch it." You don't come telling God what the situation is. He knows. He knows there is 5 [loaves] and 2 [fishes.] We think in a way that is scarce. We think in a way that there is not enough. But the miracle in loving Christ is that there is always enough and there is more than enough. Change your theology to fit the fact that you believe in a God who has more than enough love to encompass us all, there is enough ordination for us all, there's more than enough liberty and freedom and love for us all. We don't have to be divided by ... phenotypical, biological [factors].... You are breaking things down out of scarcity. You think it's scarce. It isn't. In fact, it's overflowing. In fact, the miracle is there's an abundance.<sup>19</sup>

Notable in Salleh's commentary on this topic is her vision of what God's abundance consists of. Unlike prosperity preachers who focus on God wanting to shower humans with wealth, Salleh's God's abundance is centered on less tangible blessings.<sup>20</sup> Salleh points to an abundance of divine love, ordination, liberty and freedom for everyone. Moving away from a scarcity mindset and towards a mindset of metaphysical abundance is her focus, which she feels would change practices and priorities in the contemporary LDS church. The Mormon church's historical and contemporary policies to extend priesthood to only certain groups of people based on their biological makeup is a very noticeable subtext to her sermon. In Salleh's theological worldview, God and Christ are ready and willing to fully include and bless every human. It is the disciples who must shake off their fears of scarcity, their tendencies to exclude, categorize, divide, and locate power among an elite few. Like many liberationist theologians, Salleh envisions a God standing in solidarity with the marginalized, willing the privileged to break out of narrow thinking and embrace the expansiveness of God's vision for all.<sup>21</sup> Connection and community,

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Salleh's ideas about scarcity and abundance mindsets may stem from progressive Biblical scholars. I found that Walter Brueggemann clearly articulated this distinction, though his focus is the Hebrew Bible. Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (1999): 342-347.

<sup>21</sup> Particularly powerful is Salleh's reading of the story of the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15: 21-28, who approaches Jesus and asks for her daughter to be healed. Jesus initially ignores her, and his apostles tell him to send her away. Jesus then rebuffs her by telling her that he has been sent to the Israelites and then compares

not division or exclusion, are hallmarks of her theological thought, as is a firm rejection of oppressive forces.

Nia sees certain implications for moving towards a framework of abundance within the LDS church. In her mind, a framework of abundance would mean an entire deconstruction of the current LDS power structures and systems. The LDS system would “need to be completely deconstructed so that the corporation or the organization reflects the people. Right now it doesn’t.”<sup>22</sup> What would such a deconstruction look like? What would implementing an abundance framework within the church look like?

That would look like ordaining everybody because there’s enough ordination to go around. That would look like allowing culture to come through so that I maybe am not getting the same [church] lesson [in every country in the world]. It’s very comforting for people (and troubling) that “I can go to any ward in the world and get the same exact lesson in Sunday School.” I think that’s harmful. I’m glad that comforts you, tourist, in Peru because you’re on holiday. How lovely for you! But is it what the Peruvians need? Is it what they need in Mongolia or Kenya? No. The answer is no.<sup>23</sup>

Nia’s abundance worldview recognizes that there is no need to create an artificial system of division and scarcity regarding ordination, since priesthood is in fact limitless and infinitely available. In the metaphysical bounty that God wants to extend to all, priesthood would not run out if it were extended to women as well as men. There is a limitless supply of it. An abundance framework would also fight against the homogenizing influences of the institutional church, which develops lessons and manuals in Salt Lake City and exports them to be used in every corner of the world. An abundance mentality would honor and promote the many varieties of

---

helping her to taking food away from children and casting it to the dogs. She persists, however, and he does eventually bless her. Salleh’s reading of this story indicates that Jesus, like contemporary church leadership, can learn and grow when listening to the voices of the marginalized. Salleh compares this marginal woman’s faith to the faith of black women in the Mormon church, who have historically been turned away, denied, rejected, and told they are not worthy. Just as this woman persisted in the face of rejection, so have black Mormon women persisted and sought their miracles, amidst contexts of overt racism.

<sup>22</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #164 (2015), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

cultures, customs, and wisdoms that LDS the world over embrace. Opening up more lessons for local differentiation—to address specific needs and specific communities—would resonate with a theology of abundance, which sees abilities, power and godly insight located broadly in humanity, not only in a few institutionally powerful men in Utah.<sup>24</sup> Concomitantly, abundance frameworks would also encompass a radical inclusion of men and women from all over the world into decision-making positions and a deconstruction of current centralized Mormon power structures.

Ultimately for Nia, an abundance worldview is intimately connected to concepts of justice. The top down hierarchical structure of the centralized LDS church which locates so much power and decision making in the hands of elite men and which controls so much of people’s experiences in the worldwide church is an affront to marginalized populations. For Nia, justice demands a dismantling of current power systems in the church. In her vision of the abundance of God’s blessings and the abundance of capabilities in all humans, those that are most marginalized in the current church system would be invited to the table and take part in all decision making. In Nia’s worldview, it is often “the least of these” people—those that are marginalized through gender, nationality, race, and economic status—who have untold depths of vision, wisdom and spiritual power to contribute. When Mormon church leaders “seek to understand as opposed to teach,” as Nia says, they will begin to embark on the path of embracing the abundance God is truly offering to all.<sup>25</sup> For Nia, justice for the marginalized is a necessary precursor to authentic connection and true fellowship among Saints.

---

<sup>24</sup> Currently, one Sunday a month in Relief Society and Elders Quorum classes are reserved for locally-derived lessons and discussions.

<sup>25</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #164 (2015), 13.

Jessica, a mother of five young children, also articulated a framework of abundance when we spoke. Unlike Nia, however, who used the concept of abundance to argue for widespread systemic change and inclusion of marginalized people, Jessica used the concept of abundance to speak of its internal, personal implications. Jessica is a devout Mormon who treasures her Native American heritage. Though she is genetically more European than Native American, she is tightly connected to her Inuit roots, having lived with her Inuit grandfather for a space of years. This grandfather grew up in a tribal community and converted to Mormonism as a young man. With her Inuit heritage and her Mormon heritage as important parts of her identity, Jessica reflected on how those two identities come together. She primarily finds Mormonism to be a helpful, empowering influence in an Inuit context. Because so many of her non-Mormon Inuit cousins have been plagued by alcoholism and have even been killed in alcohol-related deaths, she values Mormonism for emphasizing sobriety and provident living. She, and her grandfather too, also treasure Book of Mormon teachings that promise that the land will return to the Lamanites after the Gentiles turn away from God. The fact that this promise is not conditional on Lamanite righteousness gives her grandfather hope that Native Americans will rise again and prosper.<sup>26</sup>

While her perspectives on issues surrounding Native Americans took up a good portion of our interview, Jessica also spent time reflecting on this time of her life as she bears and raises young children while her husband is in graduate school. It was in this context that she mentioned an abundance mentality:

[You fear] you don't have your own autonomy and your own identity, but I think that really with communion with God or with your communion with your spouse, your identity is actually expanded and empowered and made into something more real and fuller.... We grow up with a lot of these things about how motherhood can destroy your

---

<sup>26</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #151 (2016), 4-5, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

personal identity and your personal autonomy. But when I come back to it, I feel like these experiences are ultimately expanding, and not limiting, not erasing. I feel that way. The more we serve ourselves into communion the more of ourselves we become. The more of ourselves there is to be. If you want to get New Agey about it, it's the abundance mentality. The opposite of the abundance mentality is that you try to take all that you can for yourself, because there's a scarcity and you need to feed yourself. But the abundance mentality is that the more that you give, the more that there will be to give. And the more there is to go around. The more you give of yourself, the more of yourself exists!<sup>27</sup>

Like Nia, Jessica also sees danger in scarcity mindsets that lead individuals to protect their interests at the expense of others. However, her focus on abundance is geared towards personal choices on how to identify and spend one's time and energy, rather than on largescale structural systems of power. Theologically, she is compelled by the idea of communion and that in aligning oneself fully with God and spouse, one does not dissipate one's identity. Rather it is a partnership with God and spouse that she envisions, a partnership that ultimately ennoble, enlivens, and builds the self, rather than dissolves it. The very term "communion," comprised of two Latin words that mean "build together" reflects her perspective on the productive and vitality-bringing nature of partnering fully and devotedly with the divine. As she states, serving God and others does not deplete her identity and autonomy; rather, it sparks an abundance of self, as she grows into her true self and becomes herself more fully.

The "New Agey" ideas about abundance that Jessica references may stem from Mormon business leadership author Stephen Covey, who discusses the "Abundance Mentality." He writes, "Most people are deeply scripted in what I call the Scarcity Mentality. They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there.... The Abundance Mentality, on the other hand, flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It is a paradigm that there is plenty out there and enough to spare for everybody. It results in sharing of prestige, of recognition, of profits, of decision making. It opens possibilities, options, alternatives, and

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 14.

creativity.”<sup>28</sup> Jessica takes this idea of abundance out of a corporate hierarchical business management setting and layers it onto a religious context of communion and personal progression. Her particular layering is centered in her current Mormon female world of nurturing, service, and connection with others. She does not, however, restrict herself and her abundance ideology to only her family and church community. Jessica is highly active in a refugee resettlement organization as a cultural companion to recently arrived refugees from the Middle East. Meeting frequently with these traumatized families, Jessica helps them navigate their new lives in the U.S. She is also a strong advocate of opening the U.S.’s borders to refugees fleeing from persecution and brutality. Jessica’s religious ideas about abundance and communion, rooted in personal reflections of identity constitution and service, do ultimately lead her to an outward orientation to helping the marginalized. In contrast to Nia’s ideas about abundance, Jessica’s abundance ideology is not a catalyst to her turning her critical gaze on the institutional LDS church, nor does it lead to a questioning of contemporary LDS gender roles. In rooting abundance firmly in the individual and her personal decisions to serve others and thus become herself more fully, Jessica finds abundance ideology compatible with LDS church systems and structures.

There is an interesting confluence between Jessica's reflections on autonomy, identity, and the enhancement of self and ethicist Sarah Hoagland’s rejections of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation paradigms. Sarah Hoagland developed her feminist ethical framework specifically for the lesbian community, in which she saw so many women devote themselves to the community and social causes, only to ultimately burn out and give up on such work and sometimes the community itself. Rather than categorizing one’s choices to engage and serve as self-sacrifice, or

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Fireside, 1990), 219-220.

an action which helps others but hurts the self, she advocates what is in effect an abundance mindset. She states, “We can regard our choosing to interact as part of how we engage in this living. Such choices are matters of focus, not sacrifice. That I attend certain things and not others, that I focus here and not there, is part of how I create value. Far from sacrificing myself, or part of myself, I am creating.”<sup>29</sup> Like Jessica, Hoagland does not see a depletion of self result from one’s choices to engage in the world and with others. Rather, she sees abundance, or as she says, creation, resulting from such choices. While it might seem surprising that such confluences can be found in the devout Mormon worldview of Jessica and that of lesbian ethicist Sarah Hoagland, it does make sense on one level. Both Hoagland and Jessica are concerned with female identity-depletion and female autonomy. They both therefore advocate a reconfiguring of perspective when thinking about their female worlds. Their choices to engage and connect—though the substance of engagement and connection may differ in these different communities—result in creation and abundance, not a dissipation of self.

Nia and Jessica represent different poles of Mormon orthodoxy, yet both have found ideologies of abundance spiritually enlivening. As they reflect on abundance, they both lay out fruitful directions a Mormon theology of abundance might take. Nia’s spiritual reflections on abundance—reflections which reject the idea that certain spiritual blessings and privileges are inherently scarce and thus carefully rationed out to only some people—point to the shattering of status quo power structures and the inclusion of the racially, sexually, and otherwise marginalized populations in all decision-making bodies. Her theologizing is born from her experiences as a black Mormon woman navigating systemic racism in the church and American society. Jessica likewise rejects scarcity thinking, but her gaze is trained on the individual—

---

<sup>29</sup> Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics*, 91.

particularly the individual woman who might be tempted to believe that she is losing herself in her gendered Mormon roles. Her theology of abundance and communion affirms the lives and choices of so many Mormon women who devote themselves to service, caretaking, and relationship building. In such devotion, she argues, she engages in a process of coming into herself and developing herself that only expands her identity and well-being.

### ***Southern African Women: Sufficiency and Abundance Within***

Just as Nia and Jessica's theological reflections on abundance emerge from their lived lives in America, Samantha and Warona's ideas likewise arise from their experiences in Southern Africa. As such their ideas about abundant living and selfhood have a slightly different theological flavor and focus than their American counterparts. Rather than envisioning Nia's endless metaphysical bounty and Jessica's self that abounds and increases as she serves herself into communion, Samantha and Warona both alluded to the concept of abundance in their discussion of being enough. They never used the word "abundance," but their emphasis on the importance of knowing that they are "plenty" in themselves, complete as they are, and not deficient ties into ideas of both sufficiency and abundance. This sense of being "plenty" in themselves is not exactly the increasing and growing self that Jessica refers to, but it is a sense that internally women are born abounding in ability and capacity. Forces in society tear women down and make them think they are unworthy or lacking—and even forces in the church at times, as Samantha mentions. But knowing that women are not only enough in themselves, but actually teeming with possibility and resources is a theological vision of human nature that lifts women up and sustains them as they face life's inevitable challenges.

Mormonism is unique among Christian faiths in its embrace of the Fall of Adam and Eve as a fortunate, divinely desired event. In conjunction with this, Mormonism rejects traditional

Christian notions of original sin. The rejection is canonized in the second Article of Faith which states that “Men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression.” The general sense of theological anthropology within Mormonism is that humans are not inherently sinful or broken but are instead filled with divine potential and vast capability.

Samantha spins off of this Mormon sense of optimism about humanity’s inherent nature as she articulates this sense of women—and particularly African Mormon women—needing to know that they are enough and more than enough as they are:

One thing that I've thought a lot in recent years is that if there's anything that I would like to stay focused on in my own life and hopefully teach my children to keep in the forefront of their minds is that understanding that you as a person are enough. You are plenty. You have everything that you need. You are imperfect, but you are complete in the sense that you have everything that you need to be ok. You have it already. There is nothing that someone else has that you need in order to be yourself, in order to be completely and wholly yourself.... It's something that I hope my children will know, especially [my daughter]. I hope she will know that she is enough. She doesn't have to be more than anybody else. She can change and she can be changed. She can have her heart changed. She can have things about her nature changed if that's what she wants, if that's what's going to bring her happiness. We can change things about ourselves, that's not to be more like anybody else, but to be more like ourselves. I hope that they will know that. I feel like I'm in a place where I care more about being the most authentic me I possibly can be. In this gospel I feel like it gives me that space. I honestly do. There are things that I don't know the answers to, there are things that I sometimes question, but I still feel I am still able to be completely myself. And if I feel like someone has tried to put me into a little box, it's always ... been that person doing it, not God. I just hope my children know that being yourself is enough. You don't have to be anybody else.<sup>30</sup>

Here Samantha expresses an emphatic vision of humans being born complete, sufficient, and full of possibility. In her theological vision of human nature, change is possible and positive if it leads to happiness, but only if it is a change toward “be[ing]more like ourselves” and not to conform to the hopes or expectations of others. Even God rejects conformity in her theological estimation, since in her experience, God has never been the one to constrain her choices or “put her in a box.” There’s a profound sense of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and flexibility running

---

<sup>30</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 21.

through her theologizing about human nature. Samantha uses the language of “enough” and “plenty”—sufficiency and abundance—to express her conviction that each human is born with a wholeness and a profusion of abilities and internal resources. Using those abilities and internal resources, an individual can work to rise more fully into her true authentic and unique self.

Samantha’s repeated refrain on the importance of knowing that you are enough in yourself implies that she has encountered forces in her life that tell her and others that they are lacking, deficient, and not enough. As a woman of color who dealt with systemic racism and poverty in South Africa, she has certainly experienced systems and individuals that have not seen her and members of her Cape Coloured community as fully human. Scholars have attested to the toll colonization and Apartheid have taken on these communities of mixed race people who were systematically segregated and relegated to their own “group area.”<sup>31</sup> Patriarchal ideology was also a part of her Cape Coloured world, as it is in virtually every community around the globe.<sup>32</sup>

While the LDS church has empowered her in many ways and given her important resources to formulate her conviction of people’s inherent wholeness, Samantha has also seen it contribute to messages which imply that African black and Coloured women are not enough and complete in themselves. Samantha recounted this as she talked about being a leader in the LDS Young Women organization in South Africa:

I look at these pictures in the *Ensign*, and I see these articles and I see these Mormon videos with these smiling beautiful blonde white girls with perfect teeth and how they are just so happy to defer to their parents and their husbands and their brothers in everything they are, and they are so happy. It makes me feel sick. I look at them, and I say to the young women, “You are not those people. You are an African child. You have a different upbringing. You have different perspectives, and it's okay. It's okay to speak. It's okay to ask questions. It's okay. You don't have to be a white person to be a Mormon.” That's my

---

<sup>31</sup> Elaine Salo, “Social Construction of Masculinity on the Racial and Gendered Margins of Cape Town,” in *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society*, eds. T. Shefer, K. Ratele, N. Shabalala, and R. Buikema (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2007), 162.

<sup>32</sup> “South Africa – Family Life in Colored Families,” *Marriage and Family Encyclopedia*, <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1615/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Colored-Families.html>, accessed May 1, 2018.

point. You are still very much who you are. It's okay to be who you are. Or you don't have to be an American to be a Mormon. You don't have to speak like them. You don't have to pray like them. You don't have to dress like the sister missionaries you see in the *Ensign*. There are other ways to be modest too. You can find who you are and that's perfectly acceptable to the Lord.<sup>33</sup>

For Samantha, LDS messages that present a narrow vision of ideal appearance and behavior are damaging to African young women. She is aware of the power of Mormon media and its ability to promote messages of inclusion or exclusion, depending on who is represented. In contrast to what she often sees in LDS media, Samantha envisions an abundance of ways to live, look, and be Mormon. Gospel principles are important to her but embracing diverse ways to live out those principles is essential if people of all nationalities, races, and cultures are to be uplifted. In her experience, specific (and Utah culturally informed) prescriptions for conformity undermine Africans' sense of wholeness and being "plenty" in themselves. A multiplicity of approaches to living out principles and to becoming the unique individual God has created a person to be is an unadulterated good.

Warona from Botswana similarly held up the importance of embracing one's unique self in her final reflections on lessons she has learned in life. Intriguingly, she also mentioned the importance of moving away from a competition/scarcity mindset:

My Heavenly Father is going to use me with my weaknesses, with how loud I am, with how easy it is for me to smile, and how sensitive I am. He's going to use you just the way you are. I've also learned that when you get promoted at work, they're not taking a star from somebody else's shoulder to give it to you, so it doesn't have to be a competition. Even in the spiritual things. When Heavenly Father gives you a blessing, He's not taking from another person's pot of gold.<sup>34</sup>

Warona shares Samantha's conviction that God values people in their individuality and that they, as individuals, are infinitely precious to God. For Warona, as for Samantha, there is an

---

<sup>33</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 10-11.

<sup>34</sup> Gender, Narrative and Religious Practice in Southern Africa, #30 (2015), 20.

abundance of ways to live out a worthy Mormon life. Worthiness is not contingent on homogeneity. This is an insight that has no doubt helped her as she has made choices to further her career as Botswana's first female military officer. These choices have meant leaving her baby for months at a time to complete the required military service, thus putting her outside Mormon and Botswana gender role expectations. Nevertheless, Warona is a devoted Mormon and has served in the highest leadership positions available to women on a ward and stake level. Her experience with God has indeed taught her that God needs her as she is, with all her unique talents, questions, vision, and ambition, to help elevate and contribute to her community. Her subsequent insight about moving away from a competitive/scarcity framework—that God's ability to pour forth blessings are not finite—echoes Nia's beliefs about God's metaphysical abundance. The subtext of Warona's thinking could very well be her experience with losing her newborn baby son. This son only survived a few days, and for a period of time Warona found it painful to see other women and their healthy babies. In Botswana, which has one of the highest HIV rates in the world and which has an infant mortality rate higher than most Western countries, death is an ever-present part of life.<sup>35</sup> Warona's realization that blessings are not a zero-sum game and one person's blessings do not entail loss for another person has helped bring her peace as she has navigated her career and motherhood. Warona, in the space of just a few sentences, thus brings together both the theme of metaphysical abundance and the theme of internal abundance, as God affirms and appreciates women in all their uniqueness.

Samantha and Warona's reflections point to fruitful directions for constructing a theology of abundance. Arising from their own lives and experiences, their wisdom about embracing and

---

<sup>35</sup> Botswana in 2015 had an infant mortality rate of 35 deaths per 1000 live births. The U.S. has a rate of 6. Scandinavian countries have a rate of 2. Afghanistan has rate of 66. See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN>.

accepting oneself, about not trying to compare and measure up to certain norms formulated in other communities, and about the infinite wholeness of one's unique individual self, are religious insights that can undergird a Mormon theology of abundance. These women from Southern Africa therefore add a self-focused dimension to the theme of non-oppressive connectedness which has undergirded so many Mormon women's thinking and priorities. Developing a healthy, generous, and affirming relationship with one's own unique and authentic self is a hallmark of their thoughts on sufficiency and abundance.

### ***Mexican Women: An Abundance of Revelation***

While Southern African women described an abundance of internal resources and strength inherent in every woman, Mexican Mormon women described an abundance of spiritual power available to them. This sense of spiritual power particularly emerged as they discussed their revelatory experiences connecting them to the post-mortal and divine realms. Dreams were an important element of their spirituality, and through dreams, these women described a depth and breadth of spiritual connection that was striking. These dreams strengthened connections and relationships to not only divine parents, but also to earthly parents and grandparents who passed on before them.

Ana gives us a glimpse of how such dreams often function in these women's lives. She mentioned dreaming that her father accepted the Mormon proxy temple rituals that were performed for him following his death: "The week we came back from Mexico [City]—that's where we were sealed—I dreamed. I had such a special dream that when I woke up I felt so energized. When I woke up and went and told my dream to my mother. When I'd described the dream, mother hugged me and said, 'Dad chose you to tell us that he has accepted the gospel.'"<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Project, #173 (2015), 17. "A la semana que regresamos de México – porque allí fue donde nos sellamos – soñé. Tuve un sueño tan especial que cuando desperté me desperté muy

Both Ana and her mother unreservedly accepted this dream as revelation. As Ana later mentioned, dreams are an important spiritual conduit for Mexicans:

We are a dreaming people. We're a dreaming people, so I dream many things. Everything has a meaning. My mother has died, my father has died, all of my brothers who I loved so much died, and we have this help, that they can come to us in dreams to guide us and help us. . . . If we are good, we can understand many of the things they tell us, what they foretell, because we admired them when they were here on earth. . . . I have a lot of experiences with this.<sup>37</sup>

Appropriate to her Mormon Mexican identity, Ana's dreams—and the dreams of other Mormon women—often served to strengthen connections between ancestors and the living. Given Mormonism's emphasis on redeeming the dead and turning the hearts of the children to their fathers, it is appropriate that Mexican Mormon women's spirituality so often emphasized the bonds between the generations, living and dead.

Dreams and visions have been an important characteristic of female religiosity and piety in Mexico for hundreds of years. Edward Wright-Rios discusses the power of visionary and prophetic women's narratives and practice in Mexican history, and he traces this part of Mexican women's piety to Catholicism. "The tight braiding of female piety and mysticism became a prominent feature of Catholicism in the Middle Ages, and it remained profoundly influential afterward. Visions became the centerpiece of most claims of sanctity for women."<sup>38</sup> He describes how the role of the devout visionary Mexican Catholic woman—particularly one Madre Matiana who described the catastrophes coming to the nation in the face of liberalism and secularism—

---

acelerada. Me fui al cuarto de mi mamá y le platiqué mi sueño. Cuando le platiqué mi sueño, mi mamá me abrazó y me dijo, 'Papá te ha escogido a ti para decirnos que él ha aceptado el evangelio.'"

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. "Somos un pueblo de soñadores, entonces yo sueño muchas cosas, y todas cosas tienen un significado. Mi mamá y falleció, mi papá ya falleció, todos de mis hermanos de los que quería yo mucho fallecieron, y tenemos esa ayuda, que ellos pueden venir a nosotros a través de los sueños y guiarnos y ayudarnos.... Si nosotros estamos bien, podemos entender muchos de tales cosas que ellos nos dicen, nos previenen, precisamente porque los admiramos cuando estuvieron aquí en la tierra. Sabemos que fueron buenas personas, entonces. Yo tengo muchas experiencias con eso."

<sup>38</sup> Edward Wright-Rios, *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and Popular Culture in Modern Mexico* (Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 29.

took the country by storm and became intertwined with nationalism and Catholic revivalism in the nineteenth century.

Mexico's female visionary culture, combined with Mormonism's own visionary history, have opened space for Mexican Mormon women to experience and claim this powerful spiritual phenomenon. Many of Mormonism's foundational stories center on Joseph Smith's visions of God and angels.<sup>39</sup> Other early church leaders had dreams or visions that they considered revelatory and helped shape the direction of the church.<sup>40</sup> Nineteenth-century Mormon women likewise experienced revelatory dreams and visions. Lydia Knight's dream of Joseph Smith's approaching visit was considered by Joseph Smith to be revelation from God, and Prescindia Huntington saw angels on top of the Kirtland temple.<sup>41</sup> Stories of revelatory visions and dreams may be less common now in standard American Mormon rhetoric, but Mormonism continues to affirm dreams and visions as legitimate vehicles for personal revelation.<sup>42</sup>

Like Ana's dream, Pilar's visionary experiences also incorporate and affirm unique Mormon elements and beliefs. At one point in her life, Pilar became extremely ill, and while she was at the hospital, she had a dream that gave her comfort and religious insight. She said, "While I slept I had a dream about my grandmother; I saw her going around me in the air in circles with several sisters dressed in white. I looked at my grandmother and she was smiling with me."<sup>43</sup>

This dream became particularly meaningful for her later when she went to the temple for the first

---

<sup>39</sup> See D. Michael Quinn's chapter, "Visions and the Coming Forth of the *Book of Mormon*." D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1998), 136-177.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Hokulani K. Aikau writes that George Q. Cannon "had a vision in 1851 that traced Polynesian lineage to The Book and Mormon and to Israel. This articulation expanded the racial and religious boundaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Aikau, *A Chosen People*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson, *Daughters of Light* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 29, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Richard G. Scott, "How to Obtain Revelation and Inspiration for your Personal Life," *Ensign*, May 2012, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/05/how-to-obtain-revelation-and-inspiration-for-your-personal-life?lang=eng>

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous, unarchived oral life history interview by Caroline Kline, March 22, 2015, Veracruz, Mexico, transcript 1A, 4. My translator directly translated the interview into English, so no Spanish transcription exists.

time and saw women dressed in the same clothes she saw women in her dream wearing a few months earlier. “I could not stop the tears, and then the sister who was helping me in the Temple said: ‘If you don't want to do this you don't have to do it.’ I explained to her that I already had seen the temple clothing I was dressed in, that when I was very sick a few months before I'd had a dream about my grandmother and saw her dressed in temple clothing like the one I was wearing, but that my grandma is already dead. Then the sister hugged me with much love. This was my entering to the temple for the first-time experience and it was unforgettable.”<sup>44</sup> Notably the temple—and the religious rituals done in the temple which binds family members together for eternity—played a role in both Ana and Pilar’s most moving and meaningful dreams.

Perhaps the most striking dream I heard about as I interviewed Mormon women in Veracruz, Mexico, was one which featured Heavenly Mother. The existence of an embodied divine woman, the consort of God the Father and mother of human spirits, is a belief treasured by many Mormons. However, Heavenly Mother is rarely spoken of in Mormon meetings. Mormons church leaders model male God language, consistently calling God “Heavenly Father,” and President Gordon B. Hinckley explicitly instructed Mormons in the 1990s to not pray to Heavenly Mother. Folk doctrines which justify Mormons’ silence about Heavenly Mother have arisen over the years, most notably one which claims that Heavenly Father wants Heavenly Mother to remain hidden since he is protecting Heavenly Mother from the taunts that humans often level at deity.<sup>45</sup>

Because of this “sacred silence” that has arisen around Heavenly Mother, Liliana’s dream about Heavenly Mother speaking to her and telling her to disseminate her message of love to other women is remarkable. Liliana considers this dream to be revelatory:

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, *LDS Reference Encyclopedia*, 309–10.

One day I had a dream about Heavenly Mother. She spoke to me. I was in the town where I was born, and I was under an avocado tree. And suddenly I heard this voice. She began, "I love all my daughters." It was a beautiful voice. "I love all of them and I want all of them to come back to me." I started to look up in heaven. It was a sweet voice. Not like my voice. It was a voice I never heard in my life. That voice filled my heart. "I love my daughters and I want them to come to me. I know how much they suffer. I know how difficult it is to be there. I know that when they leave here, I cry because when they go there I know how difficult it is, but I want them to know that I love them and that they are not alone because I want all of them to come back to me." Then I found out where the voice came from -- it came from earth! There were two little dry sticks and a mist coming between them, and that was her voice. I was always taught that Sacrament Meeting was the most important meeting, but she said to go to all your meetings. Relief society, Sacrament meeting, conferences, all types of meetings, and if it is about spiritual things, it will bring you close to me. "Attend it. Go to it. I love all my daughters. I want all of them to come to me. I know how difficult the world is for them, you may come to me, I'm waiting for you." That was the voice. She said, "Tell my daughters. Tell them."

I shared this dream with my sister who was having problems. I felt this dream was for her. I told her we don't just have Heavenly Father but also Heavenly Mother. Not just Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, also our Heavenly Mother is with us. I shared with [my daughter] and everyone I could. But there was a time in Relief Society in our ward when I went to Relief Society, and the teacher had all these visual aids. I felt a warm air come to me and I felt that I had to bear my testimony that day. I said, I have to bear my testimony? The class was on Heavenly Mother. And I said, "This is a very special dream, and I don't share this with many people except those that I feel the Spirit telling me I should tell, but the Spirit is telling me I should talk about it." And on that day, we were talking about Heavenly Mother so I had to give my testimony. There was a sister who was crying. Tears ran down and down, and she made me cry too. She was sobbing. I thought, why is she crying so much? When Relief Society was over, she said, "Thank you for your testimony -- it's an answer to my prayer. I've been fasting the entire week and asking Heavenly Father if Heavenly Mother is true. And today he answered my prayer through you. I think I'm going to write this down." That was a testimony to me that the dream was real because it was an answer to a prayer, and it was from Heavenly Mother.<sup>46</sup>

Liliana's dream about a loving, empathetic God the Mother is striking in its combination of distinctly Mormon elements (encouraging her to go to her Mormon church meetings) and elements atypical of Mormon conceptions of embodied Deity (a voice emerging as mist between two dry sticks, coming from inside the earth). The dream is also striking in the way it explicitly authorized Liliana to prophetically speak with some sense of authority about God the Mother to

---

<sup>46</sup>Anonymous, unarchived oral life history interview by Caroline Kline, March 21, 2015, Veracruz, Mexico, transcript 4A, 17-18.

other Mormon women. “Tell my daughters. Tell them,” Heavenly Mother told Liliana. That Liliana and other women in this class found the courage to talk about Heavenly Mother, given Mormons’ typical reluctance to mention her, is itself unusual, and the courage it must have taken for Liliana to disseminate this message in a church setting cannot be underestimated. As Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff mentions of female visionaries in previous centuries, Liliana’s dream gave her “a voice and a belief in herself as chosen to speak,” and thus empowered her to assert herself as having a role to play in carrying God’s message to others.<sup>47</sup> Liliana’s spiritual gift of receiving revelation through dreams allowed her to commune directly with deity. Even more revolutionarily, it compelled her to act as a messenger for Heavenly Mother to the women in her ward, who, as Liliana relates, were likewise hungry to know more about her.

The Mexican women I interviewed did not directly theologize about the concept of abundance, but their lived experience of God opening the heavens and pouring down on them knowledge of divine and post-mortal realms can inform a womanist theology of abundance. In their worldview and experience, God has abundantly endowed these women with spiritual gifts and abilities to part the veil and to strengthen connections to deity and previous generations of family members. Through this abundance of spiritual power, Mexican women therefore cultivated an abundance of relational ties and connections to departed parents and grandparents, who appeared to them in dreams and communicated important insights or comfort to the woman. Mormonism’s affirmation of personal revelation from God—through dreams, visions, feelings, sudden insights, voices, etc.—is ultimately an important counterweight to Mormonism’s emphasis on church hierarchy and authority. It is also an element of piety that these Mexican Mormon women found inspiring, expanding, and ennobling, as they used their spiritual gifts to

---

<sup>47</sup> Petroff, “Introduction: The Visionary Tradition in Women’s Writing,” 6.

experience vistas and realms outside their mundane, everyday lives. These women's experiences with God reaching through the veil to personally enlighten them serves as a powerful example of one way in which an abundance theology can manifest itself in women's lives.

### ***Developing a Mormon Womanist Theology of Abundance***

#### *Embracing the Wisdom of Women Who Have Come Before*

As feminist and womanist theologians have argued, the lived experiences of women are an essential source of theological insight when constructing theology.<sup>48</sup> The stories, insights, and scriptural reflections of everyday Mormon women like Ana, Nia, Warona, Samantha, Pilar, Jessica, and Liliana are therefore important sources in developing a Mormon theology of abundance. Womanists have also argued that authoritative sources for ethics and theology can be found in a variety of formats and places. Womanists consider authoritative folk wisdom, the stories of their grandmothers, autobiographies and literature written by black women and other women of color, and the scholarship of black women and other women of color.<sup>49</sup> Uncovering and lifting up the words and wisdom of women of color is an essential project for womanists. Inspired by this methodology which places authoritative weight on a variety of women's stories, thoughts, and writings, I turn to the theological reflections of Chieko Okazaki, former General Relief Society Presidency member, as another potentially fruitful source of authority in constructing a Mormon womanist theology of abundance. Many of her reflections and thoughts echo or expand upon the visions and religious imaginations of the women discussed above.

---

<sup>48</sup> Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices (1986)," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), 118.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. While most womanist thought, theory, and theology is articulated by black women and focuses on the lived experiences of black women, many womanists also draw insights from the lives of non-black women of color. Layli Phillips, for example, describes womanism as "a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving." Layli Phillips, "Womanism: On Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), xx.

A native of Hawaii of Japanese descent and a convert from Buddhism, Okazaki was a much beloved speaker and writer. She stands as one of Mormonism's most prolific Mormon women theologians, having produced nine books of religious thought and reflection. Okazaki too often saw in Mormon women a sense of insufficiency, of un-wholeness, of worry that they were not good enough and were falling short. As a woman of color who treasured her own Japanese Buddhist upbringing as well as her adopted Mormon culture and beliefs, she was more aware than many about the pitfalls of the inevitable exportation of culture along with gospel. Her famous sermon, "Baskets and Bottles," discusses this balance of finding and accepting new ways to live out the gospel and pushing gently against the conformity that Samantha and Nia decry:

The doctrines of the gospel are indispensable. They are essential, but the packaging is optional. Let me share a simple example to show the difference between the doctrines of the church and the cultural packaging. Here is a bottle of Utah peaches, prepared by a Utah homemaker to feed her family during a snowy season. Hawaiian homemakers don't bottle fruit. They pick enough fruit for a few days and store it in baskets like this for their families.... The basket and the bottle are different containers, but the content is the same: fruit for a family. Is the bottle right and the basket wrong? No, they are both right. They are containers appropriate to the culture and the needs of the people. And they are both appropriate for the content they carry, which is the fruit.<sup>50</sup>

Okazaki went on to explain that the fruit that sustains is the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. How these ideals are packaged in various cultures matters not at all, so long as the basic principles are the same. With teachings like this, Okazaki strongly affirmed individual and cultural diversity within a Mormon context. In so doing she emphasized a Mormonism that was expansive in its scope, robust and flexible enough to work alongside global members' cultural loyalties and diverse worldviews. In addition to being particularly sensitive to the loyalties and cultural tensions of global Mormons,

---

<sup>50</sup> Chieko Okazaki, "Baskets and Bottles," address given at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Annual General Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, April 1996, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1996/04/baskets-and-bottles?lang=eng>.

Okazaki also had an expansive vision of women's spiritual capacities and gifts. Much like the Mexican women I spoke with, Okazaki envisioned a world in which angels might interact with women and give them divine, direct guidance for their lives:

We say that we believe that God “will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” (Article of Faith 9.) Revelation to the Church will come through the prophet, but doesn't that article of faith make you ask questions? What are those great and important things? And who will he reveal them to? Could you be one of those who is struggling to “understand the matter, and consider the vision”? If you are, then you're one of those worthy to receive an angelic visitor. Furthermore, the promise of Joseph Smith to the Nauvoo Relief Society on 28 April 1844 was this: “Angels cannot be restrained from being your associates” .... Has this promise come true for you? Both Joseph Smith and Alma promise the ministrations of angels to women.... Is it possible that we're asking the wrong questions and limiting the operation of the Holy Ghost, cutting off the spiritual gifts that the Father wants to bestow upon us, and feeling fear rather than faith?<sup>51</sup>

While Okazaki affirmed male hierarchy's role in obtaining revelation for the church, she also simultaneously emphasized that women should look to themselves for revelation pertaining to the kingdom of God. In her religious imagination, women are entitled to spectacular spiritual manifestations and revelation. It is women's fear and the limited vision of their own capacities which prevents more women from experiencing an abundance of spiritual gifts and manifestations. Okazaki, along with the women in Mexico, believed in the importance of women developing, honoring, and trusting in their spiritual capacities to receive revelation from the divine.

Okazaki also echoed Samantha's reflection on the importance of women knowing that they are not only enough, they are plenty. One of Okazaki's books, actually entitled *Being Enough*, similarly emphasizes that what women in their individuality can bring to God and the kingdom are infinitely acceptable to the divine. She writes, “Who you are is enough. What you

---

<sup>51</sup> Chieko Okazaki, *Aloha* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1995), 177-178.

have to give is enough. Your best is sufficient. Your light shines enough to be a standard.”<sup>52</sup> Okazaki herself ties together the concept of sufficiency with the concept of abundance in her reading of the widow’s mite story: “I see in Jesus’ praise of this poor widow a joyous acceptance, even a celebration of her gift. He attested that her offering was not only enough, but was incredibly generous, unbelievably abundant. What she had to give was enough and more than enough.... Jesus was probably the only person in all of Jerusalem who looked at this woman and saw that she had given with abundance.”<sup>53</sup> Others might have seen scarcity in the widow’s life and offering, but in Okazaki’s reading, Jesus saw abundance. What she had—what she was—was eminently acceptable to and appreciated by Jesus. To Okazaki, there is a wholeness to each of us, and what we have to offer the world in our uniqueness is not meager. On the contrary, it is abundant.

When Samantha described her hopes about her children knowing that they are enough, even plenty, as they are, I suspected that Samantha had read Okazaki’s book. However, when I asked Samantha about Okazaki, Samantha had never heard of her. Samantha’s lack of knowledge of one of Mormonism’s most prolific female general leaders points to one of the difficulties Mormon women have in embracing and holding up other women as spiritual authorities. Within Mormonism there is little institutional memory of women’s specific theological insights. While the theological reflections of male general leaders are often repeated in lessons, talks, and teaching manuals, there is little opportunity for women’s religious reflections to be likewise emphasized. Since women general leaders now only occupy their positions of leadership for five years or so, there is also little chance for them to make a significant impact through large-scale projects. Thus, an integral part of a Mormon womanist

---

<sup>52</sup> Chieko Okazaki, *Being Enough* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2002), 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

theology of abundance is to recover, emphasize, and treat as authoritative the wisdom and insights of Mormonism's marginal theologians whose reflections are in danger of being forgotten or lost. Okazaki is a prime source for authoritative insight in constructing such a theology, given both the sheer volume of her writing and her inclusive, sensitive theological reflections.

*Drawing on Women in the Scriptures*

Highlighting scriptural archetypes to whom women can relate and draw insight has been an important methodological device for womanist theologians. For instance, Delores Williams, a founding mother of womanist theology, grounded her theology in the scriptural figure of Hagar. For generations, Williams wrote, many black women have looked to Hagar for wisdom and inspiration. Like black women in American history, Hagar experienced slavery, oppression from men and women, poverty, homelessness, and exploitation of her body. However, Williams recounts, Hagar also encountered a God who spoke to her and helped her to "make a way out of no way."<sup>54</sup> This God might not have led her to liberation, but God did help her to survive her oppression and time in the wilderness.

This methodological device of highlighting scriptural archetypes whose challenges in life and experiences of God resonate with certain groups of women is another fruitful direction for the construction of a Mormon womanist theology of abundance. Mary, Mother of Jesus, has distinct potential as an important figure for Mormon women on the margins. As a woman navigating her path in a system of colonization and oppression, as a woman who prophetically proclaims what will become a large part of her son's societal vision and mission, as a person who courageously says yes to God's call despite the real danger to her life, Mary's story can be

---

<sup>54</sup> Delores Williams writes that the phrase, "God helped them make a way out of no way," has been used by many black women to describe their experiences with God amidst various challenges. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6.

particularly resonant for Mormon women of color and offers them a model of strength, vision, and power amidst wider systems of oppression.

*Mary, Mother of Jesus: Encapsulating Abundance and Mapping a Way Forward*

Eve may have seemed the obvious choice as an important archetype for Mormon women. Not only do Mormon women in temples assume the place of Eve in sacred ceremonies, Mormons also have a somewhat unique take on earth's first woman. Unlike most Christian faiths which have traditionally conflated Eve with sin for eating the apple and causing the Fall, modern Mormonism reconceptualizes Eve as enlightened, courageous and inspired. In choosing to eat the fruit, she led the way in propelling humankind on its cosmic journey to obtain bodies, gain experience and wisdom, and progress forward toward eventual divinity. In making that choice, Eve had to navigate ambiguity and conflicting commandments. She had to make a painful and courageous decision to move humanity forward, though it would eventually cost her her life and result (somewhat paradoxically) in her own—and thus her daughters'—subordination to men. In this framework, Eve becomes something akin to a Jesus figure.<sup>55</sup>

When I asked Mormon women from Southern Africa, Mexico, and the U.S. who their favorite scriptural figure was, I expected Eve to be repeatedly named. However, she never was. Rather, a wide variety of responses emerged. Job was mentioned several times in Mexico and Botswana. Nephi was mentioned in all locations. Esther, Ruth, Jesus, and many more were named. But it was a small handful of women's reflections on Mary, Mother of Jesus which caught my attention.

Mary, Mother of Jesus may be a surprising choice as a scriptural model who might map a path forward for Mormon women on the margins. Many religious thinkers over the centuries

---

<sup>55</sup> Kline, "The Mormon Conception of Women's Nature," 191-192.

have used Mary to represent ideal (passive) femininity.<sup>56</sup> This has led some feminists to reject her as an empowering figure for women.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Mariology in Catholicism, has, according to Mary Jo Weaver, “generally been used to preserve pure femininity, support complementarity, and justify male dominion. As a symbol of perfect motherhood and spotless virginity, Mary embodies an impossible combination of attributes.”<sup>58</sup> While Mary is not emphasized in Mormonism, the few teachings Mormons have about Mary do not describe her as immaculately conceived and perpetually a virgin.<sup>59</sup> Institutional Mormon teachings instead tend to focus on her as an obedient woman and loving mother.<sup>60</sup> However, the women I interviewed who spoke of Mary had a more expansive vision of Mary that did not reduce her to feminine passivity or a model of obedience. Rather, they saw in her story aspects of their own, both in the challenges she endured and in her courage, strength, and spiritual power. When read in this light, Mary embodies a theological conception of abundance, and her story offers empowering insights and confluences for Mormon women on the margins.

Mary’s power for marginal Mormon women is first located in Mary’s positionality in ancient Israel. Like many of the women I spoke to, Mary had to navigate a world shaped by poverty and systemic inequities. In Mary’s time, Israel was occupied by the Romans, and it was because of a decree by the Roman emperor Augustus that she and Joseph returned to his hometown of Bethlehem to register for a Roman census. She was a girl of a colonized people,

---

<sup>56</sup> Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 201.

<sup>57</sup> Kari Borresen, “Mary in Catholic Theology,” in *Mary in the Churches*, eds. Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 48-56.

<sup>58</sup> Weaver, *New Catholic Women*, 201.

<sup>59</sup> Mary is not emphasized in Mormonism, but she is one of only six named women in the Book of Mormon, where she is associated with the Tree of Life in Nephi’s vision. This evocative and potentially empowering association has not been emphasized in Mormon teachings.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Susan Easton Black, “Mary, His Mother,” *Ensign*, January 1991.

dealing with the strains of that oppression. Poverty, burdens, and the navigation of a system in which she and her people were at the mercy of an imperial power are backdrops to her story.

Samantha, a Cape Coloured native of South Africa who had experienced her own fair share of structural inequities, was particularly sensitive to Mary's status as a vulnerable unwed and pregnant girl, navigating a harsh political and social environment. When asked about a scriptural figure that was particularly meaningful for her, she pointed to Mary and the internal strength she had to have to succeed in her mission to bear and raise Jesus amidst such oppression:

She [Mary] is the poster woman for unplanned pregnancy. She literally has an unplanned pregnancy. And she has to navigate a social system and class that I can't even begin to fathom. And she does it with such grace... I'm sure she encountered people who just weren't nice to her and made things difficult for her. So I look at her and I go, "She did a very hard thing, and she didn't ask for any of this, and she was a woman and she had so little power, socially or politically, even within her own family. And yet she had such power because she was chosen." So she must have had such power that I don't even know if they could have even appreciated who she was and what she must have had in her own self. The kind of strength that she must have had. So her story is pretty inspiring to me.<sup>61</sup>

Samantha sees in Mary a marginal figure, oppressed politically, socially, and economically, who nevertheless drew upon her inherent strength and power to navigate her difficult and dangerous mission. For Samantha, Mary embodies a type of internal abundance. Though marginalized in virtually every category, Mary had strengths and reserves abounding within, which she was able to call forth. Samantha's Mary embodies unbounded resilience.

Despite this context of political and social oppression that might have made her powerless, Mary is powerful in her response to the challenges life laid out before her. In the face of the angel Gabriel's pronouncement that Mary would bear God's son, she courageously assents. This assent, often known as Mary's fiat, is read by some feminist theologians as an

---

<sup>61</sup> Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, #155 (2016), 20.

enthusiastic yes to God sprung from her own free will and choice. Rosemary Radford Ruether sees in Mary's assent a model for the new redemptive community of Jesus, a community based on voluntary association and mutual choice.<sup>62</sup> Mary's "free act of faith"—she doesn't consult with Joseph or anyone else before agreeing—suggests to Ruether a co-creatorship between God and humanity.<sup>63</sup> Other liberative interpretations of Mary's story suggest a Mary full of vision and power, as well as a God who sees and embraces the lowly and sets them on divine missions. God's choice of a poor, vulnerable girl for this mission indicates to Weaver God's preference for the poor, and Mary thus "represents those classes of the subjugated who will be lifted up and filled with good things when the Messiah comes."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Mary's story signifies the abundance of abilities and courage residing in people inhabiting "the least" position in society. Mary—poor, young, female, and colonized subject—believed she was capable of seeing this mission through. She believed that she could withstand the shame and very real threat to her own life an out of wedlock pregnancy would visit upon her. Though she had every reason to shrink from this mission, she embraced it with an abundance of courage and hope that she would be strong enough to bear God into the world. Mary's response in Luke 1:38, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word," is sometimes read as feminine self-effacement and passive obedience. However, my reading sees this assent as a courageous step into the unknown, as she becomes a partner to God in bringing out the salvation of humanity.

While this openness to partnering with God in humanity's salvation involved motherhood in Mary's case, my reading of Mary resists a reduction of her importance to her role as mother. Jesus himself forcefully refuted a reduction of women to their reproductive functions. When a

---

<sup>62</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 154.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Weaver, *New Catholic Women*, 204.

woman in a crowd called out to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the paps that gave thee suck.” Jesus replied to her “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, as Jesus indicates, Mary should not be reduced to her role as mother. Motherhood is a key factor in her story, but Mary symbolizes far more than this one role. She is a model for active purposeful agency and discipleship as she sets out to accomplish the mission God has given her. Her femaleness is not defined by motherhood.

Mary particularly emerges as a symbolically rich figure for women on the margins in two stories following the annunciation. First is the story of Mary’s meeting with her cousin Elizabeth. After Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, prophesies that Mary’s child will be the Lord, Mary in a passage known as the Magnificat, in turn prophesies the “revolutionary transformation of an unjust social order.”<sup>66</sup> With this advent of the Messiah into the world, Mary says, God has defeated the oppressors, and has “scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts/ He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree./ He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.”<sup>67</sup> In this prophetic song of praise, Mary sets out the framework of what will become much of Jesus’s social mission of lifting up the poor and the marginal. Like her son, Mary is no meek supporter of the status quo. She too seeks justice for the oppressed. In this passage, Mary, poor, female, and carving out life in an occupied land, emerges as a prophetic figure, abounding with spiritual power, speaking aloud her vision of breaking down the social barriers that push some people down and raise others up. In this passage Mary envisions an abundance of justice for those who have been marginalized and oppressed.

---

<sup>65</sup> Luke 11: 27-28.

<sup>66</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 153.

<sup>67</sup> Luke 1:51-53.

Mary again emerges as a figure of insight and vision in John 2 at the wedding feast at Cana where Jesus performs his first miracle. She is the initiator, the catalyst, the motivating force in the story. The passage reads, “And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, “Woman, what wilt thou have me to do for thee? That will I do; for mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.”<sup>68</sup> Mary knows her son is capable of miraculous power, and it is she who sets the stage for him to turn the water into wine. Not only does she first prompt him by pointing out the problem, she then prepares the way for the miracle by having the servants stand ready to give Jesus anything he might need. Though Jesus is reluctant to act, saying, “mine hour is not yet come,” Mary understands that this is the time and place for him to begin his ministry and mission. Twice she goads him to take this step forward, to show the people who he is. Her wise judgement, her decisiveness, her confidence, and her vision of Jesus’s potential bring about this first startling, miraculous event in Jesus’ ministry. It is appropriate that this story, connected with themes of divine abundant generosity and concern as well as themes of God meeting us in our individual crises, is driven by Mary, who knows that her son has come to offer a new vision of divine abundance.

In short, the Biblical Mary of Nazareth stands as a potentially powerful model of insight and strength for Mormon women of color who similarly say yes to God, step into the unknown, confront systemic oppression, exercise agentive proactivity, and display spiritual power and insight. The theme of abundance runs throughout Mary’s story, as it runs throughout the reflections of various Mormon women of color. Like Nia and Salleh, Mary envisions an external

---

<sup>68</sup> John 2:3-5 Joseph Smith Translation. The original King James version reads: “And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.”

abundance of justice and opportunities for the marginalized of the world. Mary also exhibits an internal abundance of courage, spiritual gifts, vision, and ability—all qualities Liliana, Jessica, Samantha and other Mormon women reference in their oral histories—as she agrees to partner with God and urges Jesus to embark on his divine mission. Like Mary, marginal Mormon women also have hidden depths of strength and insight. Their oral histories recount that God has abundantly gifted them with capabilities, and Mary’s story likewise demonstrates that the most marginal contain quantities of wisdom and ability that are often overlooked by the elite. Mary’s story entails sacrifice but it is an agentive giving of self that begins her journey of rising into herself and becoming herself, as Samantha might say. In Mary’s story, we can see her vision and proactivity, her confidence and assertiveness, as she partners with God and Jesus to offer the world a new vision of life abundant.

### ***Conclusion***

While a variety of theological reflections and focuses emerged in my dozens of oral histories with women from the U.S., Mexico, and Southern Africa, the theme of metaphysical, personal, and spiritual abundance stood out. These reflections on abundance took on different nuances in different locations, as American women rejected notions of metaphysical and internal scarcity in favor of an abundance mindset, Southern African women described an abundance of internal resources, and Mexican women described their spiritual lives overflowing with vibrant dreams and visions. These focuses are distinct, but they share an expansive vision of human capacity and of God’s concern and desire for humans’ wholeness and well-being. They also share an emphasis on connection, community, and affirming relationships with God, others, and self.

Non-oppressive connectedness therefore emerges as an important theme within their reflections on abundance, though with distinct variances. Some American women's understandings of the abundance of God's blessings lead them to advocate for non-oppressive and inclusive church structures which could enable stronger, more authentic relationships between center and margins, while others' abundance thinking leads to wholehearted service and relationship building that only expands the self. Southern African women see in themselves an abundance of capabilities, as they affirm that they are enough and more than enough, despite messages they might receive to the contrary. Thus, embracing a sense of themselves as complete and overflowing with possibility leads to a healthy and positive connection with their own selves. For Mexican women, with their sense of abundant spiritual and visionary power, fostering non-oppressive and soul-satisfying connections with the divine and post-mortal realms are often a focus of their powerful dreams and visions. A commitment to non-oppressive connectedness therefore grounds these women's abundance thinking.

As womanist theologians have argued, the reflections, stories, and religious imaginations of everyday women of color are vital sources for constructing theologies. They also have suggested that additional richness and power for such theologies can be found in the lives, stories, and reflections of women in the community who have come before. Thus, searching through archives and old publications to find and highlight the reflections and wisdom of now-passed women of color is an important womanist project. Prolific writer Chieko Okazaki stands as a rich source of such wisdom in the development of a Mormon theology of abundance and other yet-to-be articulated Mormon womanist and feminist theologies. Additional richness and depth to such theologies can be found in the stories of scriptural women whose experiences of life and God resonate with those of Mormon women. I suggest that Mary, mother of Jesus, is a

rich symbol in such theological constructions, and other scriptural women could be useful in further Mormon womanist and feminist theological articulations.<sup>69</sup>

This theme of abundance that manifested itself in different Mormon women's reflections on God, spirituality, and human nature is powerful in its flexibility. An abundance mindset can lead some to imagine liberative, radical restructurings of LDS church hierarchy and governance. It can also be applied on an individual level in ways which leave current structures untouched, as women see in themselves the potential for expansive spiritual power and personal strength. Whether abundance mindsets contribute to radical new imaginings of the LDS church or retain current systems, a unifying drive and direction of abundance thinking is its expansive sense of women's capacities to be agents for God, to discern God's will, and to develop personally into whole, healthy, unique individuals. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is thus a distinct confluence between this aspect of Mormon women's theological imaginations and that of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who imagined human capacity so vast that godhood is the ultimate destiny for each of the Mother and Father's daughters.

---

<sup>69</sup> I see particular potential in Abish, Rebecca, Eve, Deborah, and the daughters of Zelophehad.

## Conclusion

Many Mormon women's reflections on life and religion are anchored in a paradigm which privileges non-oppressive connectedness as a major moral priority. These women's discussions of conversion, family life, church, community, experiences with God, and religious understandings reveal a worldview which places a great deal of importance on forming positive relationships with self, others, and the divine. For traditional Mormon women of color in Mexico, Botswana, and the U.S., gender equality was not the primary lens through which they evaluated their experiences at church or in the home. Rather, the paradigm of vitalizing, non-oppressive relationality centered their lives and emerged as the most productive interpretive framework through which to analyze and understand these women's lives, choices, and agency.

Importantly, this paradigm of non-oppressive connectedness contains within it elements of female empowerment and uplift even as it is rooted in a gender complementarian framework which bounds women's actions. These women often found spaces within Mormonism's patriarchal ecclesiastical and familial structure to achieve the spirituality, self-development and uplifting relationships that they wanted to center their lives. Mormonism's injunctions to men to be devoted, proactive, and kind within the family and church community gave many interviewed Mormon women means to create healthier marriages and more satisfying relationships. For these traditional religious women, gender roles and gender complementarity were not experienced as primary evils to be overcome. Rather, alienation, violence, and oppression were the evils they worked to eliminate in their lives. Mormonism was often a powerful tool in this quest to eliminate interpersonal oppression, but as oral histories in Botswana, Mexico, and the U.S., attest, this did not mean that questions about church leaders' "Americentric" emphases and

positions of privilege were not raised when church injunctions clashed with certain local traditions and realities. As Mormon women carefully navigated their loyalties between chosen faith and sometimes conflicting personal or cultural values, they enacted a complex, creative, and thoughtful agency.

Just as theological musings on abundance led some women to imagine radical restructurings of the LDS church, so too did some women's commitments to non-oppressive connectedness lead them to imagine systemic change in Mormonism which might raise women and other marginalized Mormons to greater structural power within the church. Such adaptations in structure, these more feminist or womanist Mormons indicated, may very well facilitate more authentic, healthy and vitalizing community and connectedness. For this minority of Mormon women with whom I spoke, greater gender equality, decolonizing practices, and non-oppressive connectedness folded together into one dominant moral priority.

Throughout the composition of this dissertation, I strove to find a productive balance between emphasizing women's personal agency, spiritual power, opportunities and relationships within Mormonism—themes that women themselves often stressed—and acknowledging the sometimes less emphasized structural limitations and challenges that exist for women and other marginalized people within Mormon contexts. These two interpretive lenses—that of personal agency and that of structural power—are important elements of any balanced analysis. By exploring both the ways Mormonism enabled personal connection, opportunity and change while still recognizing the ways it constricted women's choices within various race, national, and class contexts, I worked to incorporate both interpretive frameworks. While my own white Western feminist lens naturally veers toward examinations of gendered structural power, the voices of women on the margins of Mormonism have revealed new understandings of how and why

women in diverse contexts have adopted and adapted Mormonism into their lives. In particular, the broader paradigm and ethical imperative of non-oppressive connectedness most especially illuminates the choices and agentive actions of Mormon women of color. I have every hope that future scholars, perhaps especially ones arising within the communities studied, will elaborate upon and nuance this framework, as well as uncover others that are equally significant.

One particularly important thematic thread which wove its way throughout each one of these ethnographic case studies—and which often was a subtext of women’s commitment to non-oppressive connectedness—is that of domestic or gender-based violence. Whether in Mexico, Botswana, or the U.S., several Mormon women had stories to tell of sexual assault, domestic physical or verbal abuse. Mormon church leaders have clearly condemned gender-based violence in a few sermons and articles over the years, and oral histories attest that these condemnations and the general training of men to be benevolent in their relationships have been both appealing to women and often useful in helping some women fashion lives absent of abuse. However, these oral histories and other accounts by Mormon women also suggest that this problem still exists in Mormon communities around the world, just as it exists in secular and other faith-based communities.

The issue of domestic violence within Mormonism was brought into sharp focus in early 2018 in the U.S. when two ex-wives of U.S. White House Staff Secretary Rob Porter went public with the domestic violence they suffered at the hands of their Mormon husband.<sup>1</sup> In response to mounting criticism of LDS bishops who encouraged women to not divorce abusive husbands, the LDS church recently updated its guidelines for local church leaders, emphasizing that reports of abuse should be taken seriously and that women should not be encouraged to stay with abusive

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Burke and MJ Lee, “Rob Porter, and Mormonism’s #MeToo Moment,” *CNN Politics*, February 11, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/09/politics/rob-porter-mormonism-metoo/index.html>.

spouses.<sup>2</sup> These are important steps toward making Mormon victims of abuse safer, however, as one Mormon Pasifika woman writes, there is more that can be done to address this problem. Lani Wendt Young, the aforementioned Mormon Samoan writer, has seen the pervasiveness of domestic violence in Samoa, including in Mormon homes. She suggests that the LDS church could contribute funds towards trained counsellors and treatment programs to help abusers and survivors, an intervention that the country badly needs. She also sees a need for more training for bishops, Relief Society presidents, and other ward leaders on how to respond to and help those in their congregations living in abusive families.<sup>3</sup> This issue of domestic violence, usually only rarely and vaguely addressed in local Mormon church contexts (as Ana in Mexico attests), could be one which brings together traditional Mormon women, Mormon feminists, and church leaders of various backgrounds, locations, and worldviews to make meaningful progress on an issue all could agree is important. Encouraging and modeling benevolent male behavior can be powerful forces in helping to improve women's lives, these oral histories strongly indicate. But more comprehensive programs in various locales—perhaps something akin to the Addiction Recovery Program and survivor support groups—might help change the lives of other women who have lived in contexts of domestic violence and sexual assault. The stories of women's experience with gender-based violence in these oral histories stand out to me as having particularly important practical implications for Mormon communities. They highlight not only the success of different Mormon communities in creating cultures of benevolent masculinity that have been life changing for many women, but also the further work that could be done to help eradicate

---

<sup>2</sup> "Church Provides Updated Guidelines for Preventing and Responding to Abuse," *Church News*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-provides-updated-guidelines-for-preventing-and-responding-to-abuse?lang=eng>.

<sup>3</sup> Lani Wendt Young, "Rejoice in the Diversity of Our Sisterhood: A Samoan Mormon Feminist Voice on Ordain Women (2014)" in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, eds. Joanna Brooks et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 273-278.

violent behavior, support victims of abuse, and help women realize their hopes and dreams of abundant living.

Mormonism's promise and potential for redeemed manhood, redeemed families, and whole and vibrant communities is profoundly compelling to Mormon women on the margins, many of whom consciously selected this tradition as a means of fulfilling their deepest hopes and needs. Amidst a world of dislocation, family breakup, and the dissolution of other traditional structures—due in large part to colonial and globalizing forces—Mormonism helps heal the breaches and pain that so many of these women encounter in their daily lives. Just as the church serves as a new village for many women in Botswana, so it does for other Mormon women on the peripheries, who often find in it not only the community and relationships they desire in this life, but also the promise of such relationships in the next. In their commitment to non-oppressive connectedness, Mormon women of color are in some senses embracing the early cosmological vision of Mormonism, which, as Jonathan Stapley writes, centered around visions of knitting the Mormon community together in a chain of eternal relationships.<sup>4</sup> A confluence therefore emerges between early Mormonism's vision of kinship through congregations and communities and these women's commitment to vitalizing relationality, connection, and community. Today's Mormonism tends to downplay this early theological vision of expansive kinship through community, instead emphasizing and idealizing the middle-class nuclear family. Yet the stories and voices of Mormon women of color bring to the forefront the latent power of this kinship theology. Indeed, the voices of these women who understand the power of kinship and community may ultimately set the course to reclaim this powerful, expansive, and uniquely Mormon vision of connectedness.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford, 2018), 1-9.

This project to document and analyze the stories of Mormon women of color around the world is part of a greater shift in many academic and faith-based communities to lift up the voices from the margins to shift the terms of analysis and meaningfully complicate the concerns and paradigms of the privileged center. The World Council of Churches' 2012 document about the changing roles of churches and missions describes and justifies this paradigm shift well, stating, "People on the margins have agency, and can often see what, from the centre, is out of view. People on the margins, living in vulnerable positions, often know what exclusionary forces are threatening their survival and can best discern the urgency of their struggles; people in positions of privilege have much to learn from the daily struggles of people living in marginal conditions."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, oral histories with Mormon women of color around the globe offer important insights about the challenges, power, and potential of carving out a Mormon life at the crossroads of gender, race, nationality, and class. Their insights and stories offer not only fresh theological visions and pragmatic possibilities for improving the experiences of global Mormon women, but also important nuances to contemporary academic conversations about women's agency. Ultimately, the ethical orientation toward which Mormon women so often use their agency—non-oppressive connectedness—emerges as an important paradigm that illuminates women's choices to affiliate with this communally-minded, family-centered and patriarchal religious tradition.

---

<sup>5</sup> "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," World Council of Churches, March 9, 2012, <http://archived.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes.html>

## Appendix A: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in Mexico

### Parte 1 - Historia Personal

- ¿Cómo llegó a ser miembro de la iglesia Mormona (SUD)? Su proceso de conversión?
- Describa el origen de su familia y primeros años de vida. ¿Cuáles fueron sus retos y alegrías durante su infancia? Las experiencias religiosas? ¿Cuáles fueron las ocupaciones de sus padres?
- Si se casó, por favor dígame sobre su matrimonio, sus hijos y su vida familiar.
- ¿Ha trabajado usted? ¿Quién obtiene ingresos para su hogar?
- ¿Cuáles han sido sus principales retos en la vida? ¿Se ha enfrentado la pobreza, la violencia, la guerra, o la enfermedad en su vida? Si es así, ¿cómo ha enfrentado a esos desafíos?
- ¿Hay cosas importantes en su vida que ahora usted piensa que habría podido hacer de otra manera? ¿Su vida ha sido como la imaginaba?
- Hábleme de algún momento en que tuvo que tomar una decisión difícil. ¿Cómo lo hizo? ¿Alguna vez ha tomado una decisión que entraba en conflicto con la posición de la iglesia?
- ¿Cuáles son sus esperanzas y aspiraciones para su vida?

### Parte 2 - Actitudes Sobre la Mujer SUD

- ¿Como se siente de ser una mujer Mormona en México? Cuales son los aspectos más gratificantes? Las dificultades?
- Conoce usted "La Familia: Una proclamación para el mundo" ¿Su vida refleja los cometidos descritos en él? ¿Por qué o por qué no?
- ¿Cómo percibe el papel de las mujeres en el Mormonismo? ¿Sientes que las mujeres son iguales a los hombres? ¿Tienen las mujeres suficientes oportunidades para el liderazgo en la iglesia? ¿Por qué o por qué no? ¿Cuál ha sido su experiencia con los hombres poseedores del sacerdocio y su papel en el liderazgo en hogar y la iglesia? ¿Cómo ha la autoridad masculina en el hogar y la iglesia ha afectado a su matrimonio y experiencias en la iglesia?
- ¿Qué papel cree que las mujeres deben desempeñar en la sociedad y en la comunidad? ¿Crees que las mujeres deberían ser líderes (políticos, empresariales, etc)?
- ¿Qué opina de las enseñanzas de la iglesia sobre tener niños, la fertilidad y la reproducción? Experiencias? Reflexiones sobre control de la natalidad?
- ¿Cuales son las enseñanzas de la iglesia sobre las mujeres que trabajan? Las enseñanzas de la iglesia han influido en su decisión de trabajar o no trabajar por un salario? ¿Cree usted que las mujeres deben ser madres y amas de casa de tiempo completo? ¿Por qué o por qué no?
- ¿Cómo se siente en la organización de la Sociedad de Socorro? ¿Qué significa la hermandad para usted?
- Usted ha tenido alguna experiencia donde se haya sentido excluida por causa de clases sociales, raza, ideología o forma de vida?
- Si su madre y/o hijas eran/son también miembros de la iglesia, cómo son sus actitudes y experiencias diferentes a la suya en términos del matrimonio, la maternidad, la educación, el trabajo?
- ¿Crees que las mujeres tienen dones espirituales especiales o intuición?

- ¿Cuál es su concepto de una Madre Celestial?
- ¿Qué es lo que más le gusta del Mormonismo? ¿Qué es lo que menos le gusta? ¿Qué cambiaría de la iglesia si pudiera?

### Parte 3 - Experiencia en la Iglesia SUD

- Qué historias y figuras de las escrituras son importantes para usted? Por que?
- ¿Que significa Dios para usted?
- ¿Cuáles han sido sus patrones de devoción personal (oración, ayuno, estudio de las escrituras, otros rituales importantes?) ¿Como ha sido la influencia de Dios en su vida?
- ¿Qué papel juegan las creencias y prácticas tradicionales Mexicanas o católicas en su vida religiosa? Por ejemplo cómo celebras el día de muertos?
- ¿Que importancia tiene el templo en su vida? El asistir al templo, ha hecho un cambio en su vida? ¿Ha tenido alguna experiencia de revelación personal que le gustaria compartir?
- ¿Siente que usted ejerce el libre albedrío en su vida diaria?
- Describa su relación con los Mormones de otras culturas o países en su barrio (misioneros). ¿Cuales son las diferencias o similitudes entre miembros de la iglesia de su cultura con las de otras culturas? (USA)
- ¿Como es el trato de raza o clases sociales en su barrio? ¿Se hacen diferencias? ¿Qué papel desempeñan las cuestiones de raza y clases sociales en la iglesia en general?
- ¿Cómo se ha sido influenciada su familia debido a las enseñanzas de la iglesia ?
- ¿Qué podría hacer la iglesia para mejorar la vida de los miembros de su barrio, y para ayudar mejor a las personas en su comunidad en general, ya sean Mormones y no mormones?
- ¿Ha experimentado cambios en la iglesia y en las organizaciones a través de los años? ¿Qué piensa usted de esos cambios?
- ¿Cuáles son algunas lecciones que la vida le ha enseñado?

## **Appendix B: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in Botswana**

*(Note that these interview questions differ slightly from interview questions for LDS women in Mexico and the U.S. This is because the interviews of LDS women in Botswana were part of a larger research project which entailed interviewing women of various faiths.)*

### Part One – Personal History

- How do you define your religious identity and affiliation?
- How did you come to be a member of your faith community? What was your conversion process? What factors and experiences led to your decision to become a part of or remain within your current religious community?
- Describe your family of origin and early life. What were your challenges and joys during your childhood? Religious experiences?
- Which tribe do you belong to? How does this influence your traditions and life practices?
- If married, please tell me about your marriage, your children, and your family life.
- What has been your work experience? Who earns income for your household? What has been your experience working with the community? (volunteering, political work, etc.)
- What have been your main challenges in life? Have you faced poverty, violence, war, or disease in your life? If so, how did you cope with those challenges?
- Are there important things you would have done differently? Did your life go according to plan?
- What is your process for making decisions? Tell me about a time you had to make a difficult decision. How did you make it? Have you ever made a decision that was different than what your faith community or church recommended?
- What are your hopes and aspirations for your life?
- What are your top three priorities?
- What sort of things do you do as a family? How do these activities contribute to your life?

### Part Two – Attitudes on Religious Women’s Issues

- What is it like to be a [African Independent/Catholic/LDS/Muslim/Pentecostal] woman in Botswana? Difficulties? Rewarding aspects?
- How do you perceive women’s roles in your faith community/religious group? What sources or experiences inform your view? Do you feel women are valued similarly to men? Do women have opportunities for leadership in your faith community? [if yes] Do you think they should have more opportunities? [if no] Would you like women to have leadership opportunities? Why or why not?
- What has been your experience with male (priesthood, spiritual, clerical, etc.) authority and its role in home and religious leadership?
- What role do women play in the home? What role do men play in the home? [If applicable] How has male authority in the home affected your marriage and family life?
- When you and your spouse feel differently about a particular issue, how do you work it out? Who usually gets their way within the marriage, or who has the more “dominant” opinion?

- How has male authority within your faith community/church affected your religious life?
- What role do you think women should play in society and in the community? Do you think they should be leaders (political, business, etc.)?
- How do you view your religion's teachings on children, fertility, and reproduction? Experiences? Thoughts on birth control?
- What do you perceive to be your faith's teachings on mothers contributing to the family income? Working for pay? How do these teachings compare with Batswana culture in general? Have religious teachings influenced your decision to work or not work for pay? Do you feel that women should be devoted solely to motherhood? Why or why not?
- Experiences with cliques and exclusion because of class, race, ideology, lifestyle or tribe?
- If your mother and/or daughters were/are also members of your faith, how are their attitudes and experiences different than yours in terms of marriage, motherhood, education, work?
- What does "modesty" mean to you? Tell me your feelings about that idea/concept.
- Do you feel valued by your religious leaders? Why or why not? Do you feel that women's value has changed throughout time within your faith community/religion? If so, how has it changed?
- What led you to marry your spouse?
- Do you think women have special spiritual gifts or intuition?
- What do you like best about your faith? What do you like least? What would you change about it if you could?

### Part Three – Experience in the Faith Community

- What scriptural stories and figures mean the most to you? Why?
- How do you envision God? Loving? Judgmental?
- What have been your patterns of personal devotion (prayer, fasting, scripture study, charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues, other rituals?) How do you feel God in your life?
- What role do traditional African beliefs and practices play in your religious life?
- Do you feel that you are able to exercise independence and agency in your life? In your religious life?
- Describe your relationship with members of your faith from other cultures or countries in your ward. Do you notice any differences between Batswana and those who do not originate from Botswana? What are race relations like in your local faith community? What role do issues of race, class, and tribe play in your denomination at large?
- How have experiences within your religious institution affected various members of your family?
- Memorable male and female leaders of the faith? Why were they successful? What could the church do to better help members of your faith community and to better help people in your larger community, both inside and outside of your religious group?
- Have you experienced changes in religious organization and practice during your life? What did you think of those changes?
- Lessons life has taught you?

### Specific Questions: African Independent

- Which rituals are important to your religious practice? Who participates and in what way?
- Tell me about your extended family relationships. Who are the women who support and encourage you? From whom do you seek advice?
- What are your beliefs about healing? Describe any rituals and practices related to healing in your faith community. Who are the experts on healing?
- Describe your beliefs and practices of divination. Who carries it out, how does it help, and what kinds of problems are solved through this means?

### Specific Questions: LDS

- Are you familiar with “The Family: A Proclamation to the World?” Does your life reflect the roles described in it? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to have a ‘patriarch of the home’ to you?
- How do you feel about the Relief Society? What does sisterhood mean to you? What is your concept of a mother in heaven?
- What role has the temple played in your religious life? Have your feelings evolved? Do you want to mention any personal revelation?
- Do you feel connected to American church leaders?
- How are American and Batswana Latter-day Saints similar and different?

### Specific Questions: Catholic

- How do you relate to the current Pope, Francis I? What idea of what it means to be Catholic does he inspire? How is this different from ideas of the Pope you had before Francis I was Pope? How does his view of the Catholic church and what it should be relate to the African context?
- How do you see the figure of Mary functioning in the Catholic Church? Do you find a relationship of Mary helpful to you personally or not?
- What model of what it means to be female does Mary embody? Is this model of Mary help for relationships of African women?
- How does Catholicism present itself as a universal way of being Church or Christian? Do you find this model of universalism helpful for relationship to Africa, as cultures and social contexts?
- What sacraments have you received? Which ones have your children received? How do you feel about being excluded from ordination?
- How do you feel about the Communion of Saints and is there any synthesis between the saints (dead ancestors) and your cultural/tribal traditions?

### Specific Questions: Muslim

- Do you identify as Sunni or Shia? (If Sunni, what school of thought do you ascribe to: Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi, or Hanbali?)
- How often do you or a member of your family attend Mosque? Are there other forms of religious gatherings you participate in?
- Describe your relationship with other members of your faith community.

- Which passages from the Quran mean the most to you? Which hadiths are most meaningful for you? Are there figures within Islamic history that inspire you or that you relate to?
- When you think of Allah, what comes to your mind?
- How do the Five Pillars (statement of faith, daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, zakat (tithing), pilgrimage to Mecca), help you live a life of devotion?
- What other things, in addition to the Five Pillars, help you follow the will of Allah and live a life of devotion?
- How do traditional African beliefs and practices affect your experience within the community of believers?
- How does Islam help you make decisions in your life? Do you seek religious advice/counsel from someone in your family/community? Do you seek input from Islamic sources when making life decisions?
- What does wearing hijab mean to you? Do you choose to wear hijab? (How did you come to wear hijab?) Do your sisters, mothers, aunts, daughters? Do you want your daughters to wear hijab?
- How does being a Muslim enhance your life? How does it challenge your life?
- If you could change anything about your community of believers, what would it be?
- Have you been able to make the pilgrimage to Mecca? Tell me about that experience.
- Describe your relationship with Muslims from other countries. Do you feel connected to Muslims in other countries? If so, how?
- Are you pleased with the role that women have within Islam? Would you change anything about your role within your community of believers?
- How has your relationship with other Muslim women enhanced your experience of being a Muslim?
- Is there anything about Islam or your experience of being Muslim that you would like to share with me?

#### Specific Questions: Pentecostal

- How do you experience the move of the Spirit in your life and community? How does the Spirit speak to you?
- What role does the Spirit play in your daily life?
- In what ways does your church support or encourage women in using and/or operating the gifts of the Spirit within the religious community?
- Describe your first charismatic/Pentecostal experience or memory. How did it make you feel? Is that what brought you into a Pentecostal community?
- How does your community educate believers about the role/gifts of the Spirit? Is it primarily through firsthand experience, or are there classes (Sunday School, etc.)? If there are classes, who teaches them?
- Describe your relationship with other Pentecostal communities, both within your country and outside it. Do you feel connected to other Pentecostals?
- Describe your relationship with other non-Pentecostal religious communities. Does your religious community interact with non-Pentecostal Christians, Muslims, etc.?

## **Appendix C: Oral Life History Interview Questions for Women in the U.S.A.**

### Part One – Personal History

- How did you come to be a member of the LDS Church? Your conversion process?
- Describe your family of origin and early life. What were your challenges and joys during your childhood? Religious experiences?
- If married, please tell me about your marriage, your children, and your family life.
- What has been your work experience? Who earns income for your household? What has been your experience working with the community? (volunteering, political work, etc.)
- What have been your main challenges in life? Have you faced poverty, violence, war, or disease in your life? If so, how did you cope with those challenges?
- Are there important things you would have done differently? Did your life go according to plan?
- Tell me about a time you had to make a difficult decision. How did you make it? Have you ever made a decision that conflicted with the church's position?
- What are your hopes and aspirations for your life?

### Part Two – Attitudes on LDS Women's Issues

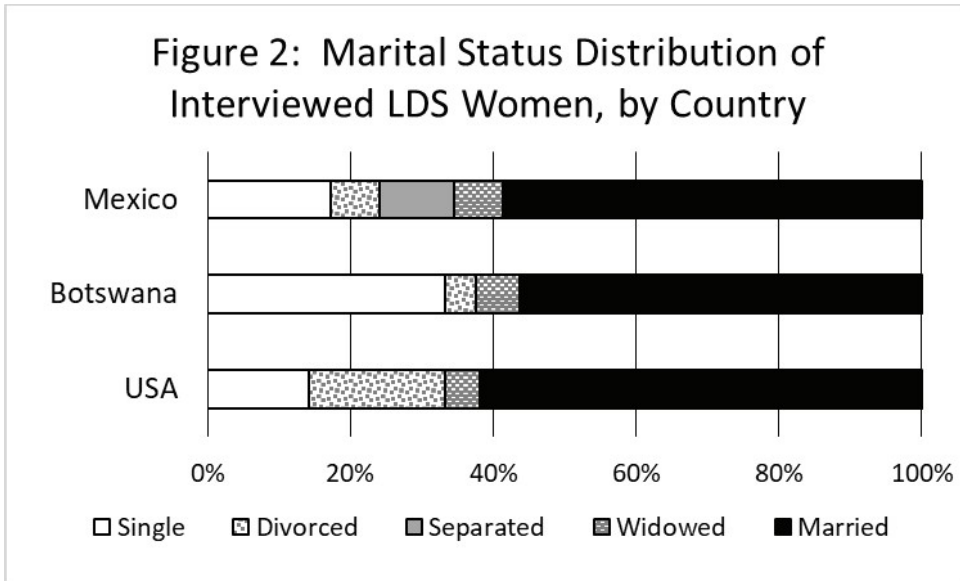
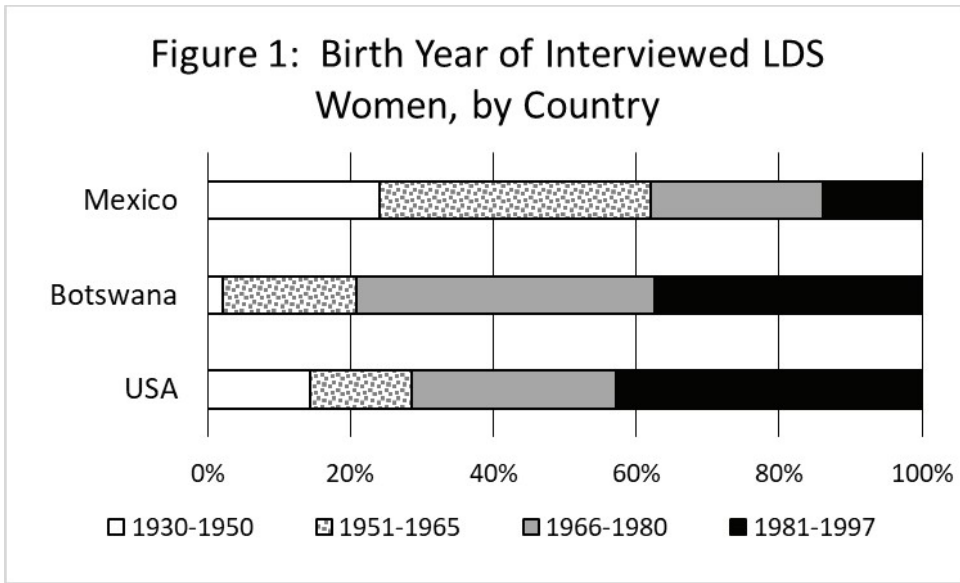
- What is it like to be a Mormon woman in the U.S? Difficulties? Rewarding aspects?
- Are you familiar with "The Family: A Proclamation to the World?" Does your life reflect the roles described in it? Why or why not?
- How do you perceive women's role in Mormonism? Do you feel women are equal to men? Do they have enough opportunities for leadership? Why or why not? What has been your experience with the male priesthood authority and its role in home and church leadership? How has male authority in the home and church affected your marriage and church experiences?
- What role do you think women should play in society and in the community? Do you think they should be leaders (political, business, etc.)?
- How do you view the church's teachings on children, fertility, and reproduction? Experiences? Thoughts on birth control?
- What do you perceive to be the church's teachings on mothers working for pay? Have church teachings influenced your decision to work or not work for pay? Do you feel that women should be full-time mothers? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the Relief Society? What does sisterhood mean to you?
- Experiences with cliques and exclusion because of class, race, ideology, or lifestyle?
- If your mother and/or daughters were/are also members of the church, how are their attitudes and experiences different than yours in terms of marriage, motherhood, education, work?
- Do you think women have special spiritual gifts or intuition?
- What is your concept of a mother in heaven?
- What do you like best about Mormonism? What do you like least? What would you change about the church if you could?

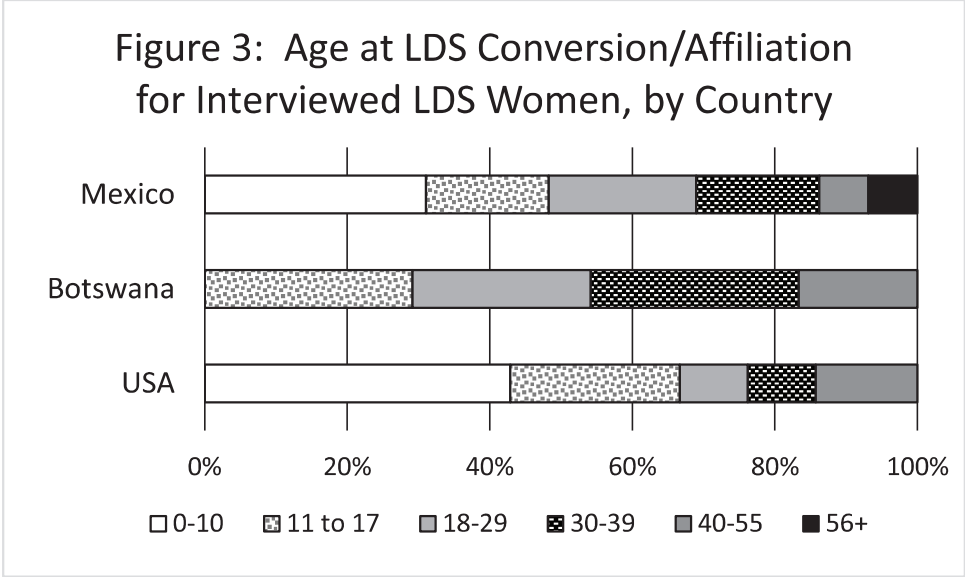
### Part Three – Experience in the LDS Church

- What scriptural stories and figures mean the most to you? Why?

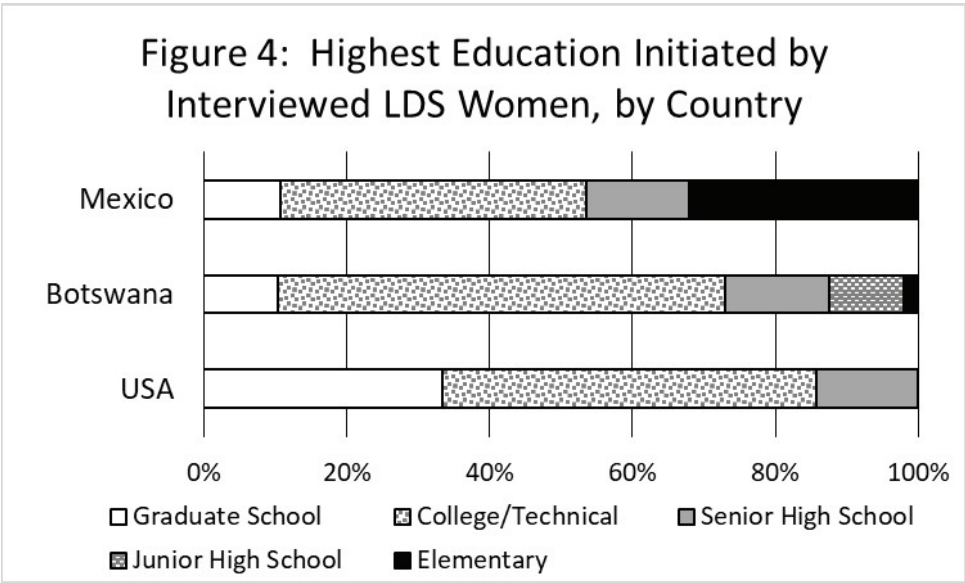
- How do you envision God? Loving? Judgmental?
- What have been your patterns of personal devotion (prayer, fasting, scripture study, other rituals?) How do you feel God in your life?
- What role has the temple played in your religious life? Have your feelings evolved? Do you want to mention any personal revelation?
- Do you feel that you exercise independent (free) agency in your religious life?
- Describe your relationship with Mormons from other cultures or countries in your ward.
- What are race relations like in your ward? What role do issues of race and class play in the church at large?
- How have church experiences affected various members of your family?
- Memorable male and female leaders of the church? Why were they successful? Do you feel connected to General Authorities and other general church leaders?
- What could the church do to better help members of your ward and to better help people in your larger community, Mormon and non-Mormon?
- Have you experienced changes in church organization and practice during your life? What did you think of those changes?
- Lessons life has taught you?

## Appendix D: Demographic Information





The 0-10 category represents children who were either born into Mormon affiliation or who began affiliating as young children. The other categories represent the age at which women were baptized into the LDS faith.



Note that the ages or grades constituting elementary school differ by country. In Botswana, elementary school goes up to the 7<sup>th</sup> year of instruction (equivalent to 7<sup>th</sup> grade in the U.S.), while in Mexico the highest grade is generally 6<sup>th</sup> grade. In the USA, the highest grade in elementary school is usually 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Secondary school also has a different structure in Botswana. Junior high school consist of grades 8 through 10, and senior high school consists of two additional years of instruction.

## Bibliography

- Abrahamsen, Rita. "African Studies and the Postcolonial Challenge." *African Affairs* 102, no. 407 (April 2003): 189-210.
- Aikau, Hokulani K. *A Chosen People, A Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawaii*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Alarcon, Norma. "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo – American Feminism." In *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*. Edited by Steven Seidman, 140-152. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Alexander, Thomas. *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930*. Chicago: University of Illinois, 1996.
- Allred, Janice. "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother." In *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays*, 42-68. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997.
- Anderson, Margaret. "Thinking about Women: A Quarter Century's View." *Gender & Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 37-55.
- Anderson, Lavina Fielding. "A Voice from the Past: The Benson Instructions for Parents." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 4 (1988): 103-113.
- Andrews, William. "Introduction." In *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by William Andrews, 1-22. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters, 1987.
- "An Apostle Speaks About Marriage to John and Mary." *Improvement Era*, February 1949.
- Aquino, Maria Pilar. *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*. Translated by Dinah Livingstone. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993.
- Basquiat, Jennifer Huss. "Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou, and the LDS faith in Haiti." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (2004): 1-34.
- Beaman, Lori G. "Molly Mormons, Mormon Feminists and Moderates: Religious Diversity and the Latter-Day Saints Church." *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 1 (2001): 65-86.
- Bednarowski, Mary. *The Religious Imagination of American Women*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Beecher, Maureen Ursenbach and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds. *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

- Benson, Ezra T. *To the Mothers in Zion* (Pamphlet). Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987.
- Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bowman, Matthew. *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- Bradley, Martha Sonntag. *Pedestals & Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority and Equal Rights*. Salt Lake City: Signature, 2005.
- Brekus, Catherine. "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency." *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 59-87.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Bringham, Newell. *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Bronk, Kendall Cotton. "The Exemplar Methodology: An Approach to Studying the Leading Edge of Development." *Psychology of Well-being: Theory, Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2012): 5.
- Brooks, Abigail. "Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women's Lived Experience." In *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy, 53-82. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006.
- Brooks, Joanna. "Mormonism as Colonialism, Mormonism as Anti-Colonialism, Mormonism as Minor Transnationalism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives." In *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, edited by Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, 163-185. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018.
- Brooks, Joanna, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, eds. *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Brooks, Melvin R. *LDS Reference Encyclopedia*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1960.
- Brueggemann, Walter. "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity." *Christian Century* 116, no. 10 (1999): 342-347.
- Brusco, Elizabeth. *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Columbia*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

- Buerger, John David. *The Mysteries of Godliness: A History of Mormon Temple Worship*. San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994.
- Bulbeck, Chilla. *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Burke, Daniel and MJ Lee. "Rob Porter, and Mormonism's #MeToo Moment." *CNN Politics*, February 11, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/09/politics/rob-porter-mormonism-metoo/index.html>.
- Bush Jr., Lester. "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11-68.
- Bushman, Claudia, ed. *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1997.
- Bushman, Claudia and Caroline Kline, eds. *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013.
- Bushman, Richard Lyman. *Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005.
- Cannon, Katie. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Christ, Carol and Judith Plaskow, eds. *Womanspirit Rising*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Botswana Information." Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://africase.lds.org/botswana-information1>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Church Provides Updated Guidelines for Preventing and Responding to Abuse." *Church News*, March 26, 2018. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-provides-updated-guidelines-for-preventing-and-responding-to-abuse?lang=eng>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Church Releases Statement Condemning White Supremist Attitudes." *Church News*, August 15, 2017. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/church-releases-statement-condemning-white-supremacist-attitudes?lang=eng>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Facts and Statistics." Mormon Newsroom. Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/botswana>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Facts and Statistics." Mormon Newsroom. Accessed April 27, 2018. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/mexico>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Race and the Priesthood." Accessed June 10, 2017. <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Unwed Pregnancy." Accessed June 24, 2016. <https://www.lds.org/topics/unwed-pregnancy?lang=eng>.

Claremont Mormon Women Oral History Collection, Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." In *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, edited by Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook, 35-57. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Colvin, Gina. "The Future of Global Mormonism: Decolonization and Inclusivity." *Exponent II* 34, no. 2&3 (Fall 2014 Winter 2015): 39-42.

\_\_\_\_\_. "#110: Mormonism, Liberation Theology and Womanism: A Conversation with Fatimah Salleh and Janan Graham." *A Thoughtful Faith*. August 24, 2015. Podcast. Accessed May 31, 2018. <http://www.athoughtfulfaith.org/mormonism-liberation-theology-and-womanism-a-conversation-with-fatimah-salleh-and-janan-graham/>.

Colvin, Gina and Joanna Brooks. "Introduction: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion." In *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, edited by Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, 1-23. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

Compton, Todd. *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997

Cooke, Miriam. "Saving Brown Women." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (2002): 468-470.

Cornwall, Andrea. "Introduction: Perspectives on Gender in Africa." In *Readings in Gender in Africa*, edited by Andrea Cornwall, 1-19. Oxford: James Currey, 2005.

Cornwall, Marie. "The Institutional Role of Mormon Women." In *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, 239-264. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Fireside, 1990.

Craig, Wesley, Jr. "The Church in Latin America: Progress and Challenge," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5, no. 3 (1968): 66-74.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

Daly, Mary. *The Church and the Second Sex*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Be-friending: The Lust to Share Happiness." In *For Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*, edited by S. Hoagland and J. Penelope, 200-211. London: Onlywomen Press, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

DeMunck, Victor C. and Elisa J. Sobo, eds. *Using Methods in the Field: A Practical Introduction and Casebook*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1998.

De Vos, Susan M. *Household Composition in Latin America*. Springer Science and Business Media, 2012.

Derr, Jill Mulvay. "The Significance of 'O My Father' in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1996): 85-126.

Derr, Jill Mulvay, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1992.

Devault, Margorie L. *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.

Dew, Sheri. "Are We Not All Mothers?" *Ensign*, November 2001.  
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/2001/11/are-we-not-all-mothers?lang=eng>.

Du Bois, W.E.B., *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New York: The Free Press, 1965.

Dube, Musa W. "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion." In *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, edited by Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan, 100-120. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Dunch, Ryan. "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity." *History and Theory* 41, no. 3 (2002): 301-325.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Right-wing Women*. New York; Putnam, 1983.

- Ellece, Sibonile Edith. “‘Be a Fool Like Me’: Gender Construction in the Marriage Advice Ceremony in Botswana—A Critical Discourse Analysis.” *Agenda* 25, no. 1 (2011): 43-52.
- Espin, Olivia. “Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexuality in Hispanic/Latin Women.” In *Race, Class, and Gender*, edited by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992.
- “The Family.” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
- Farnsworth, Sonja. “Mormonism’s Odd Couple: The Motherhood-Priesthood Connection.” In *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks, 299-314. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992.
- Fife, Jennifer Finlayson. “Female Sexual Agency in Patriarchal Culture: The Case of Mormon Women.” Dissertation, Boston College, 2007.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983.
- “Former President of Mormon Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, Gives First Ever Interview.” *World Religion News*. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/former-president-of-mormon-church-gordon-b-hinckley-gives-first-ever-interview>.
- Ford, Stacilee. “Sister Acts: Relief Society and Flexible Citizenship in Hong Kong.” In *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, edited by Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, 202-228. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018.
- Friedman, Marilyn. “Beyond Caring: The De-Moralization of Gender.” In *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, edited by Virginia Held, 61-77. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.
- Gender, Narrative, and Religious Practice in Southern Africa Oral History Collection, Special Collections, Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California.
- Gjelton, Tom. “With His Choice of Inauguration Prayer Leaders, Trump Shows His Values.” *National Public Radio*, January 13, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509558608/with-his-choice-of-inauguration-prayer-leaders-trump-shows-his-values>.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.
- Givens, Terryl. “Christ, Atonement and Human Possibilities in Mormon Thought.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow, 260-275. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Gluck, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. "Introduction." In *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, 1-6. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Gooren, Henri. "Latter-day Saints Under Siege: The Unique Experiences of Nicaraguan Mormons." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (2007): 134-155.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Mormons of the World: The Meaning of LDS Membership in Central America." In *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton, 362-388. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008.
- Graham-Russell, Janan. "On Black Bodies in White Spaces: Conversations of Women's Ordination and Women of African Descent in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." In *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, 268-270. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Griffith, R. Marie. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Gross, Rita and Nancy Falk, eds. *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Gulbrandsen, Ornulf. *The State and the Social: State Formation in Botswana and its Precolonial and Colonial Genealogies*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2012.
- Gutmann, Matthew. *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City, Tenth Anniversary Edition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Hafen, Bruce C. "Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners." *Ensign*, August 2007. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/crossing-thresholds-and-becoming-equal-partners?lang=eng>.
- Hall, Dave. "A Crossroads for Mormon Women: Amy Brown Lyman, J. Reuben Clark, and the Decline of Organized Women's Activism in the Relief Society." *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 2 (2010): 205-249.

- Hanciles, Jehu J. “‘Would that All God’s People Were Prophets’: Mormonism and the New Shape of Global Christianity.” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 2 (April 2015): 35-68.
- Hanks, Maxine, ed. “Historic Mormon Feminist Discourse—Excerpts.” In *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks, 69-147. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992.
- Harding, Sandra. “Introduction: Is there a Feminist Method?” In *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, edited by Sandra Harding, 1-14. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, 49-82. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Hardy, B. Carmon. “Lords of Creation: Polygamy, the Abrahamic Household, and Mormon Patriarchy.” *Journal of Mormon History* 20 (Spring 1994): 119-152.
- Hardy, Grant. “The Book of Mormon and Social Justice.” *Meridian Magazine*, March 20, 2011. <https://ldsmag.com/article-1-7677/>.
- Heaton, Tim B., Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman. “In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?” In *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, 87-117. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Herling, Bradley. *A Beginner’s Guide to the Study of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser. “Feminist Approaches to Research as a Process: Reconceptualizing Epistemology, Methodology, and Method.” In *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Leavy, and Michelle L. Yaiser, 3-26. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Hinckley, Gordon B. “Reverence and Morality,” *Ensign*, May 1987, 46-47.
- Hinga, Teresa M. “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa.” In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, 183-194. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.
- Hoagland, Sarah. *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values*. Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Some Thoughts About ‘Caring’.” In *Feminist Ethics*, edited by Claudia Card, 246-263. Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991.

- Hodgson, Dorothy L. *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Howe, Daniel Walker. "Emergent Mormonism in Context." In *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow, 24-37. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Hoyt, Amy. "Agency, Subjectivity and Essentialism with Traditional Religious Cultures: An Ethnographic Study of an American Latter-day Saint Community." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Beyond the Victim/Empowerment Paradigm: The Gendered Cosmology of Mormon Women." *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 1 (2007): 89-100.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Reconceptualizing Agency." *Element* 5, no. 2 (fall 2009): 69-85.
- Hurtado, Aida and Mrinal Sinha. *Beyond Machismo: Intersectional Latino Masculinities*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. and Carrie A. Miles. "Dealing with Social Change: The Mormon Church's Response to Change in Women's Roles." *Social Forces* 68, no. 4 (1990): 1231-1250.
- Iceland, John. *Race and Ethnicity in America*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
- Ingoldsby, Bron B. "The Latin American Family: Familialism Vs. Machismo." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 22, no. 1 (1991): 57-62.
- Ingram, Aleah. "Church Leaders Speak About Dowry in Africa." *LDS Daily*, January 25, 2016. <http://www.ldsdaily.com/church-lds/church-leaders-speak-about-dowry-in-african-culture/>.
- Inouye, Melissa Wei-Tsing. "A Tale of Three Primaries: The Gravity of Mormonism's Informal Institutions." In *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion*, edited by Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, 229-262. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018.
- Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *En la Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996.

- Izzard, Wendy. "The Impact of Migration on the Roles of Women in Botswana: Patterns, Causes, and Consequences." *Final Report National Migration Study 3* (1982): 654-707.
- Jagger, Alison. "Feminist Politics and Epistemology: The Standpoint of Women." In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding, 55-66. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Jenkins, Philip. "Letting Go: Understanding Mormon Growth in Africa." *Journal of Mormon History* 35 (Spring 2009): 1-25.
- Jensen, Kipton E. "The Politics of Faith-Based HIV Prevention Policies and Programs in Botswana." In *The Faith Sector and HIV/AIDS in Botswana: Responses and Challenges*, edited by Lovemore Togarasei, Sana K. Mmolai, and Fidelis Nkomazana, 44-69. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.
- "John and Mary, Beginning Life Together." *New Era*, June 1975, 7-8.
- Johnson, Allen G. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2018.
- Juschka, Darlene M. "General Introduction." In *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, edited by Darlene M. Juschka, 8-18. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Kaufman, Debra. *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Keeney, Allison and Susan Woster. "Motherhood." In *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Claremont Oral History Collection*, edited by Claudia Bushman and Caroline Kline, 73-86. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013.
- Kimball, Edward L. and Andrew E. Kimball, Jr. *Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1977.
- Kimball, Spencer W. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982.
- Kincheloe, Joe. *Critical Pedagogy Primer*. New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. 2008.
- Kiskilili. "Renaming the 'Priesthood Ban.'" *Zelophehad's Daughters (blog)*, June 8, 2008. <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2008/06/08/renaming-the-priesthood-ban/>.
- Kline, Caroline. "The Mormon Conception of Women's Nature and Role: A Feminist Analysis." *Feminist Theology* 22, no. 2 (2014): 186-202.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Saying Goodbye to the Final Say: The Softening and Reimagining of Mormon Male Headship Ideologies." In *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, edited by Patrick Mason and John Turner, 214-233. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

- Knowlton, David. "Mormonism in Latin America: Towards the Twenty-first Century." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 159-176.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (1992): 41-53.
- Larson, Mary A. "Research Design and Strategies." In *Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, 105-134. Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2006.
- Lazreg, Marnia. "Decolonizing Feminism." In *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi, 67-80. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- LDS Family Services. "Adoption and the Unwed Mother." *Ensign*, February 2002.  
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/02/adoption-and-the-unwed-mother?lang=eng>.
- LeBaron, E. Dale. "Botswana." In *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, edited by Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, 124-125. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000.
- Lindholm, Philip. *Latter-Day Dissent: At the Crossroads of Intellectual Inquiry and Ecclesiastical Authority*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2010.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Makgala, Christian John. "A Survey of Race Relations in Botswana, 1800-1966." *Botswana Notes and Records* 36 (2004): 11-26.
- Mangena, Fainos. "The Search for an African Feminist Ethic: A Zimbabwean Perspective." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11, no. 2 (September 2009): 18-30.
- Matope, Nogget, Nyevero Marunzani, Efirtha Chauraya, and Beatrice Bondai. "Lobola and Gender Based Violence: Perceptions of Married Adults in Gweru Urban, Zimbabwe." *Journal of Education Research and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 11 (November 2013): 192-200.
- Mauss, Armand. *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "From Near-Nation to New World Religion?" In *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton, 289-327. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2008.

- Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophies*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1969.
- McIntosh, Marjorie Keniston. *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." In *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology, Ninth Edition*, edited by Margaret Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, 74-78. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2015.
- McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine, 2nd edition*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1966.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester, U. K: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Meagher, Michelle. "Patriarchy." In *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by George Ritzer and J. Michael Ryan, 441-442. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought." In *African Philosophy, an Introduction*, edited by Richard Wright, 171-182. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984.
- Meyers, Donald. "New Mormon Missionary Training Center Building Plan Upsets Residents." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 2012.  
<http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/54118360-78/building-church-residents-heaton.html.csp>.
- Miles, Carrie. "LDS Family Ideals Versus the Equality of Women: Navigating the Changes since 1957." In *Revisiting Thomas F. O'Dea's the Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton, 101-134. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008.
- Mitchem, Stephanie Y. *Introducing Womanist Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, 51-80. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Mookodi, Godisang. "Male Violence Against Women in Botswana: A Discussion of Gendered Uncertainties in a Rapidly Changing Environment." *African Sociological Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 118-138.

- Morell, Robert and Lahoucine Ouzgane. "African Masculinities: An Introduction." In *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*, edited by Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morell, 1-20. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Morgenegg, Ryan. "LDS Family Services No Longer Operating as Adoption Agency." *Church News*, July 1, 2014. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/lds-family-services-no-longer-operating-as-adoption-agency?lang=eng>.
- Morin, Karin M. and Jeanne Kay Guelke, eds. *Women, Religion & Space: Global Perspectives on Gender and Faith*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007.
- Mueller, Max Perry. *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.
- Murove, Munyaradzi Felix, ed. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*. Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009.
- Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Newell, Linda King. "The Historical Relationship of Mormon Women and Priesthood." In *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks, 23-48. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992.
- Nkomazana, Fidelis. "The Botswana Religious Landscape." In *The Faith Sector and HIV/AIDS in Botswana: Responses and Challenges*, edited by Lovemore Togarasei, Sana K. Mmolai, and Fidelis Nkomazana, 2-21. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.
- Oaks, Dallin H. "The Gospel Culture." *Ensign*, March 2012. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/03/the-gospel-culture?lang=eng>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church." *Ensign*, November 2005. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2005/11/priesthood-authority-in-the-family-and-the-church?lang=eng>.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *African Women's Theology*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001.
- Orsi, Robert A. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." In *Lived Religion in America*, edited by David D. Hall, 3-21. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Lost Causes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Packer, Boyd K. "Follow the Rule." *BYU Devotional*, January 14, 1977. [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer\\_follow-rule/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer_follow-rule/).

- \_\_\_\_\_. "For Time and All Eternity." *Ensign*, November 1993.  
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/1993/11/for-time-and-all-eternity?lang=eng>.
- Pala, Achola. "Definitions of Women and Development: An African Perspective." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 1 (1977): 9-13.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *Oxford Literary Review* 9, no. 1 (1987): 27-58.
- Paulsen, David L. and Martin Pulido. "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71-97.
- Payne, Paulette. "Hallelujah and Amen: the African-American Religious Aesthetic and Black Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia." Master's thesis, Clark Atlanta University, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Panel participant at the Black, White and Mormon Conference in Salt Lake City, October 9, 2015. <http://thc.utah.edu/lectures-programs/bwm-conference/raceandmormonwomen.php>
- Pearson, Carol Lynn. *Daughters of Light*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982.
- Pena, Manuel. "Class, Gender and Machismo: The 'Traacherous-Woman' Folklore of Mexican Male Workers." *Gender and Society* 5, no. 1 (1991): 30-46.
- Petroff, Elizabeth Alvilda. "Introduction: The Visionary Tradition in Women's Writing: Dialogue and Autobiography." In *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, edited by Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, 3-59. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Piper, John. "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible." In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, 31-59. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "We are Also Your Sisters: The Development of Women's Studies in Religion." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1/2 (1993): 9-21.
- Pui-lan, Kwok. *Introducing Asian Women's Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.
- Quinn, D. Michael. *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview*. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1998.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1994.
- Rabie, P. J. "Family Structure and Support Systems in Coloured Communities." In *Marriage and Family Life in South Africa: Research Priorities* (1987): 88-110. Cited in <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1615/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Colored-Families.html>.
- Ram, Kalpana. "Too 'Traditional' Once Again: Some Poststructuralists on the Aspirations of the Immigrant/Third World Female Subject." *Australian Feminist Studies* 8, no.17 (1993): 5-28.
- Reader, Jennifer and Kate Holbrook, eds. *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*. Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2017.
- Reeve, W. Paul. *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- RJH. "Common-law Marriages." *By Common Consent (blog)*. January 17, 2006. <https://bycommonconsent.com/2006/01/17/common-law-marriage/>.
- Robbins, Lynn G. "Agency and Love in Marriage." *Ensign*, October 2000. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2000/10/agency-and-love-in-marriage?lang=eng>.
- Robinson, James, Daron Acemoglu, and Simon Johnson. "An African Success Story: Botswana." In *In search of Prosperity: Analytic Narratives on Economic Growth*, edited by Dani Rodrik, 80-119. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Rockwood, Jolene Edmunds. "The Redemption of Eve." In *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, 3-36. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
- Rutherford, Taunaly. "The Internationalization of Mormonism: Indications from India." In *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner, 37-59. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Salleh, Fatimah. "God of the Gentiles, Theology from the Margins." Paper presented at Sunstone's 2015 Theology from the Margins Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, March 2015." <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/2015-theology-from-the-margins-conference-keynote-speech-by-fatimah-salleh/>.

- Salo, Elaine. "Social Construction of Masculinity on the Racial and Gendered Margins of Cape Town." In *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society*, edited by T. Shefer, K. Ratele, N. Shabalala, and R. Buikema, 160-180. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2007.
- Saugestad, Sidsel. *The Inconvenient Indigenous: Remote Area Development in Botswana, Donor Assistance, and the First People of the Kalahari*. Boras, Sweden: The Nordic Africa Institute, 2001.
- Schensul, Steven L., Jean J. Schensul and Margaret D. LeCompte. *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1999.
- Scott, Richard G. "How to Obtain Revelation and Inspiration for your Personal Life." *Ensign*, May 2012. <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/05/how-to-obtain-revelation-and-inspiration-for-your-personal-life?lang=eng>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse." *Ensign*, May 2008, 40-43.
- Segura, Denise A. and Jennifer L. Pierce. "Chicana/o Family Structure and Gender Personality: Chodorow, Familism, and Psychoanalytic Sociology Revisited." *Signs* 19, no.1 (1993): 62-91.
- Sharpe, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Shepherd, Gordon and Gary Shepherd. *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984.
- Shippo, Jan. *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985.
- Shirts, Kathryn H. "The Role of Susa Young Gates and Leah Dunford Widtsoe in the Historical Development of the Priesthood/Motherhood Model." *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 2 (April 2018): 104-139.
- Silberschmidt, Margarethe. "Poverty, Male Disempowerment, and Male Sexuality: Rethinking Men and Masculinities in Rural and Urban East Africa." In *African Masculinities*, edited by Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, 189-204. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Smith, Dorothy. *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990.
- Smith, Joseph Fielding. *The Way to Perfection*. Salt Lake City, 1931.

- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, Second Edition*. London: Zed Books, 2012.
- Soothill, Jane E. *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007.
- “South Africa – Family Life in Colored Families.” *Marriage and Family Encyclopedia*. Accessed May 1, 2018. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1615/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Colored-Families.html>.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.
- Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-314. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Sprague, Joey and Mark Zimmerman. “Overcoming Dualism: A Feminist Agenda for Sociological Methodology.” In *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory*, edited by Paula England, 255-280. New York: Aldine DeGruyter, 1993.
- Stack, Peggy Fletcher. “Feeling Excluded, Black Mormon Women Ask: ‘Do They See Me?’” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 9, 2015. <http://www.sltrib.com/home/3048039-155/feeling-excluded-black-mormon-women-ask>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “For Many Black Mormons, Racism is a Bigger Issue than Sexism.” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 4, 2014. <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/58361569-78/women-says-black-church.html.cspT>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Landmark ‘Mormon Doctrine’ Goes Out of Print.” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 21, 2010. [http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci\\_15137409](http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/ci_15137409).
- \_\_\_\_\_. “A Mormon Mystery Returns: Who is Heavenly Mother?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 2013. <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/56282764-78/eternal-female-god-heaven.html.csp>.
- Stapley, Jonathan. *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Sterzer, Rachel. “BYU Professor Teaches How to Take the Fear out of Dating.” *Deseret News*, September 10, 2015. <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865636457/Taking-the-fear-out-of-dating.html?pg=all>.
- Stevens, Elizabeth. “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America.” In *Female and Male in Latin America*, edited by A. Pescatello, 89-101. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1973.

- Stewart, David G., Jr. "Growth, Retention, and Internationalization." In *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffmann, and Tim B. Heaton, 328-361. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2008.
- Stoll, David. *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Sue, Christina A. *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Suggs, David N., *A Bagful of Locusts and the Baboon Woman: Constructions of Gender, Change, and Continuity in Botswana*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, 2002.
- Taylor, Sheila. "The Problem of Female Salvation in LDS Theology." *Element* 5, no. 2 (2009): 1-14.
- Toscano, Margaret. "Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power." In *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, edited by James McLachlan and Loyd Ericson, 193-223. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2007.
- Toscano, Margaret and Paul Toscano. "The Divine Mother." In *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology*, 47-59. Salt Lake City: Signature, 1990.
- Tronto, Joan. "Women and Caring: What Can Feminists Learn about Morality from Caring?" In *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, edited by Virginia Held, 101-115. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.
- Tullis, LaMond. *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1987.
- Tullis, LaMond. "Three Myths about Mormons in Latin America." *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 1 (1981): 79-87.
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. "Stirring Up LDS History." Lecture, Sunstone and Friends of the Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, December 11, 2011. <https://stream.lib.utah.edu/index.php?c=details&id=8263>.
- Upton, Rebecca. "'Women Have No Tribe': Connecting Carework, Gender, and Migration in an Era of HIV/AIDS in Botswana." In *Global Dimensions of Gender and Carework*, edited by Mary K. Zimmerman, Jacquelyn S. Litt, and Christine E. Bose, 360-369. Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2006.

- Van Allen, Judith. "Radical Citizenship: Powerful Mothers and Equal Rights." In *Power, Gender, and Social Change in Africa*, edited by Muna Ndulo and Margaret Grieco, 59-76. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Van Beek, Walter E.A. "Church Unity and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity: A View from Across the Sahara." In *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason, 72-98. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016.
- Vance, Laura. "Evolution of Ideals for Women in Mormon Periodicals, 1897–1999." *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 1 (2002): 91-112.
- Walch, Tad. "Essays on Mormon History, Doctrine Find New Visibility in Official App, Sunday School." *Deseret News*, December 26, 2016.  
<https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865669945/Essays-on-Mormon-history-doctrine-find-new-visibility-in-official-app-Sunday-School.html>.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Mariner Books, 2003.
- Warren, Meghana A. "Exemplary Allyship: Raising the Bar for Inclusiveness in the Workplace." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2018.
- White, Caroline. "'Close to Home' in Johannesburg: Gender Oppression in Township Households." *Women's Studies International Forum* 16, no. 2 (1993): 149-163.
- Whitney, Helen and Jane Barnes. *The Mormons*. Documentary film. Directed by Helen Whitney and Jane Barnes. 2007: Arlington, VA: WGBH Educational Foundation. Transcript at <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/script.html>.
- Widtsoe, John A. *Priesthood and Church Government, rev. ed.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954.
- Wilcox, Linda P. "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven." In *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson, 64-77. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992.
- Wilcox, W. Bradford. *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
- Williamson, Robert. *Latin America: Cultures in Conflict*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- World Atlas. "The Major Ethnic Groups of Botswana." Accessed July 19, 2018.  
<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-major-ethnic-groups-of-botswana.html>.

- World Council of Churches. "Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes." March 9, 2012.  
<http://archived.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes.html>.
- Wright-Rios, Edward. *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and Popular Culture in Modern Mexico* Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 2014.
- Young, Brigham. "The Persecutions of the Saints—Their Loyalty to the Constitution—The Mormon Battalion—The Laws of God Relative to the African Race." *Journal of Discourses* 10 (1863): 104-111.  
<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/4266>
- Young, Lani Wendt. "Rejoice in the Diversity of Our Sisterhood: A Samoan Mormon Feminist Voice on Ordain Women (2014)." In *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright, 273-278. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Zinn, Maxine Baca, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner. "Introduction: Sex and Gender Through the Prism of Difference." In *Gender Through the Prism of Difference*, edited by Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner, 1-12. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.