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Literacy and Religious Agency: An Ethnographic Study of an Online LDS Women's Group

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**LITERACY AND RELIGIOUS AGENCY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN ONLINE LDS WOMEN'S GROUP**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CATHERINE MATTHEWS PAVIA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2009

English

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CATHERINE MATTHEWS PAVIA

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DEDICATION

To the women who read and write on the LDS My Online Friends discussion board
with my deepest respect and appreciation.

To Joe, Mom, and Dad
who have always listened and believed that I have something to say.

And to Miles and Meg,
may you also know the combined power of faith and literacy in your lives.

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ABSTRACT

LITERACY AND RELIGIOUS AGENCY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN ONLINE LDS WOMEN'S GROUP

SEPTEMBER 2009

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This dissertation is based on an ethnographic study of a discussion board and its 120-150 female participants, all of whom are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). My primary goal was to discover how the women's religion influences their uses of and the rewards of their online literacy and how their online writing affects how they practice their faith and define themselves. Methods of inquiry included two years of participant observation, phenomenological interviewing, discourse analysis interviewing, and collection of discussion board threads.

Participants' spoken comments and writing show how they created an enclave in order to communicate in ways driven by their religious beliefs and to discuss the multiple essences that emerge as they live their faith. Participants' literacy practices also demonstrate that the discussion board functions simultaneously as a private board and as a public LDS community, in which participants use intimate literacy to construct public voices that are in harmony with LDS teachings but that reflect their individual differences with those teachings.

My analysis reveals that writing in this enclave often contributed to open-mindedness and critical agency. The participants conscientiously engaged in both deliberative discourse and in a pragmatics of naming to claim religious essences and to negotiate their multiple relationships to their religious doctrine, even as they accept that doctrine. In doing so, they have found power to resist other cultural discourses. They also have become more open to difference within their community. This study shows that agency can occur within a fixed structure because there are choices within fixity and that religious discourses offered participants a position of resistance from which to speak.

This study suggests the importance of qualitative research on private contexts for faith-based literacy because public contexts may not be deemed as “safe” for discussions of fluidity within faith. I argue that composition studies and literacy studies need to pay attention to the extent to which religion informs individuals’ literacy practices, particularly students who struggle to reconcile the coexistence of religious and academic literacies. I also suggest pedagogical tactics for welcoming faith-based literacies in the composition classroom.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE INTERSECTIONS AMONG RELIGION AND LITERACY

Scholars in composition and literacy studies today need to consider more fully the fact that religious people, some of whom might be students in our classes, struggle to reconcile the coexistence of faith-based and academic literacies in their lives. Beverly Moss talks about her personal struggle with seemingly conflicting academic and faith-based literacies in the introduction to her book *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition in African-American Churches*. Moss discusses the conflict between her “scholarly path” and her life as an “African-American woman who can normally be found in church on Sunday morning” (2). She says, “I was still not convinced that being part of the academy for an African American, and especially a woman, did not mean giving up part of one’s self,” that is, until “that moment when my church community and my academic community seemed to sit down and have a conversation in my head” (2).

Other scholars in composition have noticed their students similarly struggling as they try to integrate faith-based literacies with academic literacy (Shannon Carter; Perkins; Rand; Bizzell; VanderLei). For example, Shannon Carter describes how her student James began his basic writing course by writing about the Bible as the object that best represented literacy for him. However, by the end of the semester, James had “sacrificed” the sense of self he had developed from the Bible and his religion for three reasons: (1) he did not understand how to reconcile and use the tensions between his religious faith and the academy’s ways of knowing and communicating; (2) he did not have the opportunity to develop the strategies and flexibility necessary to negotiate these

literacies and their contexts, and (3) academic literacy was presented in the course in a way that furthered the “autonomous” model of literacy rather than as one of many communities of practice (574-576, 587-588). Carter describes similar struggles by two of her graduate students, Alex and Mona, who managed to keep their ties to both their religious and academic communities, but found the two communities to be irreconcilable. Both experienced hostility in response to their religious identities, which forced them to keep their beliefs “in check” in academic contexts (576). Carter states that, as a result, Alex and Mona saw themselves as playing “an artificial role in academic contexts” (576). Telling students that they must leave their faith at home in order to succeed academically is equivalent to telling them that they must deny who they are, which leaves them little incentive to engage in the composition course (VanderLei 4) and makes writing a matter of fulfilling an assignment rather than something that matters deeply (Williams 516).

In order to help our students negotiate similar struggles and avoid having to choose between religious and academic identities, the fields of composition studies and literacy studies need to pay attention to the extent to which religion informs, enriches, and complicates individuals’ literacy practices. Paying attention to students’ religious literacies can help us understand the complexity and richness of their literacy backgrounds, just as understanding students’ multiple and alternative literacies has enhanced and deepened not only our appreciation of those literacies, but also our discovery that, as Patricia Bizzell says, there was intellectual work to be done that was made possible only by widening the accepted range of literacies and forms of English (12).

Despite our current lack of research and scholarship on the intersections among literacy and religion, the connections between the two are not new. Religion has long influenced the rewards and costs of people's literacy practices, perhaps more so than any other institution throughout U.S. history. Religion affects how people use literacy in their personal and everyday lives to find and live with meaning and personal power. When we talk about literacy and power, then, how can we neglect religion, which can act on many levels against people's personal empowerment through ideology and patriarchy but can also serve as a source of personal empowerment? Religion's influence on people's meaning-making and self-definition has certainly not diminished, nor has its existence in the public sphere (Stephen Carter; Crowley). As literacy and composition scholars, we need to inquire into the intersections among religion and literacy in people's lives and what those intersections mean for uses of and motivations for writing. By exploring religion's multi-layered relationships with people's literacy practices, we will expand our understanding of the "core literacies" (Fishman 3) of different groups of religious people, the roles literacy plays in the everyday lives of people, and the reasons why people write of their own accord. We can also gain a broader sense of what agency and critical literacy mean for different groups of religious students. Lastly, research on the relationships among religion and literacy can better equip us to engage in productive, nondivisive dialogue with religious people and can help us as teachers to welcome faith-based identity work and to know how to encourage religious and nonreligious students alike to develop open perspectives towards difference.

This dissertation addresses the relationships among literacy practices and religion for one group of LDS or Mormon women who participate together in a discussion board.

My research draws on religion as a category of analysis in relation to literacy and provides an ethnographic look at how one community of women take up religion and literacy together. I define “literacy” as the practice of reading and writing, or as the ability to create and understand texts. This includes the talk surrounding the creation and consumption of texts and the ideological, social, and technological context of that reading and writing, which give literacy its value and actively work to control it. Literacy is therefore social, cultural, and ideological. Literacy is also multiple and the relationships among literacies are fluid, rather than distinct or additive. In other words, we don’t move between separate strands of literacies. Instead, we draw on elements of one literacy even as we use another. Literacy practices inform each other, in varying degrees, depending on the context.

With my research, I seek to join other qualitative researchers who, in the last two decades, have provided fascinating examples of the multiple and alternative literacies of different communities (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines; Heath; Weinstein-Shr; Cintron; Fishman; Cushman; Moss; Guerra; Lofty; Farr; McLaughlin; Mahiri). Each of these studies shows the complexity and richness of literacy practices and resources outside of school and the conflicting relationships between school and nonschool literacies. Most of these researchers conclude that schooling needs to value students’ home literacies, whether for the purpose of helping them gain school literacy by building on their existing rhetorical and linguistic knowledge (e.g., Heath; Guerra; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines; Mahiri) or for the purposes of expanding school literacy itself and creating a more inclusive literacy (e.g., Moss; Lofty; Gilyard; Farr). These studies also show that for many people, school literacy is not the most important strand in their literacy web. As

Moss argues, “The academy should acknowledge the existence of alternative models that operate simultaneously with the essayist model and acknowledge that large segments of U.S. society have as their primary example of a literate (formal not everyday conversational) text something other than the essayist model, or have more than one primary model of a literate text” (*Community* 152).

Studying literacy practices outside of school can therefore inform our pedagogies, help us build on students’ existing literacy practices, expand academic literacy, and help students not only acquire dominant literacy practices but also gain confidence in their nonschool literacies and experiences with literacy. Among those conducting qualitative research on multiple literacies, however, religious sponsorship of literacy has been neglected. My study provides one such religious “little literacy narrative,” a term coined by Beth Daniell to describe explorations into what people read and write when they are not compelled to do so (“Narratives”). I seek to add to this body of research on multiple literacies with a portrait of a community of women and their LDS-based, online literacy practices.

Despite our lack of attention to the connections between literacy and religion, the historical relationship between the two is well-established and important in our current assumptions about and approaches to religion and literacy. In the next section, I present a brief history of the relationship between religion and literacy in the United States. I outline religion’s importance as a historical sponsor of reading and writing instruction and content in the United States as well as its effect on how we understand ourselves as readers and on how religious people might perceive and develop other literacies. This brief history is followed by a discussion of the division between liberal rhetoric and

rhetoric of religious faith in academia in general and then in the composition classroom in particular. I end the chapter by introducing my research site and definitions that are central to my research.

A Brief History of the Relationship between Religion and Literacy in the United States

Historically, in the United States, literacy and religion have been mutually enforcing. Religion has furthered people's desires to read and write, has promoted laws requiring literacy education, and has increased the avenues available for literacy instruction (Resnick and Resnick; de Castell and Luke; Graff). From the New England colonies' beginnings, reading instruction was advocated and sponsored to serve religious purposes and to create a moral society, as defined by Protestantism. In the West and Southwest, Spanish Catholics similarly influenced the existence of literacy education. Religious figures and publishers were also responsible for distributing religious texts to those in need of reading materials. As a result, reading instruction in the United States historically furthered religious ideologies. The effect of religious sponsorship of literacy has been both empowering and constraining: religion has led to increased opportunities for literacy instruction, but religious sponsorship of literacy has also been a means of furthering existing racial, gender, and economic hierarchies. Because these historical connections between religion and literacy affect how we view the contemporary relationship between religion and literacy, they're worth presenting briefly and chronologically here.

Given the religious reasons why many of the British, Spanish, and German colonists came to the United States, it's not surprising that religion played a primary role

in the existence of reading and writing instruction in colonial times and beyond. In the days both before and after the Revolutionary War, literacy education in the colonies and the United States existed because of the importance of reading for religious worship. E. Jennifer Monaghan describes how in the colonial period reading instruction was considered so important to religious worship that legislation in colonial New England required all children to learn to read (34). However, girls were denied writing instruction because writing, in contrast to reading, was viewed as a job-related skill (Monaghan 28). Writing was therefore seen as irrelevant to girls, who were expected instead to be successful homemakers and to pass on their reading instruction to children (Monaghan).

Because of continued exclusions based on gender and race, Sunday schools in the nineteenth century provided both reading and writing instruction to those with few other opportunities, namely, girls, African Americans, factory children, and adults (Boylan 22-24). These Sunday schools were important to literacy education in two main ways: first, they contributed dramatically to overall education through cultural transmission of Protestant values and ideals (Boylan 22, 33). Second, the existence of Sunday schools allowed Americans “to reject denominational schooling and class-oriented public education in favor of the ideal—if not the reality—of free public schooling for all” (Boylan 59). In the case of the Sunday schools, then, the historical relationship between religion and literacy in the United States was beneficial to both—religion furthered the spread of literacy instruction and of public schooling, and reading and writing instruction furthered the development of a religious subject.

The religious sponsorship of literacy education among slaves in the antebellum South complicates how we might understand whether the relationship between literacy

education and religion was beneficial and for whom. The slave mission, which was fueled by the Great Awakening and its accompanying revivalist movements, was conducted primarily within denominations, rather than being organized on a central basis, and was advanced by individual religious leaders in an effort to help all African-Americans be able to read the Bible (Cornelius 36). The slave mission persuaded individual slaveholders to allow African-American churches and to allow their slaves to be taught to read because of the belief that religion required literacy. Janet D. Cornelius argues that missionary efforts toward slave literacy were historically important and that these efforts “challenged the use of literacy as a form of racial and cultural separation” (13). The slave mission also influenced African-American enthusiasm for religion and for literacy. Cornelius argues that the impact of slave missions was “pervasive” and individual, as slaves realized that the combination of religion and literacy was the pathway to “new ideas, a sense of their rights and of their power to attain them” (16). Cornelius also describes how in learning to write, in particular, African-Americans established their “human identity to the European world,” which often used the lack of literacy in order to justify its considerations of Africans as lesser human beings (16-17). Religion then provided opportunities for slaves to gain literacy and for individual slaveholders to allow slaves to gain literacy.

However, Cornelius also explains the ambivalent nature of slave literacy education. Even well-intended missionary work began from Europeans’ defining of themselves as superior to African slaves (12). And although evangelicalism did inspire slave literacy missions, missionaries’ “appeals to slaveholders were tinged with respect for the slave labor system and with steady reassurance that missions would not interfere

with it” (15). All religious denominations except Quakers accommodated the slave system (Cornelius 11, 27), giving way to slaveowners’ fears of African-Americans’ political uses of literacy (Cornelius 17) and to their own fears of violence against them (Cornelius 26, 28).

Southern nervousness regarding the growing threat of emancipation and rebellion lessened the success of the slave mission by 1820 (Cornelius 30). Literacy instruction in Sunday schools similarly diminished by the 1820s and 30s, when tax-supported public schools spread and Sunday schools began focusing more on religious subjects (Boylan 24). Yet both the slave mission and the Sunday schools had wide-ranging impact and are specific examples of religion’s historical influence on the ability of people to read and write.

Religion also influenced the content of early reading and writing instruction within schools and outside of schooling. Monaghan writes that “the seventeenth-century curriculum was in essence a course on Christianity” and that the texts used for literacy education in colonial New England were basic religious texts (22). An example of religion’s influence on what people read outside of school is the campaigns launched by religious publishers in the 1840s and 1850s as books became more readily and cheaply available. The American Tract Society sent students from Princeton’s Theological Seminary to spend their summer vacations as colporteurs in the mountains of Appalachia, to the New Jersey Pine Barrens, to the Mississippi Valley, and farther (Nord 242, 271). The colporteurs brought inexpensive, mass-produced religious books and tracts to the poor people in these areas. David Paul Nord writes that “whether these publishing efforts actually hastened the flowering of religious faith in antebellum America can never be

known with certainty” (242). But the religious publishers’ efforts do show that religion’s sponsorship of literacy in the United States has been direct and pervasive in both what people read and in the means through which they learned to read and write.

The colporteurs’ tracting campaigns also provide an example of how religion has affected how we understand who we’re supposed to be as readers and writers: The religious publishers in the 1840s and 1850s specifically tried to promote an ideology of proper reading as intense, serious, careful, and thoughtful (Nord 270). Readers and writers should be methodical and meditative in relation to their literacy practices, and the results of their slow, deliberate, and reflective reading should be power—whether spiritual, material, or moral.

This transmission of values and morals that has accompanied the relationship between religion and literacy shows again the ambivalent and dual nature of religion as a force in the history of American literacy instruction. In *The Literacy Myth*, Harvey Graff argues that although religion, particularly Protestantism, was the drive behind near-universal adult literacy before the nineteenth century, this literacy was not intellectual or liberating, but ritualistic (23-4). Moreover, Graff argues that the motives behind religious denominations’ emphasis on literacy were a matter of competing for souls, “training of the masses to the social order,” and “the reassertion of hegemony” rather than literacy instruction as an end in itself (23). Graff states that morality was the base of education and literacy was the medium through which a moral society and economy were to be created and maintained (30, 33, 35). He points to clergymen as “the architects of the educational system” as such (37). This attempt to frame the behavior of students of literacy can also be seen in Cornelius’s accounts of the American Abolition Societies

schools' efforts in regards to literacy instruction for free African-Americans (24-6) and in Boylan's accounts of Sunday school promoters and public school promoters' views of their organizations as "powerful tools for improving social order" (37).

However, in contrast to Graff, Boylan emphasizes that this improved social order was not a matter of coercion, but instead a product of "the regulation of behavior" through "values rooted in self-discipline, not external discipline" (37). Boylan admits that it would be easy to show Sunday schools as comprised of middle-class outsiders, imposing and controlling lower classes by making them into factory workers. But Boylan argues instead that although Sunday schools emphasized values similar to those required by industrialization (obedience, order, and so forth), when working-class people participated in churches and Sunday schools, they were "just as likely to be expressing their own religious principles as they were to be reflecting the views of their employers" (38). The historical relationship between religion and literacy is therefore ambivalent. Religion and literacy have presented an avenue to empowerment for some individuals, yet religion and literacy have also combined as a means of furthering social order and economic hegemony to benefit those already privileged.

Self-sponsored literacy groups and institutions have emerged in response to such power struggles. For example, self-sponsored African-American clubs and literary societies from 1830 to 1940 served as "cultural outlets" for African Americans (McHenry and Heath 425). Elizabeth McHenry and Shirley Brice Heath describe how in response to being barred from other clubs and theaters, African Americans created their own intellectual atmosphere, not only for their own enjoyment but also "to build a public image of the literate strength of their community" (430). Similarly, Anne Ruggles Gere

describes how the women's club movement from 1870 to 1910 provided specific groups of women with the opportunity to use literacy to resist others' attempts to position them unfavorably, whether by social class, economic status, or gender. Gere illustrates Jewish and Mormon clubwomen sponsoring their own clubs separate from their religion in order to expand their rights and their positions while adhering to their religious beliefs (252-53). Jewish and Mormon clubwomen used their self-sponsored groups to try to integrate their religious-based ideologies of womanhood and their use of literacy for public action on behalf of women. Contemporary self-sponsored literacy groups can take numerous forms, like the book clubs that Elizabeth Long discusses, or online groups, such as the discussion board group in my own research. We can learn from self-sponsored literacy groups how individuals and communities use reading and writing to negotiate power struggles such as those that have historically existed in the combination of literacy and religion.

Qualitative research is needed to show the nature of contemporary relationships among religion and literacy. It's likely that similarly ambivalent relationships between religion and literacy exist in the lives of religious people today. The few ethnographic, historical, and composition studies conducted in the past fifteen years on the intersections among religion and literacy practices have provided some specific examples of how religion and religious literacy can influence people's perceptions of and development of other literacies. Religious identity can be a positive or beneficial resource for other literacies, as in the case of the Iranian villagers in Brian Street's study. The mountain villagers' traditional religious literacy taught in an Iranian Islamic school ("maktab" literacy) helped the villagers to develop commercial literacy (159). In the majority of

cases, however, tensions emerged in the convergence of religious literacy and other literacies, as has been documented primarily by qualitative studies of ethnic communities (e.g., McLaughlin in relation to Navajo literacy; Moss in relation to African-American literacy; Fishman and Amish literacy; Sarroub and the literacy practices of Yemeni American high school girls). More recently, these tensions have been noticed and felt by composition scholars, who have begun to write about students' struggles to negotiate religious and academic literacy and about their own struggles to negotiate the presence of faith in their classrooms (Shannon Carter; Kyburz; Williams; Rand; VanderLei; Smart; Hansen; Perkins; Leathers Dively; Goodburn). More qualitative research needs to be done to see how people use literacy to work through these tensions.

The Division between Liberal Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Religious Faith

One reason for the lack of attention to the intersections among literacy and religion is because we have inherited a liberal bias against religious literacy study, which continues both despite the historical connections between religion and literacy and perhaps because of these connections. The divide between religion and liberalism is so absolute for many literacy scholars¹ that religion has been off the radar even as it's being lived by millions of people and plenty of our composition students. Our academic culture furthers this divide by privileging logic and critical thinking and labeling faith as inappropriate for academic situations. In doing so, it erroneously divides the rhetorics of

¹ Exceptions to this include Beverly Moss's *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition in African-American Churches*, Carla Kapitzke's *Literacy and Religion: The Textual Politics and Practice of Seventh-day Adventism*, Andrea Fishman's *Amish Literacy*, and Shirley Bryce Heath's "Protean Shapes" and *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Anne Ruggles Gere also addresses religion and literacy in her book *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*.

liberalism and religious faith. Kristine Hansen attributes composition study's intolerance towards religious expression to the discourse of philosophical liberalism, which the founders of the United States adopted from John Locke's eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals (27). This discourse values the separation of private and public and of subjective and objective knowledge (27). It therefore relegates religious knowledge to the private sphere because it cannot be accessed through rational methods (28).² As Shannon Carter explains, "Faith does not seem knowledge, but rather its complete opposite" and is assumed to be anti-intellectual, closed-minded, or counter-productive (578).

Sharon Crowley's recent book *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* seeks to negotiate this division of liberal and religious rhetoric. Crowley believes that there is an ideological impasse in America's current civil discourse. This impasse results from differences between the ways in which liberals and conservative Christian activists approach arguments (22-23). She describes some of these differences in argumentative strategies as follows: Liberals consider values a private matter whereas conservative Christian activists appeal to moral and religious values in civic affairs. Liberals think religious fundamentalists are intolerant for not adopting a rational approach to negotiating disagreements whereas conservative Christian activists believe

² Stephen L. Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Discourse* and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner et al.'s edited collection *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief: Essays on Intellectual and Spiritual Life* make similar arguments about the reasons why the rhetorics of liberalism and religious faith are perceived as dichotomous, with religious rhetoric consigned to the private sphere. Sharon Crowley also describes the place of religious and moral values in the public sphere as one of the main points of contention between liberalism and religious fundamentalism. But I see Crowley's overall discussion as an argument that some religious and moral values do belong in the private sphere and not the public sphere, which reinforces the dichotomy.

liberals are intolerant for trivializing their appeals to faith and divine authority (16). Crowley explains that there is danger in this impasse between liberalism and religious fundamentalism because when people are unwilling or unable to deliberate, democracy is threatened (1-2). Crowley turns to ancient rhetoric and to rhetorical invention to negotiate this situation, a goal I find commendable and necessary. In two of her three main questions, she asks, “How can outsiders discuss insiders’ beliefs with anything like fairness and accuracy? How can believers converse with unbelievers?” (ix). Both of these questions are important to democracy within our larger society and within our classrooms, and both need to be discussed in our field.

However, Crowley ironically reinforces the divide between liberalism and religion by the end of her book. She does so, first, by writing with the end goal of changing religious fundamentalists, rather than truly maintaining deliberation with them. The third of Crowley’s main questions indicates that her purpose goes beyond negotiating the rhetorical failures between liberals and religious fundamentalists: “Is it possible to persuade people who subscribe to intensely resonant belief systems to adopt different positions?” (ix). My disagreement with Crowley begins with this third question, which I see negating the first two because discussing beliefs with fairness and accuracy and maintaining a conversation with believers requires that unbelievers adopt the goal of listening rather than persuading. When someone’s goal is changing another’s position or beliefs, that person cannot approach a conversation with fairness, and the other party in the conversation is not likely to respect or trust that person. Crowley’s focus on persuading religious fundamentalists establishes an us-versus-them dichotomy. Her intended audience is clearly those subscribing to liberalism, and the subjects of her

explication are religious fundamentalists, specifically those subscribing to apocalypticism. Although Crowley establishes the existence of both religious and liberal fundamentalists, she focuses her critique on apocalypticists, who must change their “dangerous” beliefs (131), whereas liberals must change only their rhetoric when addressing religious fundamentalists.³

The second way that Crowley reinforces the divide between liberal and religious rhetoric is in her overgeneralizations of religious fundamentalists and apocalypticism. She defines Christian fundamentalists as those who believe in the following two theological principles: personal salvation and biblical inerrancy (105). She then articulates apocalypticism with fundamentalist beliefs (105). She defines apocalypticism as the belief that Jesus Christ will literally come a second time to the earth and will take those who are saved into heaven (8-9), and she states that “apocalypticism . . . actually connects political activity to Christian duty” (9). Crowley also stereotypes apocalypticism as “advocat[ing] passive acceptance of all sorts of horrors” (114). The problem with this is that the theology of apocalypticism differs according to Christian denomination, just as the details of all theological beliefs do. Christian fundamentalist beliefs in the United States also differ vastly depending on denomination and sect, given their different histories, geographies, contexts, and theological nuances. Baptists’ fundamentalist beliefs or versions of apocalypticism, for example, should not be lumped with Lutheran or Mennonite or Mormon fundamentalist beliefs or theology regarding a second coming of Jesus Christ. Failing to make distinctions makes it easy to stereotype, dismiss, or degrade them all;

³ Crowley actually doesn’t even address liberal fundamentalists other than to acknowledge their existence. She applies her question about the possibility of persuading people with resonate belief systems only to religious fundamentalists.

doesn't allow for Christian believers to hold both liberal and religious beliefs; and only furthers the dichotomy between religious and liberal rhetoric.⁴

The third way that Crowley reinforces the divide between liberal and religious rhetoric is that she does not maintain a distinction between religious fundamentalist belief and fundamentalist rhetoric. Religious fundamentalist belief is the belief in a higher being(s) with singular authority and in an identity tied to this authoritative source (Crowley 12), whereas fundamentalist rhetoric is a tone of assault, criticism, and an us-versus-them approach. Like Crowley, I do believe that belief and rhetoric are connected. Rhetors draw on the commonplaces that circulate in a culture and its ideologies in the premises of their arguments, in the proofs that they select, in their considerations of their position on an issue, and in the language and symbols they use (Crowley and Hawhee 75-81). A culture's commonplaces are integral to the rhetoric that an individual uses. However, some rhetorical strategies, such as tone, figures of speech, and other stylistic choices, can be matters of personal choice and can reflect a rhetor's affiliation with multiple communities. Every individual maintains a unique and complex position within a community, given the multiple communities to which she or he belongs. These complex positionings affect the degree to which a rhetor's presentation reflects particular commonplaces. Therefore, rhetoric and belief are mutually informing, but the degree to which they inform each other is a complex and individual matter without a specific causal relationship. A rhetor who holds fundamentalist religious beliefs, such as the existence

⁴ Crowley herself provides examples of the possibility of stereotyping that accompanies overgeneralizations. In addition to her statement regarding apocalyptists passively accepting horrors, another notable stereotype occurs when she discusses how conservative Christian ideology accepts "a predatory view of masculinity" that "authorizes abuse of women and children, as well as male-on-male violence" (148).

of good and evil, then, does not necessarily take an us-versus-them approach that is common to fundamentalist rhetoric.

In the beginning of her book, Crowley seems to acknowledge that fundamentalist rhetoric need not be a result of fundamentalist religious belief. Crowley notes that liberals, Christians, and anyone adhering to any belief system can do so “with fundamentalist intensity” (12) and that fundamentalism is “a particular strategy (and tone) that permeates defenses of political and religious belief systems” (14).⁵ Crowley then spends the majority of her book describing together the religious beliefs and the fundamentalist rhetoric of religious extremists like LaHayes who name-call, stereotype, and refuse to engage with other religions (130-1). Religious fundamentalists’ beliefs, even when articulated with apocalypticism, are not necessarily what causes rhetorical breakdowns and the inability to communicate with liberals: fundamentalist rhetoric is.

To say fundamentalists bear the blame for not engaging liberals with liberal discourse is to ignore the responsibility of liberals to also engage fundamentalists outside of liberal discourse. Mike DePalma, Jeff Ringer, and Jim Webber criticize Crowley for establishing “ground rules” for dialogue that in effect makes liberal discourse what counts as dialogue and establishes a prescribed range for invention. They argue that Crowley offers a way for fundamentalists to be civilized but that, for her, civil discourse

⁵ On pg 8-9, Crowley does say that Christian belief and Christian fundamentalism doesn’t mean one can’t be liberal or that one necessarily adheres to conservative politics, but this is a very small disclaimer in a book that not only spends the majority of its pages articulating Christian belief and fundamentalism with conservative politics and fundamentalist rhetoric, but also occasionally uses the term “conservative Christian” interchangeably with “Christian fundamentalist” (see pg 148 and pg 164 for just two examples).

is liberal discourse. DePalma et al favor a Burkean dialectic and ground their critique of Crowley in Burke's pentad:

For Crowley, fundamentalist Christians (identified with *agent-purpose*) may be brought into "civil discourse" (corresponding to *scene-agency*) if all parties agree to negotiate their views. But if those who refuse to negotiate are deemed illegitimate for public discourse, liberalism merely excludes, rather than addresses, fundamentalism. Crowley's stated aim in promoting rhetorical invention—to discover "any and all possibilities alternative to those that are currently envisioned by parties of discourse" (57)—ends up being different from "civil discourse."

Crowley combines religious fundamentalist beliefs with fundamentalist rhetoric to the extent that she claims that our notion of "public," our nation, and our commonplaces regarding privacy and individual freedom "have now been brought into crisis by . . . Christian fundamentalism." By focusing so much on such extremists and the connections between their religious fundamentalist beliefs and their fundamentalist rhetoric, Crowley reconstitutes the divide that leads to misunderstandings and the enclaving of both religious discourses and liberal discourses. If we portray all who adhere to religious fundamentalist beliefs or apocalyptic beliefs as articulated with fundamentalist rhetoric, then we fail to see any complexity, ambiguity, or negotiations that they may make within their belief systems.

Qualitative research on the intersections among religion and literacy for different people can provide composition scholars with pedagogical help in bridging the liberal/religious divide. Equally important, qualitative research on religion and literacy practices might also further the development of understanding and respect regarding faith-based literacies, which will go a long way in establishing the civil discourse that is so necessary in our classrooms as well as our nation. In fact, I believe that Crowley's efforts to use rhetoric to discuss religious fundamentalists' beliefs and the ways in which

fundamentalists use these beliefs rhetorically is well-intended, but could greatly benefit from ethnographic research or discourse analysis interviews rather than from her own textual interpretations of what a few, extreme religious fundamentalists of specific denominations have said.

The Religious and Liberal Divide in the Composition Classroom

The division between liberalism and religion has created problems in the composition classroom both for instructors and for students. These problems have begun to be addressed in recent publications, many of which discuss composition instructors' very valid dilemmas when presented with student work that draws on religious literacies, sometimes in ways that sermonize or are hostile and intolerant of groups already marginalized. For example, Amy Goodburn documents her struggle to respond to a Christian student, Luke, who resisted the course's goal to promote the valuing of difference because to him, that was equivalent to moral relativism. Juanita Smart describes receiving a paper from a student that compares Frankenstein and Jesus Christ in a way that ended with sermonizing. Kristine Hansen also writes about receiving similar sermonizing papers on political issues from religious students who "think their political positions are right in almost the same way they think their religious beliefs are right" (26). And Ronda Leathers Dively is certainly not alone in her discomfort with students' including in their academic work literal or rigid interpretations of scripture in a way that denies complexity to different people's processes for arriving at truth (91-2).

Composition instructors' struggles with responding to such discourse can exacerbate students' own struggles with the religious/liberal divide if instructors assume that students' use of religious literacy is a result of their lack of critical thinking or their

inability to think independently or if composition instructors respond to students' use of religious discourse in trivializing ways. For example, some professors responded to the Bible-based knowledge of Shannon Carter's students by telling them it represents "ignorance" and "false consciousness" (579-80), and Goodburn's colleagues with whom she consulted about Luke suggested that such students should go to fundamentalist schools or that Goodburn had an opportunity to "enlighten" Luke or that Goodburn should ignore him (347). Other examples of trivializing or condescending attitudes towards students' use of faith-based literacies in the composition classroom can be found even in published defenses of the use of religious discourse in the composition classroom. Although well-intended, Leathers Dively describes religious students as having been "fed" narrow views of "truth" and "authority" (94). And Chris Anderson calls his TA's student Cathy's "testimonial" rhetoric "sweet," "superficial," and "foolish" discourse (13). Lizabeth Rand also criticizes Anderson's suggestion that composition teachers can offer students a model of a "more sophisticated, understanding of religious experience" (Anderson 15), a statement that Rand finds presumptuous and lacking respect for "the deeply intimate and profoundly personal ways that human beings come to make meaning of what is sacred" (362). Rand also critiques Leathers Dively's assumption that we would "naturally think it constrictive for God to be at the center of someone's universe" (362). As Rand argues, when we imply that believing in sin or salvation isn't credible, we not only trivialize faith, but we also narrow our possibilities for thinking about religious expression in the classroom (357).

Recent scholars writing about religion and the composition classroom have noted problems that can emerge for students who do struggle with negotiating religious and

academic literacies in the composition classroom. Earlier I detailed Shannon Carter's discussion of the problems faced by three of her students, one of whom gave up his religious identity whereas the other two maintained both their religious and academic identities but felt that they had to suppress their religious identities and beliefs in order to succeed academically. Rebecca Shoenike Nowacek's ethnographic study similarly shows a student who is crippled academically because she thinks that to be a good student, she must "minimize the appearance of her deeply felt religious concerns" (165). Other scholars (Rand; VanderLei; Hansen; Kyburz; Goodburn; Leathers Dively) have also written more generally about composition students, primarily evangelical or fundamentalist Christian, whose spiritual identity is "the primary kind of selfhood" that they turn to for meaning-making (Rand 350) and the tendency of composition instructors to "neglect matters of personal faith—which are in so many ways matters of identity—and persist in privileging an oversimplified audience concept that devalues the (in this case, faith-based) sense of exigence, identity, and sociohistoric context from which a writer's work emerges" (Kyburz 138).

As a response to the struggles that they noticed their students experiencing as well as to their own struggles in responding to religious discourse in their classrooms, these composition scholars then argue that we should avoid trivializing religious discourse by finding ways in which students can draw on their religious backgrounds and faith-based literacies while learning academic literacy. Some recommend approaches that allow religious literacies in the composition classroom for the purposes of negotiating the disconnect through study and critique (Goodburn; Leathers Dively). But, as Bizzell and Carter both note, welcoming religious literacies for the purpose of critique is equivalent

to trying to convert students to academic skepticism, which naturally tends to generate distrustful, rather than thoughtful, responses (Bizzell 10; Shannon Carter 574).

In contrast, Carter suggests “a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity” (587), in which literacies are presented as “overlapping communities of practice” (588), and students have to make sense of the religious literacy that they bring to the classroom before applying that same inquiry to academic literacy. VanderLei hopes to teach students that religious faith can inspire and help develop effective rhetorical practices (3). Other scholars advise instructors to invite religiously devout students to dialogue their faith-based readings with secular knowledge in an effort to find religious truth in academic places and to listen to all parts of the conversation (Perkins) or to engage in dialogue about the significance of their religious literacies with instructors and classmates in order to identify with others’ ideas and histories (Rand; Hansen).

These pedagogical suggestions could benefit from qualitative studies showing how individuals “carry faith in a variety of ways,” as VanderLei says (7), in relation to academic literacy. As Moss has already shown, for many religious people, faith-based literacies are resources for other literacies. Moss argues that faith-based literacies serve as sources for what a “text” is and that complex religious belief systems shape language use and ideas about language (*Community* 8). These in turn affect the relationships among various literacies that a person accumulates. More qualitative research can provide literacy scholars with portrayals of the different relationships among faith-based literacies and academic literacy in particular and the ways in which students draw on faith-based literacies as resources in specific contexts. Moreover, composition scholars who are dedicated to helping religious and nonreligious students alike engage in dialogue with

each other about their ideas, histories, and interests in the service of developing more effective citizens and more engaged students could also benefit from qualitative research into how religiously devout individuals use literacy to negotiate religious differences and conflicting religious and cultural ideologies outside the classroom, particularly if composition instructors want to ask religious students to do these kinds of negotiations in the classroom. My ethnographic research presented in this dissertation offers one study to these ends. I introduce that research in the section below.

Introducing the MOF Research Site, Questions Asked, and Benefits of This Inquiry

My ethnographic research consists of data gathered over a two-year period in which I participated with and observed a group of 120-150⁶ Mormon women who take part in on an online discussion board, titled My Online Friends (MOF). My purpose in conducting this research was to inquire into the ways in which religion informs, enriches, and complicates the women's literacy practices, their negotiations of nonreligious discourses, and the uses of and rewards of their online writing. I also wanted to explore how the women's online writing in turn affected their religious practices and their self-definitions. I hope that, from this inquiry, literacy scholars can gain an expanded understanding of the roles online literacy plays in the lives of everyday people, in this case, nonacademic, LDS women.

The faith-based literacy practices central to my particular inquiry are indirectly sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as

⁶ The MOF discussion board membership fluctuates as new women are invited and join and as others leave, but in the two years I observed the group, membership has remained fairly stable between 120-150. Sixty-two of these women signed IRB forms and were formal participants in my study.

the LDS Church or the Mormon Church. The official name of the discussion board in my research is LDS My Online Friends (MOF), in reference to the women's common religious affiliation. The MOF discussion board is password-protected and accessible only to the 120-150 members of the board and to whomever they choose to invite to participate. Although the women have varying degrees of activity in the LDS Church, all are baptized members and all draw from the LDS religion, spirituality, and faith as they write on the MOF discussion board.

In my attempts to better understand what these LDS women's literacy practices mean for them, how their literacy practices rewards them, and what they cost them, I build on Anne Ruggles Gere's research on LDS clubwomen at the turn of the nineteenth century. Gere reports that LDS clubwomen drew on their common religion in the content and in the shape of their prose as they wrote about doctrinal issues in the newspapers and magazines that they produced (41-42). Gere shows that the women wrote both to connect with and separate themselves from religious and cultural forces. My research provides a contemporary look at LDS women's faith-based literacy practices and the rewards and costs of those practices.

Despite the MOF participants' common religious affiliation, the LDS church does not directly sponsor the discussion board: it doesn't provide the space or encourage the participants to meet online in any way. Instead, the MOF board is currently hosted by Xsorbit.com for a yearly fee of \$49. Yet I still consider the LDS Church an indirect sponsor of the group because of Deborah Brandt's definition of a "literacy sponsor." Brandt defines "literacy sponsor" as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold,

literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). C.H. Knoblauch also argues that literacy as a concept is irrevocably linked with the ideologies of those who use it (74), which for the MOF discussion board includes the LDS church’s doctrine and culture.

Brandt illustrates in *Literacy in American Lives* how individual literacy acts are connected to larger systems—economic, political, historical, and social—but she rarely mentions religion outside of the spiritual aspect of African-American-sponsored literacy. Instead, Brandt focuses on how people have pursued literacy or on how literacy acts as an economic resource and a commodity (21). Although they don’t use the term “sponsorship,” other literacy scholars also discuss the connection among literacy and larger economic and political systems (Freire; Stuckey). Religion is one such larger system or institution that sponsors literacy, yet the majority of the scholarship on literacy and religion is historical in nature (Gere; Cornelius; Nord; Boylan). Like Daniell and Mortensen, Donehower, and Smith, I seek to expand our exploration of the variety of benefits and costs of literacy sponsorship to include spiritual and emotional rather than focusing mainly on material and economic benefits.

Most work on literacy sponsorship does one of the following: (1) Discusses literacy sponsors as systems and institutions, particularly economic systems, and focuses on the economic rewards of literacy sponsorship; (2) Discusses sponsorship on the individual and community level and speaks about the emotional, spiritual, and personal rewards of literacy and sponsorship. My study combines these two views of sponsorship. The MOF discussion board in my research has a history of three direct corporate sponsors, currently Xsorbit.com, and the indirect cultural and institutional sponsorship of the women’s common LDS religion. The growth of the board is also a matter of

sponsorship, with one woman sponsoring another as new board members. The discussion board sponsorship therefore operates on all levels—corporate, institutional, social/community, and individual. My research focuses on the emotional, spiritual, and personal costs and rewards of this sponsorship, rather than on the economic rewards.

A combined look at all types of sponsorship on the MOF discussion board is important because I believe that one of the reasons why religion is such a volatile topic in the general public sphere today is because religious affiliations and sponsorship of faith-based literacies are institutional, social, and often individual, as individuals can have a direct role in introducing and sponsoring religious affiliation and beliefs. Moreover, the rewards of faith-based literacy are deeply personal and spiritual, yet because faith-based literacies can be sponsored partly by religious institutions, they can also be fraught with ideology and tensions. Religious sponsorship of literacy involves larger structures of power and individual and personal sources of power. It's important to see what these different types of power cost and reward individuals, in this case, the MOF participants.

More work involving literacy, spirituality, religion, and faith needs to be done, or literacy scholars will miss one of the key roles that literacy plays in many individuals' lives. My study adds a religious component to this developing discussion of spirituality and literacy. Religion is an important category of analysis in literacy studies because it operates on an institutional, ideological, social, and personal level and because it can be a source of internal power and external power as well as a source of internal and external tension, as I discussed earlier. Moreover, a discussion of religion and literacy practices' influence on each other is timely right now, given the religious and political differences and tensions among Americans today.

Like other scholars (Daniell and Mortensen; Donehower; Daniell *Communion*; Smith), I distinguish between spirituality, faith, and religion. “Religion” is a group, institution, organization, or power structure that includes a specific belief system and often a culture surrounding that belief system. I like Stephen Carter’s definition of religion. Carter argues that religion must involve group worship that assumes that “a sentience beyond the human” exists, is able to act outside the “observed principles and limits of natural science,” and includes “a tradition that makes demands of some kind on its adherents” (17). Religion includes faith and spirituality as part of its belief system, but spirituality can be distinct from religion.

I draw on Beth Daniell’s definition of spirituality from her study of Al-Anon women’s literacy practices. Daniell defines “spirituality” as the consciousness of a spirit, a God, a larger force for good, or a higher power (7). For Daniell, spirituality is recognizing human powerlessness and obtaining personal power and strength that leads to peace (13). Spirituality is therefore more than just the consciousness of a higher power, but something that happens internally to a person as a result of the recognition of a higher power as a force in one’s life. Part of spirituality is a changed perception of one’s identity, purpose, or meaning. Daniell argues that the relationship between rhetoric, literacy, and spirituality is power. In the intersection of literacy and spirituality, there is spiritual power (76), meaning personal peace and emotional health (7). I join Daniell in wanting my research, like hers, to correct the academic myth that “spiritual” and “emotional” are not “legitimate categories for discussions of literacy” (2).

Because both spirituality and religion include a recognition of a larger force for good or a higher power, faith is important to both spirituality and religion, but can be

distinct from both. I draw on my religious upbringing for my definition of faith, which Paul defines as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (*The King James Bible*, Hebrews 11:1). Paul follows this definition with examples of men and women in the scriptures who “by faith” or “through faith” then took action. Faith is therefore a hope and confidence that leads to action. As such, faith is a result of spirituality. Like spirituality, faith can be distinct from religion, but a religion includes faith as a part of its belief system.

Elizabeth VanderLei argues that we all encounter religious faith, regardless of our own beliefs about religion, and that we therefore need to be able to negotiate it in everyday discussions as well as in civic debates. She writes that people

carry faith in a variety of ways. Some carry faith as unexamined warrants. Some bring faith as a skeleton in their psychological closet, one they’d rather not acknowledge but can’t seem to escape. Some bring faith as an acknowledged and well-developed worldview that shapes the claims they make and the goals they set for their writing. For some, faith is a set of nagging questions or haunting suspicions. For others it registers most strongly as doubt or vilification of particular religious dogmas or religion in general. Religious faith for some functions as a self-imposed filter, a safeguard against “damaging” or “corrupting” ideas or maybe against change of any kind at all. While it may be more or less affiliated with theology or a religious community, religious faith is inherently personal and spiritual. It is how people live out theology or religion, whether they’re embracing it, challenging it, fleeing from it, or only suspecting that it affects their lives. (7)

We do not often approach members of a religious group with this view of faith as individual and varied or with the view that all carry faith in different ways. If we approach faith and its influences on the literacy practices of any specific religious group as monolithic, then we do not allow ourselves to learn about how the faith that individuals carry actually influences their literacy practices and vice versa. My research approaches these LDS women’s faith as varied and as both individual and collective.

This approach has allowed me to discover more about the rewards and costs of faith-based and religious-based literacies for the participants in my study.

One such reward of the MOF participants' literacy practices that is a central focus of this dissertation and that also shows the need to assume that individuals take up faith, religion, and literacy together in diverse ways is the concept of agency. "Agency" needs to be localized for the MOF discussion board, just as it does for other communities. Examining the MOF women's writing within their enclave shows that literacy scholars need to expand the definition of agency. I define agency for the MOF women as being aware of how one is positioned, actively choosing among multiple subject positions based on that awareness, and voicing that awareness to self and others. The latter part of my definition—voicing awareness to self and others—draws from Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis's definition of agency in writing as "a sense of both speaking for and speaking to others whose thinking, if not behavior, they might in some way affect" (17) and from bell hooks's description of agents as those who "speak with daring and defiance" (9), "as an equal to an authority figure," and as one unafraid to disagree (5). Speaking with authority and daring requires self-respect, which Ellen Cushman and Ralph Cintron both suggest is important to developing agency.

According to our current understanding of the concept of agency, the manifestation of agency often includes the use of critical awareness and action to resist, challenge, and change oppressive political and economic systems. For Ellen Cushman, this critical awareness and resistance takes the form of small gestures of subversion to negotiate power relations. For Paulo Freire, this critical awareness can occur only by means of praxis, or "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (33).

This praxis begins by naming oppressive situations and by recognizing that power is used to further inequality. For Marxist and critical theorists, agency through writing is a means of opposing hegemonic practices and their accompanying power structures and cultures with the end goal of changing one's positioning within those power structures and cultures.

Also according to our current understanding of agency, the source of agency is skepticism. Yet limiting the source of agency to skepticism is limiting in regard to mythic communities. Mythic communities are composed of people who rely on narratives, "god narratives," as Neil Postman says, to "construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, provide a source of authority, and above all, give a sense of continuity and purpose . . . to organize one's life" (qtd in Lundquist "God Questions" 9). These narratives, or stories, about origins and futures are usually sacred, complex, and symbolic (qtd in Lundquist "God Questions" 9).

Mythic religious communities are complicated in regards to addressing matters of agency because if agency results from skepticism and if agency is manifested primarily by revising power relations through critical action, then a religious person may not be able to be an agent and still maintain her faith, which may be crucial to her identity. Such definitions of agency, then, not only don't allow for religious people to be agents, but they also maintain the binary division between religious discourses and liberal thought. The lack of connection between agency and mythic religious communities is understandable given the history of persecution and violence in the name of religion and given the fact that religious people might use their agency to criticize or resist liberal discourses. But this lack of connection between agency and mythic religious communities

also results in a lack of information and understanding regarding reading and writing strategies that religious people might use to construct identity and find meaning in their lives. In particular, it ignores that faith can be the source of agency for the religiously devout and that faith can offer people both choices within a religious power structure and positions of resistance from which to speak. As agents, religious people can be critical of and grapple with the power structures tied to their religious beliefs, but perhaps not to the point where they want to forsake their God, their convictions, or their religious community. In reference to religious agents, “critical” may be a matter of awareness and use of interruption as a rhetorical tactic. By expanding the concept of agency, we are able to see how religious people do use literacy for transformation and power, but that power and those transformations may look different and may emerge from different sources than those we usually associate with agency.

The following chapters give a more nuanced sense of the power and potential of religious literacy for the participants of the LDS My Online Friends discussion board. Chapter 2 details my methods of data collection and analyses. In Chapter 3, I discuss how the MOF participants created an enclave in which to communicate in ways driven by LDS doxa as well as to create a space for discussions of difference as they try to live their faith. Chapter 4 shows how the MOF participants use their shared religious beliefs about gender and their religious history of sisterhood in order to develop agency and power in resisting other cultural discourses. In Chapter 5, I discuss how the MOF discussion board functions simultaneously as a private discussion board and as a public LDS community. The participants can use intimate literacy to engage difference within this public LDS community and to construct public voices that are in harmony with LDS teachings but

that reflect their individual perceptions of those differences. I then conclude with theoretical and pedagogical lessons that scholars can learn from the MOF participants about the relationship between religion and literacy, particularly as they relate to the composition classroom.

CHAPTER 2

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE MOF PARTICIPANTS' RELIGION AND ONLINE LITERACY PRACTICES

The My Online Friends (MOF) discussion board site and participants have allowed me to discover more about how religious literacy is used by one community of writers for personal power and agency. To access the MOF participants' writing and to tell the story of this online community and culture jointly with the participants, I conducted ethnographic research. I found ethnographic techniques to be valuable in helping me understand the intersections among the MOF participants' online writing and religion from their lived experiences and perspectives. I participated with the women on the MOF discussion board, observed its members and their literacy practices, and interviewed my fellow MOF participants, as I describe in this chapter. I believe this study will yield insights into why these women write of their own accord and into the roles religion and literacy together play in the lives of the MOF participants. This chapter tells the story of my research, including its evolution, the nature of Internet research as culture or cultural artifact, ethical issues involved in setting up the study, data collection, and data analysis.

The Evolution of My Research Questions

The current divide in academia between religious and liberal thought is manifest in my own initial approaches to this research. Although my project currently focuses on religion and literacy, this focus evolved with my participation on the MOF discussion board. When I began my ethnographic research with the MOF participants, I did not include religious aspects in my research questions. Instead, my initial research questions

asked what literacy scholars and composition educators could learn from the ways in which a group of nonacademic women use writing in the alternative spaces of the Internet to construct identities and negotiate cultural and social forces and how that writing is constrained or enabled by corporate sponsorship.

Despite the fact that the MOF participants are all LDS, I began my research believing that religion would be one factor in the participants' writing and identity construction, but certainly not a factor that would be dominant. In fact, I hoped it wouldn't. I was raised in a deeply religious LDS household, and as an adult, I have continued to practice, explore, question, and have faith in my religious roots. But, like Bronwyn Williams, I have always considered my religious faith to be separate from my academic aspirations. As Williams said in his recent article "Taken on Faith: Religion and Identity in Writing Classes," for him, "Religion was a private matter, not to be let out of the box when in school" (514). Although Williams later found that his Quaker upbringing meshed well with academic literacies, I experienced key differences between my academic identity and my religious identity, such as fundamental beliefs about epistemology and about identity itself. I struggled with balancing and maintaining a sense of well-being in both areas. My own tendency to separate my faith and my academic life was reinforced by a few experiences in which other students in my doctoral program treated religion and my religion in particular, negatively. I carried that internal separation of faith and academics with me into my initial approach to my research. But as I interviewed the MOF participants and began reviewing the data I collected and writing about that data, religion, faith, and spirituality seemed to affect all aspects of the participants' online reading and writing. In the process of conducting this ethnographic

study, I realized just how important religion and spirituality are for the MOF participants' (and perhaps for others') literacy practices and how much literacy scholars need to learn about the relationships between religious identity and literacy.

After refocusing my lens on the intersections among the women's religion and their uses of online reading and writing, my research questions are as follows:

- How do these women's religion and faith influence their uses of and the rewards of their online literacy?
- How, in turn, does that online writing affect how they practice their faith, how they intervene in dominant discourses, and how they define themselves?
- Finally, what can literacy scholars and educators learn from these women about intersections between religion and literacy and between the intimate and the public in online discourse spaces?

My research questions and interests stem from my belief that writing can be a source of power and change in a person's life. To write is to have a voice, to respond in some way to social or cultural forces. Like other ethnographers (Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines;

Cushman; Cintron; Fishman; Farr; Moss *Community*; Mahiri; Weinstein-Shr;

McLaughlin; Heath; Guerra), I believe in the value of studying literacy in nonacademic, nonmainstream communities, and I believe that literacy education should begin with

people's nonschool experiences, language, and literacy practices. Part of valuing multiple literacies is also valuing the everyday uses of online reading and writing.

Christine Hine writes in *Virtual Ethnography* that "To date, far more effort has been expended on predicting the revolutionary futures of the Internet than has been put into

finding out in detail how it is being used and the ways in which it is being incorporated into people's daily lives" (2). Also important to my research questions about identity

construction and religion is my view of the "self." Like Keith Gilyard, I see the self as "a

dynamic system” that we consciously and unconsciously change based on context. Our sense of self emerges from our literacy communities. I also agree with Heidi McKee that we can “carry with us a sense of self that we trace through our life’s experiences” (48). We alter our expressions of our sense of self based on context and in relation to our discourse communities.

The Internet as Culture and Cultural Artifact

The MOF community, like other online spaces, is rooted in and a part of other social spaces and is not a distinct, “self-enclosed cyberian apartness” (Miller and Slater 5, qtd in Sveningsson 49). Like the Internet as a whole, the MOF discussion board is both culture and cultural artifact, without a boundary between what is online and offline (Hine 9). Viewing the MOF discussion board as culture assumes that it represents a place where culture is formed, whereas viewing the MOF board as cultural artifact, assumes that it is produced by particular cultures, people, and contexts and is “a technology which is shaped by the ways in which it is marketed, taught and used” (Hine 9). Hine states that ethnographers tend to study online spaces as one or the other, but I approached my research with both views and the associations between them, which are reflected in the research questions that I asked of MOF and its participants. I tended to focus a little more on the MOF board as a cultural artifact as can be seen in my questions regarding the ways in which the women’s offline religious culture influences their uses of the Internet and the meaning they get from that use. However, my view of the MOF board as culture can also be seen in my attention to MOF as a social space connected to, but distinct from, the LDS church, and with a public, private, and intimate nature that has evolved through participants’ use of the space. Although Hine says we don’t know much about how these

two contexts of the Internet (culture and cultural artifact) are connected, it's useful to include in research "the circumstances in which the Internet is used (offline) and the social spaces that emerge through its use (online)" (39).

I also maintained a dual perspective on the MOF discussion board as both an interactive site and a text, despite Michelle Sidler's argument that online researchers must decide if the online discourse in their studies is text or interactive communication (82-83). Approaching MOF as an interactive site allowed me to see the presence of multiple parties and the exchange of their perspectives towards a shared understanding (Hine 50). In contrast, approaching MOF as a text, or a "temporarily shifted and packaged form of interaction" (Hine 50) allowed me to focus on the participants' identity performances and constructions of authoritative persona (Hine 53). I believe that maintaining both perspectives was necessary to address my research questions about the MOF participants' uses of online literacy and the rewards of their literacy practices. And as I describe throughout this chapter, I took the ethical and methodological procedures and cautions necessary for studying both online texts and human subjects online.

Establishing an Ethical Study: IRB Issues and Beyond

When I initially considered the MOF discussion board as a research site for exploring online literacy practices, I approached it cautiously. Two of the seven board rules deal with keeping MOF private. Rule #4 reads, "Never post about this group on BBC [BabyCenter] or other public boards, we want to keep this group private and troll-less. If you break this rule, you will be deleted." And Rule #6 reads, "You are not allowed to copy and paste posts or photos from this board to other websites (with the exception of recipes) without the permission of the original poster. If you break this rule

you will be deleted from the board.” These rules were taken very seriously because of an extremely negative experience that occurred on MOF about five months after I joined when it was discovered that twelve of the MOF participants, including one of the managers, were members of another board, where they called themselves the “Elite Twelve” (or E12) and made fun of other MOF participants, even copying pictures others had posted and doctoring the images in hurtful ways. These 12 women were deleted from MOF, of course, but “The E12 Incident” left quite a mark on the history of MOF, so much so that a number of participants in my research referred to it two to three years later. Given this experience, I wasn’t sure how my request to analyze posts would be received.

Moreover, when I began my research, I had few preexisting relationships on MOF. I had been invited to join the board a year earlier, but I had only recently begun posting regularly on MOF, so I wasn’t well-known by any means. Because it was my first experience with discussion boards and I had not met any of the members, other than my friend who had invited me to the board, it had taken me almost a year to feel comfortable and to be interested in posting regularly. In fact, I was pregnant with my daughter at the time, but I did not mention my pregnancy or post on the “Maternity Ward” sideboard of MOF until I was six months along because it seemed weird to me to talk about pregnancy-related issues with random people. However, as I spent more time in the online space, I became more interested in discussion topics that I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to discuss elsewhere with those of my faith, and I began to value the knowledge of the other MOF participants and the resources that were available through the discussion board.

Despite my concerns about how my request to conduct research with MOF participants would be received, I emailed the board managers with my request to approach the board with a description of my research objectives and with a request for volunteer participants. The three MOF managers' responses were positive. I believe this to be a result of my existing membership on MOF. Beverly Moss raises a number of questions in her article "Ethnography and Composition: Studying Language at Home" that ethnographers who study their own communities need to consider. One of these questions is, "What role does an ethnographer's degree of membership in a community play in successfully carrying out the study?" My membership in MOF was crucial to my ability to study the literacy practices of the MOF participants because it afforded me enough trust that the managers readily gave me their permission to approach the board, and it affected the MOF members' tendency to volunteer to participate. Before I approached the board to ask for volunteers, I went through the IRB training and drafting of documents and then posted on the general discussion board with the IRB-approved letter in Appendix A. Because I had only recently begun posting regularly, I was initially worried that I would be perceived as an outside researcher rather than a participant on MOF⁷ and that nobody would volunteer to participate because of that. I don't have a copy of the responses I received because the discussion board host at the time moved that discussion board and lost its content, but I received only positive responses to my post. Thirty-six women emailed me to volunteer to participate in interviews as well as to let me

⁷ As I conducted interviews, I found that the opposite was true in most cases. Although some of the participants talked to me as though I did not know much about MOF or about the LDS religion (referring to the Relief Society, for example, as "the women's organization in my church"), most of the participants treated me as though I were a close friend.

use their posts. More volunteered at a later date. My MOF membership was therefore important to my ability to carry out my study successfully.

When MOF members responded to my initial post and volunteered to participate, I personal-messaged them, which is a feature of the discussion board, to request their addresses, and I mailed them a consent form that had been approved by the IRB. The consent form (Appendix B) gave further information about my study, detailed the different levels of participation possible, and discussed privacy protection. I described three levels of participation: MOF members could (1) refuse consent; (2) give consent for me to quote their posts, responses, or blog entries; (3) give consent for me to quote their posts, responses, or blog entries and to interview them and quote from their interview transcripts.

I was initially concerned about maintaining confidentiality for research participants because, as Donath says, members of virtual communities are not “anonymous” but are “pseudonymous” because other members of the community may recognize their online names, even if they do not know much about their offline identities (qtd in Sveningsson 52). I was concerned that it would be difficult to protect the anonymity of participants from other members of MOF. In other words, while I could guarantee onground anonymity to participants, I could not guarantee online anonymity. I expressed this concern to participants and asked them if they would like me to use their real name, their screen name, or a pseudonym in order to give them more control over their anonymity. Most of those who wanted me to use a pseudonym chose their own pseudonym. I also kept any geographically identifying information out of the dissertation.

Researchers who conduct their research in online places often face ethical issues specific to the virtual and anonymous nature of those spaces. These ethical issues include difficulties with informed consent, obtaining explicit permission versus “harvesting” the words of others, undermining the author’s intent by quoting out of context, and erroneously interpreting others comments (Sharf 245, 251). They tend to pertain, however, to naturally occurring discourse on the Internet. When discussion board or listserv correspondence occurs in a public forum, researchers may not have the contact information necessary to obtain consent, clarify author’s original intent, share drafts and interpretations, and stay open to feedback from research participants. My research avoided some of these dilemmas because I had access to the participants’ email addresses and postal addresses, thanks to the invitation-only nature of the discussion board. I therefore could contact board members for consent and feedback.

Because the participants in my research study are known to me, I could also account for Elgesem’s six principles of fair information processing for research involving computer-mediated communication (CMC). Elgesem argues that with CMC, private situations occur within larger public situations, so personal information control is crucial to ensuring participants’ privacy (qtd in Sharf 247). Elgesem establishes six principles for personal information control that have been used to support legislation on computer-related matters in several countries. I adhered to these principles (as explained in Sharf 247) in the following ways: (1) openness: I informed all members of the discussion board and blog ring that I was conducting this study; (2) individual access and correction: I sent participants any data I collected from their threads and posts in order to receive continuing consent and feedback from them; (3) collection limitation and relevance: I

collected data only for the purpose of this study; (4) use limitations: I specified my possible uses of the data in the consent forms; (5) disclosure limitation: I did not discuss (online or offline) personal data without the consent of the research participants; (6) security: I stored data on my computer and in personal files, not online, in order to guard it against unauthorized modification or access.

Data Collection

To address my research questions, I used ethnographic techniques for collecting data, as well as an ethnographic intent, to better understand the women's online writing from their lived experiences and perspectives. Initially, I set out to conduct an ethnographic case study, but because of the breadth of research I collected, I focused on ethnography rather than case study. I also did this because of the importance of participant observation when insiders' perspectives may differ from outsiders' perspectives and when the culture isn't easily accessible to others (Roberts et al 159), which is the case with MOF. In *Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Down, Writing It Up, and Reading It*, Wendy Bishop details the difficulty of defining ethnography, both because of its hybridization of research traditions from sociology, anthropology, and cognitive studies and because of the broad concepts involved in its definition (e.g., culture, language, symbol) (4, 15). Michael Kamil, Judith Langer, and Timothy Shanahan delineate four characteristics of ethnography: (1) ethnography is phenomenological and attempts understanding participants' worldview; (2) ethnography uses systematic observations of behavioral patterns; (3) ethnography emerges from field settings, conceptual frameworks, and hypotheses based on these settings and frameworks; and (4) ethnography uses a variety of data sources, contexts, and times (72). Bishop states

that at its core, ethnography “becomes a representation of the lived experience of a convened culture . . . [that] cannot be replicated or tested because it is experienced for a finite time through the researcher’s participation and attention” (3). In my research, I studied a few aspects of the MOF culture, specifically how the MOF participants take up reading, writing, and religion together. Although my ethnography is not of a physical place, participant observation in a seemingly “placeless” realm is not substantially different than ethnographic work in physical communities: as Jan Fernbeck reminds ethnographic researchers of virtual places, “issues of ideology, agency, power, ontology, roles, and boundaries affect virtual communities just as they do physical communities,” and ethnographers working in cyberspace still need to include reflexivity in their studies (216).

To meet the requirements of ethnographic research as described in the previous paragraphs, my ethnographic techniques included two years of participant observation, in which I acted primarily as a participant and secondarily as an observer. As a participant, I read discussion threads and responded to discussions in which I was interested or to which I thought I had something to offer. I also began my own threads when I needed insight or knowledge from the other MOF participants.

Once I began my study of MOF, I did feel as though my own participation on MOF changed slightly because I became more cautious about how I could be affecting the outcome of discussions as both researcher and participant. It was strange during the course of the two years to both become closer to the women while also feeling detached from the women as I analyzed data and wrote about MOF. Patricia A. Sullivan discusses this detachment that occurs in ethnographic studies as a positioning of research

participants as “other.” She says, “Ethnography itself, in any field, entails the assumption of an other” (100), regardless of whether the research participants are different or familiar to the researcher: “The moment we ask what it means to speak or write or learn in a given setting, even if that setting is our own, we set ourselves apart from those other selves who hold the possibility of understanding it” (100). In order to conduct an ethnography of MOF, then, I had to both create an other as I analyzed and represented participants’ experiences and be a part of that other. I did try to have research participants engage in a similar process by analyzing their threads also and by representing themselves, as I’ll discuss later.

In addition to participant observation, I also triangulated my data (as described by Moxley; Bishop; and Doheny-Farina and Odell) by taking fieldnotes, gathering writing from the discussion board and blogs, and interviewing the MOF members. By doing so, I studied what the participants in this online community did, said, and knew, as well as the physical artifacts of their writing (Spradley 54). I also gathered data that pertained to different spheres, as described by M. Maczewski, M.A. Storey, and M. Hoskins. Maczewski et al argue that when we do online research, we need to be aware of three spheres that could be considered the “natural setting” for the qualitative research: the online sphere (the virtual space and interactions within it), the “onground” sphere (the material world and physical realities), and the technical research sphere (63-5). In gathering texts from discussion boards and blogs, I focused on the virtual space and community. In my interviews, I gathered people’s ideas and opinions in their onground lives. (Maczewski et al. use “onground” instead of “real life” because they think online and onground are both real life [78].) This combination of active data (participant-

observation and interviewing) and passive data (collection of postings and technical documentation) strengthens the research (Roberts et al 159). I also hope that gathering this data allows the participants themselves to help provide what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” of their culture and meaning-making (qtd in Moss “Ethnography” 157). I gathered data in three phases: (1) taking fieldnotes and gathering discussion board threads, (2) phenomenological interviews, and (3) discourse analysis interviews. Table 1 shows my timeline for this data collection. I describe these phases individually in the sections below Table 1.

Table 1: Data Collection Timeline

Phase	Type of Data Collected	Time Period of Collection	Purpose of that Data
1	Fieldnotes	March 2006-September 2008	Record and reflect on observations of MOF, its culture, and the participants’ literacy practices.
	Discussion board threads	March 2006-September 2008	Collect participants’ writing in order to notice patterns and to improve, correct, and confirm observations.
	Blog entries	May 2007-September 2007	Collect participants’ writing in order to notice patterns and to improve, correct, and confirm observations.
2	Phenomenological interview #1	April 2007-May 2007	Provide a context and history for participants’ experiences.
	Phenomenological interviews #2 and #3	May 2007-August 2007	Hear the participants’ voices and their details of their experiences on MOF. Hear how each participant understands MOF and her experiences writing on MOF.
3	Discourse analysis interviews	January-February 2008; October-November 2008	Hear and include participants’ perspectives on texts and on exchanges.
	Miscellaneous interviews	October 2008	Discover insights into why MOF participants leave MOF.

In all, I distributed 70 consent forms, received permission from 62 participants in 20 states and 2 nations to quote their posts and blogs, interviewed 45 participants from 16 states. The total number of participants is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Total Number of Participants

Data Source	Total Number of Participants
Discussion-board posts	62
Blog posts	10
Phenomenological interviews	25
Discourse analysis interviews	9

Phase One: Fieldnotes and Gathering Discussion Board Threads. In the first phase of my data collection, I took fieldnotes and gathered texts from participants' blog entries and discussion threads for rhetorical and content analysis. This phase was ongoing throughout the two years because I continued gathering fieldnotes and texts as I interviewed participants in the second and third research phases. I also observed and participated with the women at the group's first annual Girls' Weekend Out (GWO). I catalogued lists of discussion board threads as examples under the following categories, which I initially generated from my research questions and later added to based on interviews with the MOF participants:

- Public characteristics
- Enclave aspects/Community aspects
- Private characteristics
- Intimate characteristics
- Audiences/Expectations of audience
- Assertion of agency, power
- Intervention in dominant discourses
- Collective textual action
- Defining and performing gender; Gender expectations and cultural pressures
- Threads about specific subject positions/identities
- Threads specifically about religious subjects
- Discussions of issues with dissent
- Uses of writing
- Miscellaneous

As can be seen from this list, my study is primarily a topic-oriented ethnography, which is natural, given my focus on language and culture. Dell Hymes identifies topic-oriented ethnography as one of three forms of ethnographic inquiry, the others being comprehensive-oriented ethnography and hypothesis-oriented ethnography (22-23). In addition to topics, a few of the categories in the list, such as private and intimate, focus on describe discursive features.

Selecting specific threads from these lists to analyze and use in my write-up was one of the most difficult aspects of the research for me because there were so many discussions that I thought were interesting and important.⁸ I based my selection of threads primarily on if I had consent from the majority of the participants, if they seemed representative or important to me, if they had a large number of posts, or if they seemed significant to MOF members (two of the threads, for example, I revisited and used as examples after research participants specifically mentioned them in interviews). After I selected threads to use, I also had to contact some MOF members who had participated on those threads to ask for consent. All gave their consent via email or personal message, but not all returned the consent forms. Table 3 summarizes each of the specific threads I

⁸ I originally gathered blog posts as well from the discussion board's accompanying blog ring. I did not select blog entries myself. I asked research participants to send me blog entries that they felt were important or that represented themselves, their writing, or issues of importance to them. I ended up not using any of the blog entries I gathered because the scope of my research was large enough just focusing on the discussion board threads. Using blogs also added additional ethical complexity regarding anonymity, publication, and interaction versus intervention, as discussed by William P. Banks and Michelle F. Eble in their chapter "Digital Spaces, Online Environments, and Human Participant Research: Interfacing with Institutional Review Boards."

include as examples in my dissertation and the level of participation by the participants on each of those threads.

Table 3: Specific Threads and Level of Participation in My Research

Thread Title	Number of Thread Participants Who Consented to Participate in my Research	Number of Posts with Permission to Research (% in thread)	Number of Participants Involved in Discourse Analysis Interviews	Number of Participants Involved in Manuscript Review
“Stand in Your Majesty”	14/15	19/20 (95%)	2	5
“I Don’t Want Another Women to Speak for Me”	3/14	4/17 (24%)	1	3
“The Shape of a Mother”	29/36	99/109 (91%)	0	5
“Finding Me”	7/7	9/9 (100%)	2	2
“FYI”/“Cookie Cutter”	23/33	29/43 (68%)	1	6
“Just a Thought (Super Tuesday)”	48/31	85/117 (73%)	2	6
“Evolution and Mormonism”	26/38	56/70 (80%)	2	5

Phase Two: Phenomenological Interviews. The second phase of my data collection was conducting phenomenological interviews, which combine life-history interviewing with open-ended interviewing that builds upon and explores participants’ responses. I structured the interviews according to Irving Seidman’s guide to phenomenological interviewing in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* with a few exceptions. Seidman argues that three separate interviews need to be conducted with each participant because these three interviews allow participants’ behavior to be situated in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. This context is crucial for

understanding and discovering the meaning of behavior. I therefore initially designed three interviews, each of which had the following purposes:

- Interview 1: Focused History. The purpose of this interview was to put each participant's experiences in context by asking her to tell as much as possible about her history and early experiences with discussion boards and blogs. (Interview questions for all phenomenological interviews can be found in Appendix C.)
- Interview 2: The Details of the Experience. The purpose of this interview was to ask each participant to concentrate on the concrete details of her present experiences blogging and posting on the discussion board and to ask her to reconstruct the details of her experiences.
- Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning. The goal of this interview was to ask each participant to reflect on the meaning of her experiences and learn more about how each understands the blog ring and discussion board in her life.

However, after conducting five interviews with the three-interview format, I found that the questions at the end of Interview 2 naturally led the participants to discuss the meaning of online writing in their lives. Because of the open-ended nature of the questions, the participants began talking about the meaning of their experiences and, although I didn't encourage that because I was trying to respect the three-interview structure and the logic and power Seidman attributes to it, it seemed redundant to set up another interview and ask the participants to discuss these topics again. Another difficulty with the three-interview structure was that I was conducting a large number of interviews within a short time frame, and the participants' lives themselves were so busy that it was difficult to space the interviews three days to a week apart, which is what Seidman suggests in order to allow participants to reflect on the preceding interview without losing the connections between them (14-15). For most of my interviews, then, if the participant began talking about meaning at the end of the second interview, I continued onto the third interview. I believe I maintained the logical progression of the three

interviews in doing so, although I did not allow the time for reflection that could have benefitted the participants.

Table 4: Total Number of Interview Participants

Data Source	Total Number of Participants
Phenomenological interview #1 (via email)	25
Phenomenological interviews #2 & #3	28
conducted via phone	17
conducted face-to-face	12
conducted via Instant Messenger	1
Other interviews (such as interviews of those who left MOF)	8
Discourse-analysis interviews (via email or phone)	9

As can be seen in Table 4, I conducted all but one of the first phenomenological interviews and some discourse analysis interviews via email and the second and third phenomenological interviews and some discourse analysis interviews in real-time situations, 17 over the phone, 12 in person at the GWO, and 1 through Instant Messenger⁹. I chose to conduct the first phenomenological interviews via email for three reasons: first, many of the participants requested that I interview them via email because of the busyness of their lives or because they felt they expressed themselves better through writing and did not enjoy talking on the phone; second, I felt like I was asking a lot of the participants to commit to over three hours of interviewing (I told them to expect up to an hour for each interview) and I thought having the first interview via email might soften that request and be a comfortable and less demanding way to get participant

⁹ This totals 30 interviews, which is different than the 28 presented in Table 2 because for two of the interviews, I conducted Interview 2 over the phone and Interview 3 in person.

volunteers to become invested in the three-interview structure; and third, because the purpose of this first interview was to discover each participant's history with discussion boards, I thought the written format was suitable to that purpose.

Email interviews, of course, are more directed than face-to-face interviews and contain less dynamic interaction. I did ask multiple follow-up questions and exchanged multiple emails with each of the participants to provide feedback and follow-up in a type of delayed conversation. I thought I might not get as long of responses from the email interviews because it is easier and faster to talk than to write. This was the case with some, but others gave me more detailed responses in our emailed interviews than in the interviews I conducted with them later over the phone. I think this has to do with participants' individual comfort levels and abilities to express themselves through writing versus through speaking. These differences also relate to Maczewski et al's discussion of the three different spheres of online research, which I introduced earlier in this chapter. Some participants may feel more comfortable voicing opinions in the online sphere rather than the onground sphere. Maczewski similarly cites the example of one research participant whose onground voice was different and more reserved than her online voice and argues that "respondants' voices are negotiated among researcher, participants and technology within the interplay of all three spheres" (73). Nadia Olivero and Peter Lunt actually found that email interviews can lead to increased self-awareness and self-reflexivity on the part of the participant because participants can reexamine the content of their answers and elaborate on them with increased time to think (105). I found that when I asked follow-up questions, participants in the email interviews actually wound up restorying their previous emails as they reflected on what they had written previously.

Olivero and Lunt also caution, however, that email interview models need to do as much as possible to minimize power asymmetries and to establish a trusting and reciprocal relationship because increased self-awareness can lead to deceptive behavior or “strategic self-presentation” (109). I hoped that our joint participation on MOF would provide the basis for a trusting relationship and would minimize power differences inherent in an interview relationship. I found that, contrary to my initial thought that email interviews wouldn’t require as much of participants because they could decide when and how much to write, email interviews did require more motivation and active involvement on the part of participants, as Olivero and Lunt describe (107), because participants had to choose whether they would complete the interview.

I requested that the second and third interviews be done in real time because I could directly follow up on things participants would say, because I could let them direct the interview to a greater extent than with emailed interviews, and because of literature stating the possible difficulties of interviews conducted solely via electronic means. For example, in his article “Getting the Seat of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities,” Luciano Paccagnella cautions that “It is never correct to accept [data obtained electronically that refers to the real world] without keeping in mind that obtaining information . . . through on-line means of communication—although seemingly easy and convenient—is always hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of ethnographic context . . . and it may also produce misunderstandings due to different communication codes.” For those whom I did not interview at the GWO, I asked if I could call them and I didn’t offer

them any other option upfront. Only one asked if we could do IM instead and because IM is synchronous, I agreed. I also requested that the discourse analysis interviews be done in real time, but I mentioned the possibility of emailing if they preferred. Six out of twelve asked if I could email them the questions¹⁰. This is an example of the research participants having different interests, time commitments, or time constraints, and the need for me as the researcher to develop realistic expectations regarding the level and types of participation volunteers were willing to give and the degree to which I could establish a collaborative, reciprocal relationship with participants (Kirsch 27; Rheinhardt 266-7).

The second and third phenomenological interviews had the combined purposes of having participants reconstruct both the details and the meaning of their experiences with reading and writing on the MOF discussion board. These interviews lasted approximately 40-70 minutes, depending on the participant. I had a standard list of questions I asked each (see Appendix C for the interview protocol), but I tried to let the participant guide the interview as much as possible. Follow-up questions for each participant were therefore very different.

For the most part, I did not pre-select participants for the phenomenological interviewing. All but three of the 28 participants volunteered in response, first, to my post on the discussion board asking for volunteers (see Appendix A), and, second, to a sign I posted next to the food and activity schedules at the MOF members' first Girls'

¹⁰ Three then did not respond to the emailed interview questions or to my follow-up email.

Weekend Out (GWO).¹¹ The sign I posted explained my research briefly and requested volunteers for participating in interviews throughout the GWO. Some of the original volunteers allowed me to use their posts but either did not want to participate in interviews or did not respond to my emails requesting to interview them. Table 2 summarizes the number of participants in each phase of data collection. I did personal-message three MOF members who had not volunteered to ask if I could interview them because of the frequency, variety, and articulateness of their posts. Of those three, all agreed and all signed consent forms, but one never responded to my emails and personal messages regarding setting up an interview time.¹²

Phase Three: Discourse Analysis Interviews. The third phase of my data collection was discourse analysis interviews which amplified or revised my own interpretations of the relationship between religion and online reading and writing for the participants. The questions I asked were similar but varied slightly for each participant and are listed in Appendix D. All questions dealt with the participant's purpose, rhetorical strategies, expectations, and reactions to a specific thread. I emailed each participant the thread at least a day prior to speaking with them on the phone.

My approach to discourse analysis interviewing was influenced in particular by Heidi McKee's arguments regarding the importance of expanding text-based studies of online communication to include participants' perspectives on their texts and exchanges. McKee defines text-based studies as those in which the researcher(s) read the online

¹¹ The GWO took place in July 2007 in Park City, Utah, from a Thursday evening to a Sunday morning. Seventy-five of the MOF members gathered from all over the United States (and one from Germany).

¹² This is more than understandable, given that at the time she was a single mother of five children and was also working and going to school.

transcripts and reflected on and analyzed the contexts, the participants, and the exchanges without including the participants' perspectives on the exchanges (44-45). In the 34 studies of online communication that McKee reviewed, only 8 included surveys or interviews as a means of soliciting participants' perspectives, and of those 8, the perspectives solicited regarded general impressions of online communication rather than reflections on specific exchanges (45-46).

Through my own experiences conducting discourse analysis interviews for this study, I found that I often did not know the entire story surrounding the discursive exchange. For example, on the "Mormonism and Evolution" thread example found at the end of Chapter 5, I did not know that this thread was a catalyst for one of the main participants' (Steph's) decision to leave MOF. I initially read the thread as an excellent example of deliberative discourse and of the MOF participants using online writing to grapple with differing religious beliefs in a way that focused on understanding and on a respectful space for discussion. When I spoke with thread participants, particularly Steph, I realized that without discourse analysis interviews, I knew very little about the emotions behind the writing. It wasn't enough to treat the data as texts. I needed to treat them also as interactions. A similar example occurred in my discourse analysis interview with Emily regarding the "Super Tuesday" thread example in Chapter 5. I had framed the relationship between Emily's religious beliefs and her use of writing in that thread as unsupportive or contrary, meaning that I thought Emily was using online writing to grapple with her religious beliefs because of her political beliefs. But the following interview excerpt reveals how wrong this view was:

Catherine: Do you see this political thread as connected to religious beliefs?

Emily: Yes, I do because that's what people bring up again and again. And maybe it's because we're on a religious board. Not even that. That's just how LDS people are. And that's what regular people do too—if it's something that close to your heart, that's what you talk about. I do think that if it wasn't an LDS board, there wouldn't be so much of the church stuff in it. It wouldn't be so religious.

Catherine: So do you wish the politics weren't as connected to people's religious beliefs?

Emily: Yes and no. Because to me, it is a religious thing. I feel like I feel the way I do because it's Christ-like. That's why I believe the way I believe because I feel like it's a more Christ-like way, but they see their way as that way as well.

As Emily's comments show, the relationship between her religious beliefs and her online literacy in this example is one of support rather than grappling. Emily was not using her online writing to struggle with religious beliefs as being contrary to her political beliefs. Instead, her reasons for her political beliefs were directly tied to her religion. The grappling came in relation to the political beliefs of other participants (which were tied to their religious beliefs as well) and to the perception of her political beliefs as unrelated to her religion, a poor assumption that I had initially made as well. Because the majority of LDS people are politically conservative for reasons that often tie to their religion, I assumed that was the norm and that Emily therefore did not tie her more liberal political beliefs to her religious beliefs. My discourse analysis interview corrected this false assumption. Overall, I found that discourse analysis interviews were crucial to the ethicality and validity of my research.

Phase Four: Miscellaneous Interviews. I did have one category of interviewing that I did not originally plan for and that does not fit into any of the above types of interviews. After I read critiques of the idea of community, I realized that I needed to

interview, if possible, women who had been members of MOF in the past but had left the board. I posted on the board explaining my need to do so and asking if anyone had contact information for someone who had permanently left the board. I emailed nine women to ask them their reasons for leaving. One agreed to talk with me over the phone, so I called her. Seven of the others responded to my emails, and four of those also responded to my follow-up questions. Only one never responded at all.

Data Analysis

My primary method of analysis was reading the interview transcripts and discussion board threads against each other. I initially coded the over 300 single-spaced pages of phenomenological interview transcripts and the lists of discussion board threads according to the MOF participants' uses of writing on MOF. For this coding, I initially generated the categories listed in the previous section based on my research questions. I used these categories primarily for gathering lists of discussion threads from the discussion board. I then added categories for coding based on interview transcripts. The "topic" for my topic-oriented research was therefore generated initially by me through my research questions and then revised and added to from the MOF participants. I also created a master coded list solely from excerpts of interview transcripts to show genres used on the discussion board, genres used in blogs, statements about motivations and reasons for writing on the discussion board, and statements about motivations and reasons for writing on blogs. After doing so, I focused on the genres, uses, reasons, and motivations for writing on MOF that related to the participants' religion and faith. Analyzing and grouping the data in this way allowed me to address my first research

question about how the MOF participants' religion and faith influences their uses of and the rewards of their online literacy.

My approach to my second research question "How, in turn, does that online writing affect how they practice their faith, how they intervene in dominant discourses, and how they define themselves?" similarly came out of the interview transcripts and from threads I had written about in my fieldnotes that I believed were examples of the MOF participants practicing their faith through writing, intervening in dominant discourses, and writing on MOF to define themselves. To analyze specific threads and uses of writing, I also turned to literature for some theory-based coding and to situate my analysis in relation to other discussions. For example, when I coded for the participants' use of intimate literacy, I looked for the following characteristics of intimate literacy that Anne Ruggles Gere established: shared information about actions, beliefs, emotions that one has the right not to share (40); affection expressed (40); emotional connectedness despite differences (42); familial language (47). And when I coded threads to analyze the existence of public deliberation, I looked for the following characteristics that James Bohman and Iris Young maintain are important to the definition of public deliberation: open and inclusive dialogue (Bohman 27-8); providing reasons and answers (Bohman 27-8); "uptake," or openness to having their opinions or understandings change (Bohman 27-28; Young 6); cooperation as end goal (Bohman 33). I also coded threads for the following rhetorical strategies that Crowley discusses as useful for deliberative rhetors who want to advocate change in situations involving fundamentalist religious perspectives: narratives (197); conjectures (199); recognition of privileged positions

(200); demonstration of the contingency of conservative values (101); and disarticulation of beliefs (102).

Feminist scholarship was also important to my data analysis as I attempted to answer my second research question about how the MOF participants' online writing affects how they practice their faith, intervene in dominant discourses, and define themselves. The LDS church's gender doctrines and the fact that all of the MOF participants are women greatly affects the participants' uses of writing both to live and to negotiate religious doctrines relating to gender. The MOF participants use writing to renegotiate gendered and religious subject positions within the material constraints of their lives, and in doing so, they re-create and re-gender themselves.

In addition, the MOF participants themselves consider their religion and gender together to be key to their participation on the discussion board and to override other aspects of their identities. For example, MOF participants do come from a range of socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, although the majority are white. Yet when I asked the women to describe themselves for the purpose of my research, none mentioned their race or ethnicity. MOF participants also range in age from 22 to 50, and they are geographically dispersed throughout the United States, with one currently living in Germany and another in Australia. Although the LDS church has almost 13 million members worldwide, most of whom do not live in the United States ("Newsroom" www.lds.org), racial and ethnic differences are backgrounded in relation to gender on the MOF board.

The fact that the MOF participants connect their gender with their religion is important to their uses of online writing and is important to the feminist theories I chose

to analyze my data. The LDS church has an essentialist notion of gender in that church doctrine portrays gender as a natural, biological category and sees nurturing as a fixed property or essence of motherhood and of women. The majority of the MOF participants also see gender as a natural, biological category. However, individual MOF participants vary in the degree to which they connect being biologically female with being culturally feminine. Despite individual variations in gender beliefs, many MOF participants do often use their religious literacy to validate their belief in a female essence and in female attributes. Because the MOF participants start with a foundational notion of gender and identity, I choose to rely on feminist theories detailed by Diana Fuss, Johanna Schmeertz, and Linda Alcoff that make room for the way that the MOF participants identify themselves. The forms of feminism I use for data analysis, then, are postmodern in that they allow me to analyze the fluidity in the ways in which the MOF participants align and re-align themselves with religious identities and ideologies, yet they also allow for the MOF participants' notions of a more fixed identity and for their actions in relation to that notion of identity.

In addition to analyzing the data myself, I also relied on the research participants to describe themselves or to tell me how they would like me to describe them in my research. I similarly relied on participants to confirm, reject, and revise my data analysis and to offer their own analyses. As Thomas Newkirk argues, researchers have an ethical responsibility to include participants' interpretations, especially when they differ from the researcher's (13-14). Newkirk presents this as part of the "default" position, or the standard procedure for qualitative research situations (12), and calls it "the rights of co-interpretation (13). Co-interpretation was important to me because I came to the study

with a great deal of previous knowledge about the LDS religion, which does affect how meaning is made in the MOF community. Because I was studying a “home” community, I needed to take extra precautions that I was not making assumptions about meaning and behaviors based on my previous knowledge rather than my actual data (Moss “Ethnography” 163). I did not approach my research thinking that my membership in the LDS church or on the MOF discussion board already provided me with a knowledge about other LDS women’s experiences with MOF or about the ways in which they took up their religion and online literacy practices together. For example, in interviews, I asked individual participants about their opinions about the relationship between MOF and the Relief Society rather than relying on my own opinions and knowledge. As a result, I occasionally found that my underlying expectations were proven wrong. For example, I did not expect so many participants to talk about how MOF had contributed to their developing open perspectives. Instead, I expected more comments about MOF being enclave-like, which is similar to many of my experiences with the Relief Society. I also tried to address the certainty that I would make some assumptions based on previous knowledge by collecting a large amount of data, by making an effort not to overlook any patterns, and by sending my writing to three other academics (in addition to the three on my dissertation committee) not in the LDS or the MOF community.

I encouraged co-interpretation through discourse analysis interviews and through participant checks, or what Gesa Kirsch calls “confirming consent” (41), in which I sent my analysis of each thread to all research participants who had posted on that thread. I

told them I would be revising and asked them the following questions to answer if they had the time or the desire¹³:

- Do you think I represent you fairly here?
- Does my description and analysis of the thread and your experience in the thread seem valid to you?
- Can you add any analysis, descriptions, or suggestions about this thread?
- Do you have any changes you would like me to make?

Participant co-interpretation is also important to me because, as Owen Van den berg argues, we pay “mere lip service to the ethics of informed consent” when we don’t allow participants to participate in research at the end of the study, just as they participate at the beginning of the study (4).

Part of moving away from assuming an objective stance and from pretending that objectivity is possible when representing research participants is the move towards developing collaborative relationships with participants throughout the entire research process. The goal of collaborative relationships is to understand others on their own terms and to give others the opportunities to represent themselves and communicate their understanding of themselves to readers using their own voices. Descriptions of collaborative relationships are often idealistic when compared with the realities that surface in practice. Cheri Williams’s portrayal of the desired collaborative relationship is an example of this idealism: “When research is truly collaborative, the researcher and the informants participate as a team; they become co-researchers who explore an issue of common interest and concern. They co-author the research questions, co-collect, co-

¹³ These questions are similar to those Heidi McKee asked her research participants in her “member checks” (44).

analyze, and co-interpret the data, and they co-construct the final products” (51).

Rheinhartz similarly describes this ideal as follows: “Distinctions between researcher and researched disappear . . . the researcher abandons control and adopts an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk” (181). Both Rheinhartz and Williams describe the relationships between researcher and researched as a fully equal relationship, with distinctions between the two parties disappearing as the researcher and researched seemingly become one in purpose and action and with both parties sharing an equal part in all aspects of the research. I find these descriptions unrealistic because in a hierarchical situation (which a qualitative study of persons usually is), distinctions between researchers and researched never truly disappear and to pretend otherwise is to ignore the realities of power and ideology. Kirsch says, “Our long-term goal as feminists should always be to allow those we study to speak for themselves, to study their own communities, and to enter public discourse on their own terms” (84). I believe we can still answer this call and strive for this goal by collaborating with research participants without the guise of “fully” collaborating. Anne Herrington views participant involvement in a study on a continuum, with more passive, noninvolved participants at one end and active involvement in more phases of the research study on the other end (44).

The image of a continuum is useful when describing my own collaboration with MOF participants. At times, my research seemed very collaborative. Some research participants voluntarily emailed me threads that they thought fit different areas of my dissertation, brainstormed with me in phone interviews, and read and commented on drafts in a way that showed that they considered themselves to have authority and insight

on the subject. Other participants quickly deferred to my own interpretations and didn't offer any of their own. Most of the participants who collaborated with me had some academic background in English or sociology or had their own research experiences (with Master's theses or law degrees, for example) that helped them become personally interested or invested in the research. Others simply did not have the time to become more involved.

Regardless of participants' level of collaboration with me, it was important to me that my research be reciprocal. Because I believe that determining appropriate reciprocity should be done by consulting with research participants and asking them what genuine reciprocity would be for them, I asked participants frequently during phone conversations and via email what I could do for them so that I was not the only one benefiting from the relationship. The only two upfront requests that I received were that participants wanted to read my completed dissertation, and one requested a "floor to sleep on if I'm ever in your neck of the woods." Here are a few of the responses I received:

Melissa: Nope. I am happy to do it for you.

Carrie: No really, it's no trouble!

Kristin: No way, I just want to help you out!

Kris: Can't think of a thing.....

Kate: Nothing! I'm happy to help-- I'm just so proud of you for working so hard and getting this done.

Sunny: No, I don't mind helping!

Jami: Honestly, nothing! I enjoy the opportunity to help you out! It makes me feel useful.

Katie: I'd do it for you as a favor.

Shelah: Nope--I'm excited to be able to help!

Emily: Nothing! You're my hero!

Jeannette: Can't think of anything—I am just happy to help you out.

These responses are the only data I have to show how I was perceived by the community. Some of these responses show that research participants were proud of me, as a member of their community, for continuing my education and participated in my research as a favor to help me reach my goal. I wish that I were able to offer the participants something more for their time and efforts. Like Seidman states in his discussion, reciprocity is one of the most “problematic aspect of interviewing” (92). I do hope that those who participated have benefitted from my listening to them, from my interest in their thoughts, and from my recording their experiences for a larger public. The American Anthropological Association states that some reciprocity can come simply from the working relationship itself because when researchers actively involve participants, all parties can benefit. Like Cushman says of her research with the Quayville residents (26), I also consider my research reciprocal because participants worked with me to authorize my final written representations of them, as I described earlier. As part of this reciprocity, I do feel a loyalty to research participants and a concern about the picture I paint of the community and about the reaction of participants. As I analyzed data, I worried simultaneously about being accurate, fair, overly critical, or not critical enough, which are pressures Moss says are common among ethnographers who write about communities to which they belong (“Ethnography” 169). And, like Moss, I tried to balance my responsibility to MOF and its participants with a “rigorous and thorough” reflection and triangulation of research data (“Ethnography” 169).

Researcher/Participant Relationships and Positionality

During the two years that I acted as a participant researcher on MOF, I believe that my role as researcher helped me perceive the MOF participants as individuals, each with a great deal of knowledge and insight. I spoke on the phone with many volunteers who I would not necessarily have hand-picked as valuable research participants and was surprised at the depth of thought they put into interview questions and at their generosity towards me. Through my developing role as participant-observer, my relationship with the other MOF participants developed into friendships. In “The Ethics of Accountability in Action Research,” Van den berg argues that any discussion of ethics and methodology ultimately rests on the question of the relationship between the researcher and the research participants (85). I’m sure that is the case in my research because my friendships with the MOF participants have affected my own desire to portray them and their literacy practices in a positive light. My friendships with the MOF participants have developed through my participation and my own use of intimate literacy, which required that I invest more of myself into MOF. These friendships have also developed as I have tried to establish some reciprocity with those who have willingly offered their own time, efforts, and good wishes to me in my research efforts. My researcher/participant relationship with the MOF participants is one of closeness, empathy, and identification rather than the objective, respectful distance that traditional research methodology calls for. Rheinartz argues that this kind of intimate relationship allows for friendship, shared struggle, consciousness-raising, and even identity change within the researcher (68).

I’d like to think that any ethnographic researcher after spending considerable time in a community would feel the same loyalties or concern with representing participants

fairly, accurately, and positively that I faced as a member of the MOF community.

Perhaps these concerns were amplified for me slightly because I am still participating on MOF and I want to continue to interact with those who participated in my research, but because that interaction is online, I don't feel many of the direct pressures that other researchers may feel who intend to remain active in the communities that they study.

My relationship with research participants, the fact that I was studying a "home" community (Moss "Ethnography"), and my personal experiences with negativity regarding my religion and with my own conflicting academic and religious identities all impacted my positionality in this research, which, as many researchers argue, is an integral part of the entire process of ethnography (Chiseri-Strater 117; Kirsh 14; Sullivan 106). Because the meaning in a qualitative study is a result of the participants' interactions with the researcher (Seidman 16), the researcher's identity is a necessary element of discussion. In their article "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry," F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin address the complexity of the multiple "I's" researchers all have when we write research narratives: "The 'I' can speak as researcher, teacher, man or woman, commentator, research participant, narrative critic, and as theory builder. . . . However, in the writing of narrative, it becomes important to sort out whose voice is the dominant one when we write 'I'" (9). Connelly and Clandinin also quote Peshkin's discussion of the role that a researcher's personal qualities play in the research process. Peshkin argues that researchers bring multiple selves to the research site, two of which are "the human self that we generally are in everyday situations, and the research self that we fashion for our particular research situations. . . . Because of the unknown and the unexpected aspects of the research field, we do not know which of our

dispositions will be engaged” (10). Connelly and Clandinin conclude that as researchers, our stories merge with our participants’ stories to create new, collaborative stories (12). By positioning myself as a white, middle-class, Mormon woman in this text, who is studying a community to which I already belonged, readers can better know what I was positioned to know and not know. They can also better understand the complexity of “I’s” in relation to the research story I present and how my story merges with the stories of my participants.

The remainder of this dissertation presents my efforts at “writing it up” in a way that “provide[s] a satisfactory account, one that aims for fidelity, coherence, generosity, wisdom, imagination, honesty, respect, and (at least a certain type of) verisimilitude” (Bishop 138). I hope that the chapters that follow present my perspective and the MOF participants’ perspectives about what’s important in the intersections among their religion and their online literacy practices. The data collection, analysis, and the opportunity to write about the relationships between the participants’ religion and literacy practices have also helped me begin to reconcile my own religious and academic identities as I have begun to realize that not just allowing, but also welcoming, students’ uses of faith-based literacies in academic classrooms is important for all parties. Religious students need to be able to use writing both to claim and to struggle with religious ideologies. And religious and nonreligious students alike need to learn how to talk about religious beliefs and stereotypes with each other in ways that lead to increased understanding and civility rather than ridicule or violence.

CHAPTER 3

MY ONLINE FRIENDS DISCUSSION BOARD AS AN ENCLAVE FOR SHARED THEOLOGY AND FOR DISCUSSION OF DIFFERENCE WITHIN THEOLOGY

The LDS My Online Friends discussion board began as a public board hosted by BabyCenter .com and available to anybody. Over seven years, it has evolved into a private enclave, the context of which is crucial for the participants' use of literacy to give and receive support in their religious beliefs and to discuss their different lived experiences with those beliefs. SuAnn, a member of the MOF discussion board since June 2004, introduces MOF as a supportive community and as a place for difference in the following interview excerpt:

“Although it took time, this board is now a big part of my life. I have been here for [five] years now, almost from the beginning, I think, so I have been through a lot. I have seen births, deaths, divorces, fights, making up, spouse problems. But I have seen how we all pull together in times of need, even if it is something as simple as praying for someone who needs it. It's like a great big group of sisters now.

One of my favorite aspects of this board are having people from so many different backgrounds. For the most part my experience has been a good one. I have met a lot of nice ladies who have taught me a lot. It was great to see how many different perspectives there were on various topics. It made me think about why I did things that I did, things I had never really given much thought to. . . . It didn't just pertain to mom type stuff either. I also learned to become informed about what was going on in the world around me . . . and learned I needed to find out about these subjects and form my own opinions, yet I was also able to see someone else's opinion and see the validity there as well.

For me, this is so different from the Relief Society [the LDS Church's women's organization]. My experience there is everyone wanting to be perfect and show their best side. People want everyone to think the best of them and that makes them afraid to let down their guard and show their true feelings. I think the main reason for the difference is the relative anonymity of an Internet-based board. There is some protection there. . . . I feel freer to say things that I wouldn't usually talk about in person. . . . On the board we have a lot of candid discussions about things like sex, adultery, abuse, porn, things that I wouldn't normally discuss with people

because they are such taboo topics. I mean I definitely wouldn't share some of my experiences with abuse in Relief Society. . . . [On the board] I can choose to tell what happened in my own time frame."

In her comments SuAnn emphasized that the MOF discussion board has given her both a sisterhood and an appreciation for difference within that sisterhood. SuAnn also contrasted her experiences on MOF with her experiences as a member of the Relief Society, which is the official women's organization sponsored by the LDS church. The MOF discussion board has evolved into a place for a shared sisterhood and a place for expression of difference as its members have deliberately formed an enclave separate from the institution of the LDS church and shielded from the public's gaze.

As an enclave, the MOF discussion board provides its participants with a place safe from voices critical of their theology itself and safe from voices critical of their interpretations of and lived experiences with that theology. The discussion threads in this chapter show the MOF participants using their enclave to construct their self-concepts in ways that draw on and negotiate multiple subject positions, particularly subject positions informed by LDS gender doctrines. Because the enclave is key to the context for the women's writing, I discuss its establishment first, followed by how this context furthers an intimate sphere based on shared theology and sisterhood and how the MOF participants use this intimate sphere to write with agency regarding differences within their theology.

“You Never Knew Who Was Actually Reading Your Thoughts”: The Need for a Religious Enclave

Important to the MOF participants' ability to connect to others who share their beliefs and to negotiate these beliefs is their deliberate establishment of an enclave. Jane

Mansbridge describes enclaves as discursive spaces “in which the relatively like-minded can consult with one another” with the goal of

understanding themselves better, forging bonds of solidarity, preserving the memories of past injustices, interpreting and reinterpreting the meanings of those injustices, working out alternative conceptions of self, of community, of justice, and of universality, trying to make sense of both the privileges they wield and the oppressions they face, understanding the strategic configurations for and against their desired ends, deciding what alliances to make both emotionally and strategically, deliberating on ends and means, and deciding how to act, individually and collectively. (57-8)

Drawing from Mansbridge’s description, I use “enclave” to refer to the MOF discussion board as a discursive space where these LDS women can discuss and negotiate individual self-concepts and a group or community self-concept, where they can consider the social, cultural, religious, and economic forces that structure their worlds, and where they can make emotional, spiritual, and intimate connections. Mansbridge’s description of enclaves is analogous in many ways to Gere’s description of the nineteenth-century clubwomen’s use of intimate literacy. Gere talks about intimate literacy as a means of service (25), connection (21), and strength through emotional ties. For the MOF participants, intimacy is an important part of their enclave and their use of the MOF enclave to work out “alternative conceptions of self, of community, of justice, and of universality” (Mansbridge 57-8).

Originally, MOF participants thought that they had such a space for working out conceptions of self when BabyCenter.com created a Latter-day Saint families subboard, but they found instead that the public nature and coding of BabyCenter impeded their ability to communicate in ways driven by LDS doxa. In the following interview excerpts, the MOF participants I interviewed explained how BabyCenter’s Latter-day Saint

families subboard compared to the type of space and community that they had expected and hoped to find:

- Jenn: “I expected [other LDS parents] to be more honest and supportive. But since it was a public board ANYONE could post and lurk there. Although the majority of the posters were genuine and sincere, I was disappointed to find out about trolls and people making fun of our church and our posters.”
- Sunny: “BabyCenter was very dramatic and lots of feelings getting hurt and people saying things in the anonymous manner—they felt they didn’t have to be kind. I don’t know if you were on BabyCenter before, but it was a very different atmosphere. Much more backbiting . . . It was just very different. . . It left a bad taste in my mouth, so I am not the right one to ask about that one.”
- Amy: “Anyone could lurk and just read all of the threads and never post. People could change identities and post anonymously too. You never knew who was actually reading your thoughts. And at times trolls made the environment tense. If we were a manager, we didn’t have much power except to police our board and report it to BabyCenter’s community and they would decide what to do.”
- Misty: “Seems like there was always someone causing problems or pretending to be someone they weren’t. Specifically, within the religion boards there was always someone crossing to a different religion’s board to preach. Debate was a constant.”
- Tami: “When I was on the bulletin boards there, everything was public. They had some volunteer moderators (1 or more on each board) keeping tabs on things, policing behavior. You could create as many accounts with different screennames as you wanted, which of course led to all sorts of trolling, flaming, and other unwanted behavior. . . . I’ve stopped going there altogether.”

As these comments illustrate, because BabyCenter is public, its creators did not limit the number of screennames and accounts a person could sign up for, nor could BabyCenter ensure that those who posted on the Latter-day Saint families discussion board really were members of the LDS church who wanted to support and communicate with each other, rather than those who wanted to ridicule or convert participants. BabyCenter’s Latter-day Saint families board then became a place of debating, preaching, trolling, and flaming rather than a place where the MOF participants could

connect with those who shared their basic religious beliefs and find support in seeking to understand, live, and sometimes contend with those beliefs. In the comments above, Jenn talked about hoping to find this support and people who were honest and genuine regarding their affiliation with the LDS church. Sunny also mentioned wanting to find kindness rather than harshness.

In order to find kindness and support and to write themselves in relation to their religious group without ridicule and personal attacks, in October 2003, a group of women from BabyCenter chose to leave and find another location where they could have a stronger role in defining the literacy site, the rules, and the boundaries such that they could establish a more respectful environment for discussion. One woman from BabyCenter initiated this move by setting up a private board on MSN for women from BabyCenter's Latter-day Saint families bulletin board whose writing and comments she valued. These women could then invite, or sponsor, others. The current MOF board is password-protected and women-only. To log on, a woman must receive an emailed invitation from a current member. Members are allowed only one screenname, which restricts them from posting anonymously, trolling, or pretending to be someone else.

The MOF discussion board was therefore created specifically as an enclave because the women wanted more privacy from members of an anonymous public pretending to be members of the LDS community. The women established an enclave to ensure a basic level of trust in a common religious background.

Scholars have shown that enclaves are useful, particularly for those who might be subdued in larger deliberations and who need a space for developing positions without being silenced (Sustein; Fraser). Trish Roberts-Miller discovered this herself, as she

reports in her *Into the Blogosphere* article “Parody Blogging and the Call of the Real.” Roberts-Miller begins by critiquing blogs because she argues that they are enclaves in the sense that like-minded people express themselves to others rather than deliberate with others in “a more open and public sphere of participatory argumentation.” However, Roberts-Miller adds that she began writing a parody blog out of frustration with her political isolation. In doing so, she discovered that “the place of the intimate . . . took on a real value.” Other studies show enclaved spaces as beneficial for groups of women writing online. Within enclaved spaces, women have adopted multiple subject positions and voiced interests and identities (Gillespie et al; Hawisher and Sullivan *Women* 186; Camp 114-115).

The MOF participants’ uses of their enclave are similarly beneficial. The trust in a common religious background and a common faith was necessary before the MOF participants could use literacy to discuss their understandings of and their experiences with their faith, particularly as women within that faith.

“I Don’t Get Much Out of Relief Society”: The Need for a Self-Sponsored Enclave

Not only did the MOF participants need a space for writing that was separate from ridicule or hostility toward their religious theology, but they also needed a space for writing that was separate from the official sponsorship of their religion. The MOF women already have a long-established literacy and religious society through the Relief Society, the official women’s organization in the LDS church that has existed since 1842. The Relief Society has historically played an important role both in upholding the LDS church’s understandings of gender and expanding those understandings to give women a more public and more equal role with men in the LDS church. However, in the post-

Depression and post-World War II era, changes in the Relief Society resulted in a altered and narrower understanding of what it means to be an LDS woman. The MOF women use their enclaved discussion board in order to draw on the Relief Society's history of sisterhood in a way that creates a more intimate and accepting sphere and a greater variety of subject positions as LDS women than they have found in their experiences with the Relief Society. A brief background of the Relief Society is important for understanding how the MOF women use their enclave to reclaim the sense of sisterhood and the variety of subject positions and roles historically available to women through the Relief Society.¹⁴

LDS women established the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo in 1842 after church members moved west, from New York¹⁵ to Ohio to Missouri to Nauvoo, Illinois, due to persecution. The women's initial goal was to provide the financial means and the skills to make shirts for the men working to build the Nauvoo Temple (Derr 158). The women managed their own funds and buildings and presided over their own organization, with a three-member presidency, who would "serve as a constitution," or as the law of the group (Derr 158). As the church grew larger and members were forced to leave Nauvoo to head west, the Relief Society grew to consist of both a larger umbrella

¹⁴ A detailed history of the Relief Society can be found in *Women of Covenant: The Story of the Relief Society*, by Jill Mulvey Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher.

¹⁵ The LDS church was founded by Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1832 (<http://lds.org>). A more accurate description of Smith's actions, according to LDS theology, is that Smith "restored," rather than "founded," the LDS church, because LDS people consider their church a restoration of the original church and gospel established by Jesus Christ in the New Testament (<http://mormon.org>).

organization and smaller Relief Society units, organized geographically, with one unit in each local congregation.

The Relief Society has always preserved the LDS church's establishment of a gendered binary and its belief that binary distinctions between men and women are eternal and divine, as explained in the following official statement of church doctrine: "All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Proclamation").¹⁶ In reference to this doctrine on gender, the Relief Society initially described itself as "a holy sisterhood" (Derr 173), which evolved into "a worldwide sisterhood" as the LDS church's membership expanded worldwide. As a result of this doctrine, the church and the Relief Society have always used the term "sister" to refer to "both the collectivity of sisters, i.e., female church members, and the 'sisterly' quality of their interactions" (Derr 154). I will refer to "sisterhood" in this dissertation according to the common LDS understanding of sisterhood as an intimate, emotional connection based on social and spiritual bonding. Historian Jill Mulvey Derr describes LDS sisterhood as

¹⁶ Of the LDS doctrines that influence the MOF women's understandings of gender, this doctrine is the most constant throughout the history of the LDS religion. Suzanne Lundquist explains that in many religious communities, there are apodictic laws (timeless) and casuistic laws (time-bound). For example, the Biblical book of Exodus is an example of both because the Ten Commandments are apodictic and applications of them throughout time result in casuistic laws (Lundquist, "Re: Defining"). In the case of gender and the LDS church, I see this first doctrine as apodictic and the others as slightly more casuistic, which is important for how considerations of gender roles have changed over time in the LDS culture.

“the bonding among women on both personal and public levels, from simple friendships to massive organizations” (151).

As was common in the nineteenth century, the Relief Society also emphasized child-bearing and child-rearing and saw nurturing children and expertise in nurturing as the province of women (Bushman “Mormon Sisters” xxxi; Derr 167). However, the early Relief Society also maintained the importance of women’s roles in the community and public sphere. As a result, the early Relief Society gave its members public responsibilities and leadership positions that made them responsible for advancing themselves, others, and the church itself. For example, the early Relief Society women supported each other in the initially unfamiliar roles that came with public speaking in mass meetings in defense of church positions (Derr 175), at the International Council of Women (Derr 176), and in the National Woman Suffrage Association conventions (Derr 179). Early Relief Society women also wrote, researched, and published a semi-monthly paper and a women’s journal (Derr 177); founded libraries; established kindergartens; provided relief to the poor (Derr 158, 174); raised funds for their own Relief Society halls (Derr 174) and for sending women to be professionally trained as teachers, midwives, and doctors; established their own Deseret Hospital with a female MD as the principal (Derr 177); and instructed others in gospel principles and spiritual matters (Derr 160). As can be seen in this summary, the responsibilities of the early Relief Society women extended beyond the traditional private sphere and allowed women to develop diverse subject positions which were valued both in the church and in the larger community. Derr argues that these tasks took early Relief Society women beyond their homes to contribute

to the larger community, strengthened their collective identity and sense of accomplishment, and built bonds of sisterhood (190).

Moreover, in its early years, the Relief Society was not organized under the patriarchal church structure or viewed as a church auxiliary, as it is now, nor was it viewed solely as a charitable organization. Instead, as Derr says, the Relief Society was seen as wholly necessary to everything the church did (173) and as “an extension of the divine partnership of woman and man emphasized in Mormon temple theology” (180). The Relief Society and its members were visible partners with the male priesthood officials in building the church.

In the past century, cultural changes in the United States and changes in the overall LDS church organization have changed the Relief Society and have also altered and narrowed the perception of what being an LDS woman means. Following the Great Depression and World War II, the LDS church, the Relief Society, and American culture in general glorified women’s roles in the home through publications such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* and emphasized nuclear family relationships rather than female kinship (Derr 187-192). The LDS church officially outlines this emphasis in the following statement that divides gender roles according to essentialist differences between men and women: “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 their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Proclamation”). Derr argues that the Relief Society’s emphasis on nuclear family

relationships and on women's roles in the home diminishes women's public roles (190) and presents a "monolithic model of womanhood" that has resulted in difficulties for many LDS women (194).

In addition, as the LDS church grew in size, particularly outside the United States, the church implemented organizational changes that lessened the Relief Society's autonomy and visibility and the variety and number of responsibilities and accompanying subject positions that Relief Society women could take up. For example, the church introduced a new churchwide welfare program, thereby diminishing the Relief Society's part in the church's humanitarian work. Also, as they tried to meet the challenges presented by escalating membership, LDS church leaders structured the Relief Society under the hierarchical chain of command, attempting to make the church organization more efficient (Derr 199). With these organizational changes, Derr says LDS women lost a sense of female leadership and collective identity because helping the poor and conducting welfare work was no longer a collective task, nor was it initiated by the women but given to them (188). As the Relief Society became organized under official church leadership, it consisted primarily of formal meetings, which assembled women together, but didn't lead to binding friendships and support systems. Derr contends that the less formal meetings in the earlier Relief Society days were important to women's abilities to "deal frankly with each other" (199). The culmination of these changes, Derr argues, has been a "collective crisis of closeness and competence" (194), which she believes Relief Society women are just now beginning to address as individuals and as an organization. In the last two decades, the LDS church and Relief Society have begun to

situate their praise of women's roles in the nuclear family within the larger context of parenthood, personal development, sisterhood, and Christian service (Derr 197).

Derr's outline of what LDS women have lost with the changes in the Relief Society over the last century is reflected in many of the comments that the MOF participants made as I interviewed them. Many referred to the Relief Society independently of my questioning to talk about the connections, intimacy, and opportunities to "deal frankly with each other," to use Derr's phrase, that the discussion board provides for them and that they do not get out of their participation in the Relief Society.¹⁷ As Kristine told me in an interview, "I don't get much out of Relief Society. [I] feel much closer to the women on the board than in the Relief Society." The MOF women as a whole have self-sponsored their online enclave because of their desire for a religious forum that first, encourages responsibility to community and second, fosters openness, intimacy, and the type of sisterhood found in the early Relief Society. I'll discuss their sense of responsibility to a larger community in a later chapter. The remainder of this section focuses on how the MOF participants draw from their connection with the Relief Society in order to create a sisterhood that relates to, but extends, the sisterhood they have experienced in the Relief Society. This revised sense of sisterhood is based on informal female kinship, intimate literacy, and a feeling of acceptance rather than judgment.

Some MOF participants I interviewed attributed their preference for MOF and the stronger sense of sisterhood that they feel there to an informal female kinship outside their home, which relates to women's experiences in the early Relief Society and may

¹⁷ Of course, individual women each have their own experiences with the Relief Society, many of which are positive.

often be lacking in formal Relief Society meetings. Kate told me that she comes to MOF for the daily female kinship outside her home that the Relief Society can't provide: "The board is something that's available every day. It feels almost tangible. Relief Society doesn't feel that way to me. It's always there, you are always a part of it, but there isn't someplace you can go anytime you need to ask a question or just feel like being silly. It's a much more broad organization and doesn't fulfill the same purpose as the board." Tami also emphasized the informal female kinship of the discussion board in the following comment, "I love Relief Society but in my [local congregation], at least, we're not connecting the way we need to. . . . I wish my Relief Society would have a board like this and that people would participate in it. There's something about being able . . . to connect with other women frequently . . . that enriches all of our lives."

As they connect with each other in an informal context, the MOF participants also establish an intimate sphere, which deepens their sense of sisterhood. The following interview excerpt with Lee illustrates the importance of intimacy to the MOF board and the participants' revised sense of sisterhood:

Catherine: Are you involved in any other discussion boards or offline groups right now?

Lee: I am in Relief Society and it is good. They support you, but here [on the MOF board] there is a stronger feeling of sisterhood for me. . . . It seems like our deep thoughts and things we don't tell people in real life we tell on the board. And that creates a stronger bond of unity. I think [the board and the Relief Society] are similar in that they both really have women who know a lot. Relief Society seems to support the religious aspect of my life. The board is somewhat connected to the church because we all share the same basic beliefs. The board has given me a sense of belonging and understanding of motherhood and life that is often very needed. I think the Relief Society is the way it is because it is through church. And, well, this board isn't. We are all women and bring different aspects to the table.

In this interview Lee said that she feels like the Relief Society is “good” and supports her religious life, yet she is motivated to write on MOF because she desires “a stronger feeling of sisterhood” than she finds on MOF. This sisterhood results from participants expressing their “deep thoughts and things we don’t tell people in real life.” In Kelsee’s response to my same question, she attributed this tendency towards openness, sharing, and intimacy to the ability to write rather than speak: “The only [women’s group] I’m involved in offline is through my church. I meet with them one evening a month. There are certainly similarities in the two groups—love, laughter, support, sharing of life’s ups and downs, but I feel much more open with my online group. They know me better in a lot of ways. That’s my fault—it’s easier to write out my feelings than to speak them.”

Other MOF participants I interviewed find a stronger sisterhood and deeper intimacy on the discussion board because online they feel accepted rather than judged. Carolyn told me that she prefers the MOF discussion board because she doesn’t feel any pressure from others about who she should be: “On the board if people are struggling . . . they say so.” SuAnn also mentioned this in the interview excerpt at the beginning of this chapter when she said, “My experience there [in Relief Society] is everyone wanting to be perfect and show their best side.” And Sunny referred to judgments in her following comment: “I am a part of a group at church, the women’s organization. In theory, it’s a place where womanhood is celebrated and a sense of sisterhood is in effect. It’s meant to be that way, and at times it is, but other times, there are cliques, gossiping, which causes a loss in the feeling of sisterhood.”

As can be seen in this discussion, the Relief Society has historically been and still is a resource for LDS women for a sense of religious, emotional, and material support as

well as for new skills and roles. Yet the MOF participants' comments about lacking connection and acceptance of their struggles and imperfections in their Relief Society experiences show that the current culture of the Relief Society limits these women to a singular subject position defined by the perception of the "perfect" norm of an LDS woman as someone who does not struggle in life or in the role of mother and homemaker in a nuclear family. The MOF participants' feelings of dissatisfaction with the current Relief Society culture created a need for the liminal community of their discussion board.

"Finding Me": Claiming Multiple Subject Positions and Agency

within a Mythic Community

The MOF discussion board is strongly affiliated with the LDS church because all board members are required to be members of the church. Yet as a self-sponsored, informal, and intimate enclave, the MOF discussion board provides its participants with a place conducive to expressing and discussing what Diana Fuss calls multiple essences (72) and multiple essentialisms (xii). Although Fuss is anti-essentialist, she argues that we should not ignore that there are differences within essentialism (xii), that boundaries between subject positions are fluid (34), and that a subject can "possess multiple essences which may even contradict or compete with one another" (72). Luce Irigaray talks about this process as a simultaneous construction and deconstruction of competing "multiple essences" (qtd in Fuss 70, 72). On MOF, the enclave is important to the participants' ability to try to make sense of conflicting multiple essences because the community is supportive of both religious and nonreligious positionings.

For the MOF participants, one of these essences is informed by the LDS doctrine of essentialist gender roles. As I discussed previously, the LDS church's doctrines

specific to gender establish a gendered binary that assumes essentialist differences between men and women and their roles. LDS church doctrines position women as daughters of God and as responsible for nurturing children in the home. The MOF participants established an enclave for their discussion board partly so that they could be supported in their acceptance of and desire to live according to LDS theology, including its gender doctrines. However, the MOF participants' literacy practices in their enclave also allow them to express additional essences. In the discussion thread below, participants claim essences related to their professional training, education, hobbies, and interests, such as a professionally trained Shakespearean actress, a social worker, a runner, a writer, a gardener, a skier, and so forth.

The MOF participants' negotiation of multiple essences, as seen in this discussion thread, shows agency in this particular mythic community. The participants spoke with awareness of their religious positioning and with authority to claim that they are not just defined by a religiously prescribed concept of an LDS woman. They showed agency as they wrote to negotiate, but not reject their multiple essences, including their religious essences. For the participants in this discussion thread, agency took the form of critical awareness of the fixity and singularity of their religious essence and a negotiation of that, but not an overturning of the religious doctrine itself.

This thread began with Melanie quoting from a blog post by Nicole, who is also a member of MOF, in order to invite further discussion of Nicole's ideas. Nicole's blog post is titled "Warning: whiney...post ahead" and reads as follows¹⁸:

¹⁸ Discussion board transcripts are unedited and as-is. I occasionally excerpt parts of transcripts due to length. Excerpts are noted by ellipses.

So lately I've been in this blue funk. I have been feeling so disconnected from me, and well I'd love to be connected to the me I remember, but I haven't seen that girl in so long that if I ran into her on the street I don't think that I would even recognize her. Seriously who is this girl who cleans house all day, chases toddlers, and makes dinner (which just messes up the clean house, making me have to start all over again)? This isn't me. I feel like someone, well I guess it was me, hung up a sign that said "free pieces of Nic." And they came a running, I gave a chunk of me to the church (the sweet little primary children¹⁹ to be exact), a piece to keeping up appearances with the neighbors, some to the inlaws, and then there's the boy, fruit of my loins whom I love more than life itself, and he is just chewing me up and spitting me out by the mouthful.

Now all of these thing I did willingly and of course I love most of them, but this morning as I was cleaning off the child who had dowsed himself in yogurt, I remembered a soliloquy from "Romeo and Juliet" that I had memorized once. Yep you heard it I am a professionally trained Shakesperean actress, I played Juliet, and Joan of Ark, and Gertrude, and several other fabulous parts in my day. I also used to be a good social worker, I started the first Spanish speaking children's educational support group of its kind in the state that I lived in at the time. In my time there I was also an expert crisis line answerer.

I went to college once, and back then I was fun...really fun, and I had friends. Do you guys remember what friends are like? I'm not talking about the ladies at the playgroup who I play *whose-kid-has-the-most-expensive-name-brand-clothes* with (which I always lose at). I mean real friends, that care about being your friend more than they care about getting the gossip. Seriously, do any of you guys ever feel like this? Like everything that is unique about you is going to get sucked into the black hole of trying to make everyone else happy. How do we as women let this happen? And how do we find balance? Because I love my husband more than I can say and I want to make him happy, and I love my son so much it hurts, and so I want to give him the best life I can; and I love primary; and I love the relatives; and as much as I hate to admit it, I want the playgroup ladies to like me.

How do we make enough of ourselves for everyone and still have some left for ourselves? I just can't figure it out...

I warned you that this would be a whiney one.

¹⁹ "The Primary children" refers to the Sunday classes for children ages 3-11. Nicole was a teacher for one of the classes at the time.

Melanie copied Nicole's post onto a thread that she titled "Finding me" on MOF and began the following conversation:

I'd love to discuss this. . . . I just read it, and it struck me-- and I wondered how to put the pieces of us back together.

I go through funks where I feel fine-- fulfilled by the many cups I am filling. Then other times I feel bored, annoyed by the cups that are always getting emptied and wanting ME to refill them. lol. How do you find those hobbies/interests/passions that make you feel like an *individual* again? I am not the person I was in college, nor do I want to pretend that the things that I liked then would necessarily be the same now. My life experiences have changed me, I am different, and I am trying to discover the things that make me 'me' now... kwim [know what I mean]???

discuss....

Emily: I think that in the past year I am finding pieces of myself that I never knew existed. Someone who likes to run, someone who likes to garden, someone who likes to write. I think that just dabbling into new things has made me learn more about myself, expecting more out of myself. Trying new things and being able to say, Hey! I'm good at this! That has been really rewarding for me.

So I guess that is my answer. I do stuff for myself. That is why I blog. That is why I exercise. I feel like I am a better person because I am taking care of myself, and a better mom, wife and friend. Make sense?

Meg: this has been one of the biggest struggles i have had in the past 2 years. sometimes i love my life. but sometimes i am so restless in my life. when i am restless, i think of who i used to be when i really only had me to think about. i think of the rush of adrenaline and the sharpness of the air when i would downhill ski, cross-country ski, backpack in the mountains, stay out all night dancing, etc. like you said, Melanie, i don't want to go back to who i was then, but i want to feel like she's still a part of me now. i'm still looking for answers to this.

a couple things have helped me lately, though. i made a list of "things that i know about me". it helped me to think about it, to write it out.

Amber: This subject has been on my mind for several weeks lately...I feel like I have lost Amber and now i am just wife and Mom. If I dwell on it I do get pretty down. So I've made a commitment to myself to try something new and to really ponder who I am now. I have begun

running...which I would have NEVER done before. . . I am a person! I have likes and dislikes just like every one else. I have opinions...

Kristin: I think [Nicole] stole my thoughts!!

I loved what you said, Meg. Ditto pretty much exactly about the restless feeling, and wondering where that "other" girl went. I also love your idea about the "what I know about me" list.

One thing that I've told myself, and maybe it's just to pacify myself for a time, but I have to believe that those piece of me are still there, and that it's just a time and season right now where I'm this other person. I don't know if that's very healthy, though, because I'm sure someday I'll long for these days of early motherhood and babies and all that stuff, and wonder what happened to THAT person.

Interesting stuff...

Melanie: It is fascinating to me that so many women feel this 'limbo' of who they are. I know Oprah attempts to 'uncover' the reasons why on the bigger scale, but sadly falls short in her ever anti-marriage/family explanations--- making the transformation to wife/mother as a negative one.

That's why I love this thought of discovering the 'new' you. Embracing the changes that have made us into the people we are now, and recognizing that we are different.

In my restless phases, I love trying new things. However, I rarely find things I feel good at, lol. I love the thought of expecting more out of myself though--- and not accepting the monotony of days to be 'my life'. Kristin, knowing that this time is just a season in my life is what gets me through!!! Honestly, when I start feeling unfulfilled I remind myself that this gift I am giving to my kids is the most important thing in the world to me. It isn't forever, and I need to slap myself in the face with that perspective all the time.

So finding things you are good at--- process of elimination?

Athena: A couple years ago I went to a [Relief Society] board meeting that really pointed out to me the importance of ME having someplace in all my roles. It was about keeping our tanks full and doing those things that you like for YOU. They pointed out if your fuel tank runs out, you can't run or help the people that you want to and deffinatly not give them any fuel. For me, it really takes effort to have the me time and not feel bad, but I am getting better at it and I know as I do it does make me a better person and

better able and wanting more to love the people and things around me. I don't grudgingly "fill up cups" if I take the time for me.

Vina: Man this is my theme! But I will admit that I have been diligently wittling away at Life's additions to "me" and am finding who I really am and like to be.

I was always so free and spontaneous and Life has made me reserved, cautious, and on the attack. So I am taking my dh out for fun more...letting my kids cut up a million pieces of paper on the floor without freaking out (they can be thrown away)...turning up my favorite music and "breakin' it down" in front of my kids. They actually LOVE the last one...one of my secrets is that I can dance hip hop rather well and now that my kids are older I'm suddenly "cool" LOL! . . .

This is a very important issue and I am glad that I am not alone in it...but sad that you are all going through it as well.

The women in this thread grappled with the dominance of their LDS-designated role as nurturer, or filler-of-the-cups, as Nicole and Melanie both describe it. They wrote to claim multiple subject positions in addition to “mother.” Nicole wrote to temporarily claim the subject positions related to her professional life, and the other women joined her in writing to temporarily interrupt religious-based narratives of perpetual fulfillment in “making everybody else happy” (Nicole). In interrupting, they presented alternative narratives that expressed the difficulty of and the conflict that can be involved in adopting “mother” as their primary subject position. Nicole told me that this difficulty was the reason why she posted:

I just had a really hard time with that transition from just me to me and the baby. I didn't think I would miss working so much and I really missed all of the identity I got from having a job and all of a sudden I felt like I wasn't me, I was just an extension of the baby. I don't know, my first baby, he was 8 weeks premature and so his birth was really stressful, and up until he was a year old, he seemed very fragile to me. He was so fragile and we were so afraid to take him around other people. And it was just a stressful experience. . . .

I always thought I would just love being a mom and it would be so great, and again, it was really, really stressful and it was really, really hard. And yes, it is really wonderful, but there are a lot of things that nobody tells you, like, you are not going to be able to use the bathroom by yourself for the next three years of your life. Every time you go to the grocery store, someone's going to be there whining at you the entire time. There's kind of a picture that's painted and I wasn't prepared for the reality and so I was grappling with what is this, you know. What is my purpose? And a lot of it was, gosh, I just don't feel like me anymore, but this is my new stage of reality, so who am I, and is that okay, and is it okay to feel this way, and do other people feel this way?

Nicole and the other women who wrote on this thread adopted a postmodern perspective toward mothering, as Elizabeth Flynn describes, in that they addressed and “[dealt] with the contradictions and complexities” of mothering in a way that portrayed a more realistic view of motherhood (78, 81). Flynn argues against the binary perspectives of, first, radical feminism, which emphasizes patriarchal culture's harmful effects on mothering, and, second, of cultural feminism, which focuses on the importance of mothering (78). As Flynn says, “The actual fact of mothering has always been the site of contradictory tensions between social expectations and individual realities” (82). The MOF women talked about some of these tensions and realities in this thread, and they wrote with critical awareness of the contradictions in narratives of fulfillment regarding mothering. In this discussion thread, the MOF women's writing illustrates Derr's argument that the Relief Society's focus on nuclear family relationships and on women's roles in the home presents a “monolithic model of womanhood” with which many LDS women struggle (194).

The participants in this discussion thread are postmodern in that they claimed fluid and multiple subject positions in this interaction, but they did so within a structure established by their religious institution. They therefore are not postmodern in the sense

of deconstructing the category and concept of “woman” completely. The identity that they claimed does involve “essences,” which, like Fuss, I do not see as static and authentic. Instead, I see an “essence” as a subject position that one uses to name oneself within a specific context. As Fuss says, an essence does not have to be essentialist in that it is “transhistorical, eternal, immutable” (xi). Yet, a person often acts as if an essence is a permanent part of her identity. As illustrated in this thread, the MOF women have internalized and identified with the essentialist essence of an LDS woman, as initially defined by their religion. Yet for the MOF women, that essence is not unified and is, to a certain extent, fluid. The women do not completely re-create that essence every time they call it up, but, depending on the context, they do negotiate it and change it in the context of their enclave. They take up essentialist positions based on their religious ideology, but those positions can also be called postmodern, first, because the women deliberately choose to align themselves with it, and, second, because they do change and redefine it to an extent. Their actions in choosing and negotiating their essences are therefore postmodern, but they also are essential in that they work with variations of an essence that is still within the structure of their religious ideology. The concept of essence for the MOF women is not completely fixed nor completely fluid.

The participants in this thread also began to think critically about what the essence of “LDS mother” is asking of them and how they want to occupy that position or alter that essence for themselves. MOF women therefore show agency as they use their enclave to reinterpret their religious beliefs in ways that allow them to account for differences in their experiences living their faith, particularly in their multiple essences. The participants on this thread used agency in “engendering alternative feminist positions

in discourses” (Probyn, qtd in Reynolds 59) in that they claimed the value of their multiple subject positions within a community whose primary discourse emphasizes the subject position of nurturer. Fuss might describe such a move as indicative of Luce Irigaray’s “psychic resistance” (69). Fuss argues that Irigaray broadens the notion of politics to include psychic resistance, which acknowledges that resistance operates on many levels (69). “For Irigaray,” Fuss explains, “women are engaged in the process of both constructing and deconstructing their identities, their *essences*, simultaneously” (70). I see this psychic resistance and this simultaneous construction and deconstruction of multiple essences in the women’s writing in this discussion thread. The participants resisted the idea that the continuously emptied cups are “wanting ME to refill them” (Melanie) and that “this girl who cleans house all day, chases toddlers, and makes dinner” is really them (Nicole). They also recognized that some of the scripts they repeat are “just to pacify myself for a time” (Kristin). These comments deconstructed the essence that relies on religious-based narratives of fulfillment regarding motherhood and constructed a new identity with the addition of multiple essences. The thread participants showed that they “possess multiple essences which may even contradict or compete with one another” (72) and that these essences are not fixed. For example, Melanie asked the thread participants to focus on who they are now, in their own particular context, and to think about the possibilities that entails for them.

However, in this thread—and in other threads in which MOF women grapple with the priesthood or with career decisions and religious gender roles—the women did not write to permanently interrupt religious ideologies. Their agency was a matter of awareness of positioning, actively choosing their positioning, voicing that awareness to

self and others, and interrupting the fulfillment narrative, but not challenging power relations through writing. Melanie emphasized this in our discourse analysis interview:

Catherine: Do you see this post related to your religion?

Melanie: Oh, definitely. As LDS women, we culturally tend to get married young, we culturally tend to stay home with our kids and so I think this forum for the discussion was probably going to be more encouraging those things than necessarily than the scholarly pursuits I was going through at the same time [applying to grad school]. I don't even think I brought that up in there. But I think I mentioned on there about how society, Oprah or something, always goes through, like when women lose themselves in their families and forget who they are, and I was thinking, society tells us oh, you're forgetting who you are, but as Latter-day Saint women, we know that we aren't that person anymore. Does that make sense? So I felt like because these are other Latter-day Saint women, they shared that thought with me.

Catherine: That we aren't what person anymore?

Melanie: That we aren't necessarily the individual anymore. . . . I don't think I felt any wrestling with a choice of not being with my kids because that was never something that I considered, but at the same time, I did see it as a sacrifice. It was something I was giving to them, if that makes sense. And I think definitely this is a forum where I would feel support in that because society doesn't give us a lot of accolades for that.

As Melanie said, instead of permanently interrupting religious ideologies, she wrote to find the support available in the enclave for her subject position as a stay-at-home mother and to ask for support in how to find and take on other subject positions in addition to it. In fact, Melanie told me that she had posted this after the birth of her third child when she had applied and had been accepted for graduate school in education as was “really wanting to move on to the next stage in my life.” She said,

I think at the time I was really trying to make a new person, but as I read through the responses to my post, I thought, maybe [grad school] isn't as important as I thought it was. I'm still going to do it, but originally, I had thought, this is who I'm going to be, and then I thought, no, this is just something I'll do. . . . I felt like even the responses I got, people were still going through that process, so it kind of helped me to think it's still

ongoing. It's not like, I have to decide now what I'm gonna do or what I'm going to be. That little things are okay.

Melanie and the other thread participants used the enclave to ask for support in additional gendered subject positions by expressing restlessness with their religious-based gender roles while reiterating the importance of those roles. This can be seen in Nicole's question, "How do we make enough of ourselves for everyone and still have some left for ourselves?" and in Athena's statement that she is less grudging about her nurturing role if she takes time for herself as well. In the women's simultaneous interruption and reinforcement of their beliefs, they relied on what Dana Anderson calls "doxastic commonplaces of self-nature," one of which is the belief that the self is temporal, or that they are moving from a past to a future (13). This belief allowed them to claim multiple essences and unstable subject positions, such as Nicole's reference to "the pieces of Nic" and to Melanie discussion of a changing self, and to situate their positions as mothers as only one of many and as only temporarily dominating the others.

Melanie comments in our discourse analysis interview show this approach to a self that is temporal and multiple. When I asked her about her purpose for posting, she said,

I think at the time, I kind of felt like I was wondering how other people found a way to figure out who they were after having kids. Because sometimes we tend to identify ourselves with when we went through that time of self-discovery which was, for me, in college, discovering what I really wanted and what I really believed and so after having kids and realizing, okay, am I still relying on those things or am I creating the new person that my experiences have made me. And so my purpose in posting was to see what other people had done to discover that or to develop that person.

Diana Fuss's discussion of "reading like a feminist" is also very applicable to the participants in this thread. Fuss relies on Gayatri Spivak's argument that the reader is "a

site of differences” and that the reading process is a “negotiation amongst discursive subject-positions which the reader, as a social subject, may or may not choose to fill” (Fuss 34). Fuss agrees with Spivak’s view of institutional subject positions as “social vacancies that are of course not filled in the same way by different individuals” (Spivak, qtd in Fuss 34) because this view allows for “fluid boundaries and continual commerce” between subject positions and emphasizes that “no reading is without internal contradiction” and that readers can read from several positions at the same time (35). The participants in “Pieces of Nic” have multiple essences, the boundaries between which are fluid. Although all MOF women subscribe to LDS doctrines, they do not fill the subject positions of “LDS woman” in the same way. Their readings of religious discourse do involve internal contradictions as they read from multiple positions at the same time.

This discussion also illustrates Linda Alcoff’s concept of positionality for feminist theory. The MOF women’s subjectivity reflects their position within their LDS religion and within the MOF discussion board, as well as within other contexts. The MOF participants’ positioning is not a sole matter of external elements. They are not passive recipients of identities created by external elements, including their religion. Rather, the MOF participants interrupt and reconstruct their subjectivity and history through the “cultural discursive context to which [they have] access” (Alcoff 434). They actively contribute to the context in which their positions can be defined (Alcoff 434). In fact, their continuous interpretation of their experiences, or their habits, practices, and histories, and the context of those experiences leads to agency.

By making a space for continuous interpretation of experiences and for construction of multiple essences, the MOF discussion board has helped its participants dispel rigid and monolithic notions of what an “LDS woman” should be. Shelah said as much in my phenomenological interview with her when I asked if there were any discussion threads in particular that had impacted her. She said, “In a general sense, I think because I’m a convert [Shelah joined the LDS church at age 14], . . . I always thought that everyone who is LDS is super spiritual or aspires to perfection all of the time. And I’ve always had a sort of ‘I’m not like that’ sort of feeling. I’ve always had this inferiority complex. And I think the board has helped me see that people are normal. That there’s a fairly wide range of accepted behavior on the board. The sex threads have changed my perception of Mormon women being uptight. I think the political discussions have been enlightening too and even the threads that tend to be more controversial because I like to see all of these varied perspectives.”

The result of these discussions and this thread in particular, however, was not the women’s engendering of alternatives to traditional gender roles and patriarchal hierarchies within the larger discourses of the LDS church. Because the women’s identity expressions in this thread were meant to elicit change only in their individual lives through actions like finding things they are good at that allow them to claim additional subject positions, they can’t be seen as feminist interruptions in a postmodern sense. Even as the women expressed some of the tensions and realities they experience with mothering, they also emphasized its importance, and they talked about this as a problem for women alone, which is a return to cultural feminism. Moreover, the women’s views

of gender did not move beyond binary conceptions of difference, as can be seen in Nicole's question, "How do we as women let this happen?"

With this thread, we can see the distinction between overturning official church discourses and critiquing them. Criticism, whether voiced or not, is a prerequisite for interruption because we would not interrupt if we did not want to revise or expand on something. In interrupting religious-based narratives of the fulfillment of mothering, the participants on this thread demonstrated critical awareness and the desire to alter those narratives based on their own life experiences. But these interruptions and demonstrations of critical awareness did not constitute the women overturning church discourses regarding the necessity and importance of their role as mothers. In this thread, the women therefore used narrative as a strategy of simultaneous connection and separation, of acceptance and criticism. Laura M. Leming discusses how Catholic women in her study use similar strategies as "points of convergence, or narrative linkages" between their own stories and the larger church story. Leming describes the Catholic women using these strategies to strengthen their religious identities while distancing themselves from those identities. In this way they are better able to deal with the difficulties involved in being both Catholic and what Leming calls "woman-conscious" (75, 80).

From Anne Ruggles Gere's book *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in Women's Clubs, 1880-1920*, it seems that Mormon women have been doing this kind of simultaneous connection and separation for years. Gere describes the Mormon clubwomen in the late 1800s renegotiating gender relations in their writing in order to expand their rights and approach mainstream norms while adhering to their religious

beliefs (252-3). As LDS women have before, then, the MOF women use writing as a “dialectic of distancing and engagement,” or “flexible alignment,” to use Leming’s term (82), to claim multiple gendered subject positions and to negotiate the internal religious difficulties this may cause for them.

For summary purposes, then, in this discussion thread, the women’s writing shows agency within their mythic community. Their interruption of a religious narrative in regards to gender took the form of expression within their enclave. They used their enclave to draw on multiple essences to voice difference within their religion and to take ownership for defining themselves, but not to overturn religious power relations. As a result, the women did not disrupt the patriarchal nature of their religion individually or collectively. They did not gain any additional political or ecclesiastical power from this exchange or others like it. They wrote to engage with and commit to their religion and to receive support in doing so, while distancing themselves enough so that they could negotiate overlapping identities and claim multiple subject positions. This thread shows how the MOF women write both to connect with others living according to LDS gender ideologies and to explore multiple possibilities within their religious foundation for defining themselves as LDS women.

In this chapter, we see how the MOF participants’ creation of a self-sponsored religious enclave, safe from criticism of their religion and from observance by their religion, results in MOF participants both reiterating their faith and doctrine and re-creating it to allow for complexities in their lived experience with their faith. We also see how the Relief Society serves as a valuable inheritance for the MOF participants, but one that does not currently provide them with the means to claim multiple essences. This

chapter gives only a glimpse into MOF participants' use of religious literacy to explore their multiple relationships to their religious doctrines. This glimpse into the MOF participants' use of religious literacy to negotiate the possibilities of varied, gendered subject positions within their theology shows the complexity of religious literacy and the coexistence of subject positions for these women that we cannot see if we look only at religious literacy in public discourses, as Crowley does, or at our students' uses of religious literacy in the composition classroom.

I like Fuss's description of difference and identity as it applies to the MOF participants. Fuss rejects the post-structuralist perspective that differences are not within identity but in the spaces between identities. Difference for post-structuralists, according to Fuss, is "a product of the friction between easily identifiable and unitary components of identity (sexual, racial, economic, national . . .) competing for dominance within the subject" (103). Fuss argues that this view of multiple identities fails to challenge the notion of identity as unified because it presents multiple unified identities (103).

This chapter shows that agency in a mythic community means actively and conscientiously claiming one's positioning, including religious positioning, but also expressing critical awareness of and interrupting limiting subject positioning without forsaking religious convictions and religious community. For the MOF participants, faith is not monolithic, but involves multiple discourses and individual negotiations within faith itself. Faith for the MOF participants is a source of agency and fluidity, as this chapter describes, and, as the next explores, a source of agency against other cultural discourses.

CHAPTER 4

SELF-CONSTRUCTION, AGENCY DEVELOPMENT, AND PERSONAL POWER THROUGH LITERACY PRACTICES WITHIN A RELIGIOUS ENCLAVE

“What is power in religion? Leadership seems important, but many religions, certainly [the LDS religion], have stressed the humble vineyard worker as the powerful position. . . . This question of where power lies is significant for Mormon women who wield uncelebrated influence. Is it therefore insignificant or diminished? Should women, apparently not important in modern terms, sue for influence? Should they deny their ambitions? Can women deal with this puzzle?”
~Claudia L. Bushman, “Lives”

Power in relation to religious literacy and religious identity is paradoxical (Daniell 27) and difficult to understand, partly because it is not only a public or institutional type of power, but is personal and internal. Religious literacies and religious identities are therefore often viewed as powerless when approached from the “literacy as power” metaphor outlined by Sylvia Scribner as group or community advancement or as “an instrument for human liberation and social change” (75). These definitions refer to power as political and economic rather than as spiritual and personal. In the quote in the above epigraph, Claudia Bushman relates the paradox of religious power to Mormon women whose influence, or power, is uncelebrated yet not insignificant (“Lives”).

In this chapter, I show one way in which the Mormon women in this study find power in relation to their religious identities and literacies. I do so using the concept of multiple essences as outlined by both Fuss and by Johanna Schmertz. In “Constructing Essences: Ethos and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism,” Schmertz explains that in naming ourselves we create multiple essences, which are situated in particular contexts (88). Understanding the MOF participants’ construction of multiple essences helps us see how they act with agency and how they draw on religious essences in particular as a

source of personal and spiritual power over their self-concept and as a source of personal power to resist other cultural discourses.

Agency for the MOF participants in the discussion thread examples in this chapter was therefore a matter of choosing to position themselves in relation to their sense of a divine power and speaking out in a way that validated their relationship to and life experiences with this divine power. Leming defines this as religious agency:

Religious agency is understood here as a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity. . . . To constitute religious *agency*, this identity is claimed and lived as one's own, with an insistence on active ownership. . . . This valued identity is experienced as meaningful, claimed as one's own, and directed toward chosen or adopted goals. Essentially, when religious agency is operative, religion is performed as well as practiced; it is consciously, rather than repetitively, enacted. (74, emphasis in original)

As they chose and created essences, the MOF women in this chapter also used narratives, encomia, and intimate literacy. Using these rhetorical tactics, the MOF women wrote with awareness of their positioning, chose among multiple essences, and invited others to similarly claim agency. The end goal of the MOF participants' construction of LDS-based essences and the agency that accompanies these constructions was resistance to and critical awareness of other cultural discourses.

“Stand in Your Majesty”: Agency in Constructing an Essence as a Child of God

In this first discussion board thread, the MOF women show agency as they constructed an essence by drawing on a sense of self as God-given. This discussion thread provides an example of Schmetz's efforts to draw on contemporary feminist reinterpretations of “essence” as multiple and as subject to choice. An essence is not “real” or fixed, but is “nominal,” or is created by language through naming. We alter an essence every time we speak it in a new context or rhetorical situation. Fuss similarly

argues that we need to acknowledge that essence is a sign and as such is subject to change and redefinitions (20).

In this discussion thread, the participants found personal and spiritual power as they called up an essence based on their religious belief that they are children of divine beings. As mentioned previously, LDS theology holds that each person is “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents and, as such, has a divine nature and destiny,” a divine nature that includes gender (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Proclamation”). Church members are taught that as spiritual offspring of gods, all people have inherently infinite worth. In fact, LDS doctrine holds that all people also have the potential to progress to godhood themselves in the afterlife. Of course, it’s difficult to maintain this intangible sense of divine worth when others measure worth using economic or physical considerations, as the following post by Heidi demonstrates. Heidi, a cancer-survivor, began this discussion thread with a post that expressed cultural discourses regarding beauty and self-worth, which the other women then interrupted and urged Heidi to interrupt.

The MOF enclave is able to promote an LDS sense of self because the women share a religious background, and MOF members can support each other in drawing on religious subject positions and asserting agency to critique definitions of self-worth that are contrary to definitions of worth in their theology. In this thread, the tactics that the MOF women used for this interruption and support of Heidi’s construction of self were intimate literacy and encomia. Agency for Heidi became a matter of being aware of her positioning in multiple discourses and choosing among multiple essences to name herself in a way that is aligned with her faith in God. This thread shows that one reward of the

intersections among the MOF women's religion and literacy practices is their ability to draw on divine authority, to see themselves as agents, as able to construct a self-concept and act with power over their own actions and attitudes. As an enclave, separate from outside criticism of LDS theology, the MOF board supports this development of agency and personal power.

Heidi: How do you remain happy? Or how do you get happy? I'm in a slump. I have horrid self esteem.

This is going to sound dumb. But at my breast cancer [bulletin board], there are a ton of women that have gone through chemo and various surgeries. They have chemo and I've seriously never seen women more beautiful than the ones on this site. I know that "bald is beautiful" and I know I'm plain. I went through chemo somehow thinking in my mind that I would come out looking beautiful because I saw all these gorgeous women that were bald. But the hair is growing back and I still look like me. I was so disappointed! Still have the wide jiggy butt, flabby old grandma arms, metal mouth with the added pleasure of rubber bands

now 🤔, and my face didn't become beautiful. I get winded easily, I have a fuzzy memory, a space cadet attitude, and can't seem to be able to do the simplest things. I meant it when I read that thread and said I wasn't a catch [a reference to another thread]. I thought more about it and realized that I'm having a rough time because I don't see how I could be a catch to anyone, even myself.

I know I have to get out of this mindset, but it's so dang hard! This month has been a month of bad memories and either trying to acknowledge them or make new ones has been so difficult. I'm just can't seem to find out why I am of worth or if I really am. 🤔

Tisha: I think you need to really focus on loving yourself Heidi, you have done and gone thru similiar things that those women you see as beautiful, you need to see that in yourself and praise it! You ARE beautiful like they are, but you must be willing to open your eyes and acknowledge and accept the happy you see.

Do things that make you feel good. If you feel good when you exercise, then do it. If eating good things, makes you happy then do it. Take care of your body and your spirit and do things for yourself. I went to a women's leadership conference and there was a class on knowing your heart. She had us do this exercise where we stood with a partner and for 60 secs we

had to say what i like about myself is_____. and we had to do it over and over again, when we drew a blank,we had to say "what i like about myself is EVERYTHING". It helped alot of us realize and verbalize how much we had to offer and what we really did have good qualities to say about ourselves instead of the negative, to focus on the positive.

Another thing that helps me be happy is that I truly have a testimony of me as Tisha, a daughter of God. Knowing that and living that gives me great strength and succor when Satan tries to lie to me and tell me how bad, ugly or nothing I am.

My question is this..are you ready to REALLY do it? If you are, get a blessing²⁰ from your dh ["dear husband," an acronym common on many bulletin boards] and begin. Write notes and leave them on mirrors, begin your daily prayer and scripture study with getting happy and loving who you are as Heidi, answers and instructions will come. I KNOW IT. Be prepared, Satan will try his very best to deter and lie to you, but you just Stand in your Majesty (read Helaman 5:12)²¹ and you will not fall.

YOU ARE OF GREAT WORTH AND YOU ALWAYS WILL BE. But nothing I tell you will do any good unless you know for yourself. That knowledge is there for the taking..Take it, Heidi. This is your time to know.

Alaina: Tisha seems too wise for someone younger than me. 😊
Heidi- would a GNO [Girls' Night Out]²² help? I'm free tonight and tomorrow. I'd love to come take you out (somewhere cheap 😊) I go through phases of depression, so I can relate to how you feel. 🌿👩

²⁰ Here Tisha referred to a priesthood blessing, which is defined by the LDS church as “A blessing given by a Melchizedek Priesthood holder, by the laying on of hands and by inspiration, to one who is sick or otherwise in need of special counsel, comfort, or healing. ([James 5:14–15](#))” (lds.org, “Gospel Topics”).

²¹ Tisha cited a scripture from *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, which LDS people believe is “a record of God’s dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas” (*Book of Mormon*).

²² Of the women in this particular thread, Alaina is the only one who lives geographically close to Heidi. Women who live in the same state or area occasionally get together for Girls’ Nights Out (GNOs), which is what Alaina is talking about here. None of the other women who responded to Heidi have met her face-to-face. They “know” her only through interacting on MOF for however long each has been a member.



Amy: and you are so worth it!!!! You amaze me with how you have dealt with all your trials in the past year. And I whole heartedly agree with what Tisha said--she is wise!!

Dawnyel: Slumps are sucky!
That said, I would totally do what Tisha said! These are wise ones! I know that when I find myself feeling icky, if I read either my scriptures or the Ensign²³ (sometimes both) I'm happier.



I can't imagine what you're going thru.

Caroline: Repeat this in your mind 10x in the morning and 10x at night...
"I am beautiful, I am beautiful...."

You're not beautiful unless YOU believe it. BUt you're lucky, because you have the knowledge of the gospel. SO you know that Heavenly Father made you and is proud of you!!!! So take that knowledge and grasp it. It'll be hard at first, but just try it. After a while maybe it will sink in a little. Have faith that you are beautiful. 😊

Stephanie: Oh, Heidi! I am so sorry you feel that way! I haven't been around as long as everyone else, so I haven't been able to go through all of this with you. I want you to know that I have drawn strength from you. I feel so whiney and I look at you and feel so humbled. You know what I see, a woman who is amazingly beautiful inside and out. You have grace, dignity and integrity. You have faced a challenge that would have crumbled me...and many other women. You are entitled to have a bad day, but you need to see in you what the rest of us see in you!

Please, don't beat yourself up! Imagine how bad you would feel if you read how you felt about yourself and it was one of your daughters that had written it. You never want them to feel that way about themselves. Heavenly Father wants you to be proud of who you are!

I know that when you feel so bad about yourself it is hard to see anything differently. Please take a step back tonight and look at yourself the way Heavenly Father would look at you. He would tell you every wonderful thing about yourself. He would say, look, you may have metal in your mouth, but it is temporary. It will help you to have a perfect smile, less cavities and great cheekbones. The fuzzy memory and space cadet...temporary as well. Your body is bearing the scars of war. You aren't the same person on this side of it...you are better!!!

²³ An LDS church magazine.

Then go get a pedicure. I always feel pretty when my toes are pretty.

Heidi: Thanks ladies. Every once in a while, you really need a boost.
Thanks for giving it to me. 🌹 🌹

Kelsee: I wanted to say this yesterday but felt too emotional to write to you. Then I was telling my husband about you and this post today on our way to our service project and I cried telling him what you had said about thinking you would be beautiful after cancer and you aren't. 🤔 I just hurt so much because you aren't seeing what I'm seeing.

See, the thing is, real beauty is NOT about what we look like. It's about how we feel about ourselves, how we act. It's about being happy with ourselves even if we aren't Miss Universe. It's about being good and trying. It's about having purity of spirit.

You are beautiful to me because you are courageous. You are beautiful to me because you are strong. You are beautiful to me because you have held your head high. You are beautiful to me because, in spite of this difficult trial, you still bring such joy and happiness to those around you. . . . You are beautiful to me because you are a daughter of God and my sister and you are of such great worth - you shine with a special light.

Heidi: Now I'm gonna go bawl. 🤔 I'm really not brave at all. If this had happened to anyone here, you would pick up and go on with life because there is no alternative. Contrary to all my whining, most days are pretty decent. lol

Heidi began this thread by projecting herself as a passive subject of others' discourses regarding her worth, which she equated to perceptions of her as "a catch." This cultural discourse of beauty and worth centers on physical characteristics. Heidi ended her initial post by adopting this position of little worth and accepting these standards of measurement for herself: "I don't see how I could be a catch to anyone, even myself."

The participants responded by giving Heidi everyday strategies for interrupting these cultural discourses. Nedra Reynolds writes that developing a theory of agency involves determining rhetorical tactics for not only "finding one's own voice" but also for

responding to or resisting “discourses of the everyday” (59). In this particular thread, the tactics that the participants suggested involve deciding for herself what makes her feel good and acting on them (Tisha) or verbalizing her worth daily for herself (Caroline, Tisha, Stephanie).

Other tactics turned to spiritual sources for interruption, such as scripture, prayer, priesthood blessings, and spiritual perspectives. In turning to religious discourses, the participants constructed an essence based on religious positioning. The essence that Tisha and the others called up in this thread is more essentialist than perhaps Schmertz and Fuss had in mind because it names a self with some fixed and eternal qualities as a daughter of divine beings. Moreover, the participants acted as though that essence is fixed. Nonetheless, they found power in speaking this essence. And, as Schmertz says, rather than focusing on the “who” of a person or an essence, we should focus on the meaning of an essence and on its possibilities and limitations for agency. Schmertz therefore presents the construction of essences as a self-conscious tactic that is similar to Linda Alcoff’s concept of positionality. Alcoff also emphasizes the ability to “take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose what we make of this position” (435). The participants in this thread took up a religious position and chose what they made of the position by applying it to Heidi’s situation.

This essence based on religious positioning gave the participants the power to write as agents in countering the discourses to which Heidi is subscribing. Tisha, Caroline, Stephanie, and Kelsee all named themselves and Heidi as daughters of God. The participants saw this essence as one of power because it gave Heidi a greater authority than those whom she originally established as the measurers of her worth. In the

women's choice of this religious-based essence, God becomes the author of Heidi's worth, and Heidi can act with agency because she becomes critically aware of other harmful cultural discourses regarding beauty and worth and can choose to interrupt them.

Schmertz uses the idea of multiple essences to recast the concept of ethos as "*neither manufactured nor fixed, neither tool nor character, but rather the stopping points at which the subject (re)negotiates her own essence to call upon whatever agency that essence enables*" (86, emphasis in original). Schmertz argues that we construct ethos when we stop and speak for ourselves to name, reorder, or negotiate multiple essences. The participants in this discussion thread demonstrated this ethos by helping Heidi to "(re)negotiate her own essence" (Schmertz 86), which enabled her to find a position from which to critique cultural discourses of beauty. This is also a re-defining of "power" as the ability to separate one's own beliefs about the self from others' beliefs and opinions. Kim Donehower describes this power to fashion a concept of self as one of "literacy's other powers" (103). Donehower argues that power is not only a matter of outwardly changing privilege or status, but is also a matter of changing internally in ways that can affect one's ability to act in public settings as well (93-4).

To construct an essence based on a religious context, the participants used intimate literacy and encomia. In order to identify intimacy in the participants' literacy practices, I turn to Gere's description of the characteristics of nineteenth-century clubwomen's intimate literacy practices. Intimate literacy practices express affection (40); emphasize emotional connections despite differences (42); use language that portrays others as related (47); and share information about actions, beliefs, and emotions that the participants have the right to withhold from anyone (40). In the above thread, the

participants used literacy in all of these ways to persuade Heidi to interrupt cultural discourses. Tisha and Alaina both shared information (about spiritual testimony and personal depression) that they could rightfully withhold; Stephanie and Kelsee emphasized emotional connection and affection; Dawnyel and Amy expressed additional affection through emoticons; and Kelsee referred to Heidi as her sister.

This thread is also an example of the informal encomia, or discourses of praise, that the women often write on MOF. In ancient Greece and Rome, teachers of rhetoric had their students write encomia as part of their typical progymnasmata exercises for achieving copiousness. In this thread, the participants wrote encomia to Heidi to praise her strength and spirit. As they did so, they argued that identity and worth should not be based on the physical body, but on a person's God-given internal characteristics and qualities, which the participants, specifically Tisha, Melissa, and Caroline, tied to their religious beliefs in a spiritual existence that originated with heavenly parents. This praise of Heidi is therefore also an expression and praise of their religious beliefs in a higher being and in every individual's divine origin and potential.

One author of the most frequent appeals to religious essences on the MOF board is Tisha, who describes herself as "a lover and student of life, truth, goodness and learning." Tisha frequently posts to remind women to "stand in your majesty." The following is Tisha's response to Lee when Lee posted a follow-up thread to ask Tisha to "Please explain the standing in your majesty thing. I don't get it":

Tisha: We are children, in our case, daughters of Heavenly Father. We are beloved, good, precious and powerful because of who our Father is. He wants to share EVERYTHING He has with us. We are Him, or have potential to become like Him as we are true to the greatness and goodness we possess. We do that in word, thought and action. When faced with day to day experiences and trials. How do we act? . . . In everything, Christ

never forsook who He was nor who His Father was. He didn't cower from His greatness nor His mission. He stood in His majesty. He was a son of a King. And He acted like it.

To me, standing in your majesty is to be as the Savior was as He navigated His way on this earth. It is serarchign after, remembering, LIVING and retaining the testimony of who we really are and doing our best to not shrink from it. In a youth conference a long time ago, someone said ." Be loyal to the royal that IS within you, for you are a child of THE King." That struck me and that knowledge and testimony of my own divinity and goodness as a daughter of God has been a tremendous tool to me as I have faced my challenges and everyday rigors and adventures of life. [I love this] quote by Marianne Williamson

"You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world. . . .

We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone." . . .

But how many of this really know it? When you know it and live it, you are standing in your majesty. It is truth, not just a good thought or silly Pollyanna fluff. And more than anything, Satan wants us to forget it, because he did and look at what a miserable creature he is. We are great and we can never forget to live our lives in such a manner and it has nothing to do with perfection. I can sit here and think of all the times just today I could have done better, but when I do my best-and my best varies from hour to hour. I feel brilliant, good and powerful. I feel lovely, strong and majestic and this is what my life-no matter the challenges-was intended for.

I am that I might have joy, that I might return to my Father in Heaven and know who I am. And make sure others know the same about themselves.

SO there you go. 😊

Tisha's discourse of praise, which she combined with intimate literacy, was directed at herself and at the discussion participants: "We are great . . . We are beloved, good, precious and powerful. . . . I feel brilliant, good and powerful. I feel lovely, strong and majestic." Her praise was also directed toward "Christ [who] never forsook who He was nor who His Father was. He didn't cower from His greatness nor His mission. He stood in His majesty. He was a son of a King. And He acted like it." Tisha's post and her

interview excerpt below was also a construction of an essence as a spiritual, powerful, and royal being and was an argument about how the participants should act as agents given that essence.

My phenomenological interview with Tisha also emphasized to me that Tisha regularly takes up a position with self-conscious awareness of her ability to choose what she makes of that position (Alcoff). Tisha often chooses to make that position a critique of harmful gender relationships:

Catherine: Have any particular discussion threads have stood out to you or have any made a difference in your life?

Tisha: The threads that stand out to me the most are the threads where we discount ourselves. I hate those. Because I feel like that's exactly what Satan wants us to be doing.

Catherine: and by discounting ourselves, you mean . . .

Tisha: We don't talk about, that we are powerful people. Because we really are. . . . So the threads that hit me are those that say, "Okay, don't forget how strong you are. Don't forget what you're here for." We don't know exactly what we're here for or exactly what our missions are, but all I know is that in each passage of my life, I'm supposed to be living like Tisha, a daughter of God, who was sent here to do something. And as long as I am honoring my spirit and being true in it, like the whole "standing in your majesty" thing that I like to say. So the [threads] that hit me are the ones that well, maybe their husbands aren't being, aren't valuing that majesty in their wives or aren't honoring their wives at all. I mean, there's the normal marriage stuff and then there's the stuff where women are really kind of beaten down, and we shouldn't feel that way. We shouldn't live that way. We're not supposed to live that way.

In this interview Tisha talked about power as personal and spiritual and as originating from a connection with a higher power and from the ability to see herself as an agent in her life, as someone who has power over her own actions and attitudes. When I asked her about this thread in a discourse analysis interview, Tisha said her purpose in posting was

To encourage [Heidi] to do things that would nurture a love for herself and develop that powerful self-knowledge of her divinity. To share with her the things that have helped me. To help her see a different perspective. I don't like it when we as women tell one another to go drown our depressing self-thoughts in sugar, treats, and practices that only contribute to crankiness, lack of motivation, and only make us feel worse—not to mention distract us from the happiness that is inherently ours to experience.

Here Tisha again described this self-knowledge and the construction of this essence as “powerful,” a view shared by other MOF members, as can be seen in the following interview excerpts:

- Kelsee: “I feel that through my writing, I’ve come to better understand my self. It’s kind of helped me cement who I am in my mind and use that in my life every day. It’s helped me feel like I have an important place in the world.”
- Marinda: “I don’t think I would be who I am today without [writing on MOF], to be honest with you. Because I think it’s made me more aware of who I am. . . . It makes you more confident in who you are.”

Marinda, Kelsee, and Tisha all talked about the personal and spiritual power of actively constructing essences. Leming says that this “insistence on active ownership” of religious identity and claiming of it as meaningful and personal constitutes religious agency and a true practicing of one’s religion (74). In this sense of power, Tisha and other MOF women are similar to the Mountain City women in Beth Daniell’s research who use reading, writing, and spirituality to “name and claim one’s life” (253). Daniell says, “When scholars in rhetoric and composition discuss writing and power, they most often mean economic or political power first, intellectual or social power second—power over others. Perhaps it is time for us to see all the multifaceted ways actual human beings use literacy to compose power in their daily lives” (76).

As Tisha and the other MOF participants write on this discussion board, they compose themselves as powerful in their ability to construct an essence that positions

them in accordance with their religion. An alternate reading might argue that the women perceive that they are acting in their self-interest, but really their subject positions serve the patriarchal society so they are still acting within hegemony. A definition of religious agency, though, recognizes that religious people act with agency even within their patriarchal power structures by actively claiming their religious identity. The act of naming and constituting their own identity is a source of spiritual and personal power for the MOF participants first because they connect themselves to a larger power and second because the act of naming is also an act of resistance and of claiming personal power to speak for oneself and to determine one's own value. Doing so does undermine the power of other discourses over them. An increased sense of spiritual and personal power both give them greater authority, one because of a divine connection, the other because they are rejecting others' judgments of which subject positions have value. The act of naming is the act of separating one's identity from another's beliefs about that identity.

The enclaved nature of the MOF discussion board and the fact that the participants are likeminded in many of their religious beliefs regarding gender and the nature of the self allows them to use encomia, intimate literacy, and similar rhetoric tactics for constructing a religious essence and drawing on the agency it enables.

“Have the Guts to Embrace Your Motherly Body”: Using Religious Beliefs to Author a New “Normal” and to Interrupt Other Discourses

Whereas Heidi and Tisha's exchanges emphasize agency based on appeals to an essence as a child of God, the MOF women also write to construct with awareness an essence as an LDS mother that is based on the LDS gender doctrine that “mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints, “Proclamation”). This doctrine originates with the Adam and Eve story when in Genesis, Adam is instructed regarding work in the fields (*The King James Bible*, Gen. 3:17-18), Eve is instructed regarding work with her family (3:16), and both are told to have children (1:28). Because LDS doctrine holds that family relationships can continue after death, this responsibility to nurture children, which is stated as belonging primarily to a mother, is viewed as influential and important.

In the discussion board thread in this section, Deanna wrote with agency in a move similar to Tisha in that she constructed an essence that defines beauty and worth according to her religious beliefs, but not in her value as a child of God, rather in her value as a mother, which she also believes is divinely mandated. The fact that MOF functions as an enclave is again crucial to the MOF women’s development of agency here because it was due to the private space, their like-minded audience, and their ability to use intimate literacy that they were able to construct this essence and use it for agency against other cultural discourses of beauty.

Deanna began this thread, called “The Shape of a Mother,” by discussing a web site in which women share body images because “a post-pregnancy body is one of society’s greatest secrets” and so that “we can finally see what women really look like sans airbrushes and plastic surgery” (<http://theshapeofamother.com>). “After seeing this site,” Deanna wrote, “I thought it was pretty interesting what people are hiding under their clothing. Awhile ago some of you commented on my . . . photos wondering if I had stretch marks. I don’t have the guts to post them on the free internet but thought I could do it here. So if you have the guts to embrace your motherly body, post the pictures

here.”²⁴ Deanna invited the MOF participants to post a collective visual narrative that celebrated their choices to have children and that countered society’s own visual narratives regarding normalcy and women’s bodies. The participants’ constructions of an essence based on their religious beliefs encouraged them to similarly interpret their shared experiences of pregnancy. Twenty-two participants posted pictures, and thirty-six talked about their bodies and the value of their bodies in the 109 posts on this thread.

Amy: My belly button tore when I was delivering C²⁵ and it never healed. When I had my tubes tied after S [her daughter] the dr created me a new belly button when he went in laproscopically. but I've come to appreciate me and all my saggy tummy full of stretch marks. My visiting teacher [a woman from the Relief Society] told me that she sees it has her badge of motherhood. And that sounded so cool to me.

Lisa: Let’s just say that I’m so happy my worthiness isn’t measured by how pretty my stomach is. It’s thrashed. A total road map everywhere. I swear the celebrities get them all airbrushed out. Is it really possible for not ONE celebrity to get a stretch mark?? PUH-LEASE!

Vina: wow MY pics are HUGE....looks like my belly button could eat ya!!

LOOK OUT LADIES!!! ROFL! See we are TOTALLY BRAVE!! that belly was made by beautiful babies....so don't be ashamed! That's the whole point of [The Shape of a Mother]...of course we want to look skinny and perfect but ya know, I don't and I am ok with it for the most part, b/c if ME having a flat belly means trading in my kids.... Everyone should bet a big ol standing ovation! Those bellies were worth it!! 🙌👏

Jenn: Ok, here you go! 😊 Honestly, I'm really grateful for this thread. I didn't realize how many women have tummies like mine. You guys all made me feel better about myself knowing others have the same issues. I HATE HATE HATE my stomach. I can handle my tiny boobies, but my gooshy tummy just grosses me out. None of my sisters have stomachs as bad as mine, so I figured I was the freak of nature (especially since I don't compare tummies with my irl [in-real-life] friends either!). I've been

²⁴ I included the participants’ text, but not the images that they posted because of IRB and consent issues.

²⁵ I used initials for the names of the participants’ children for privacy purposes.

working my butt of loosing my baby weight, but I finally told dh that I think my stomach will be around forever! It is truly my badge of motherhood! 🙄

Heather: It's nice for me to see as well. That's a good point Jenn...we see all these nice [stomachs] and think we're the only ones....it's just that eveyrone else we DON"T see looks like us!

Tisha: This thread has been really good for me. I thought I was the only one with my mommy belly. To have a body that is similiar to women that I know, respect, think a great deal of and love makes me more proud of mine.



Amy: 🙌👍 Thanks for starting this thread. And thanks for posting. I feel so much better to know I have a "nomal mom stomach" to see so many of you brave enough to share---just really made me feel better to know I'm not the only one. And I think I'm odd b/c I'd never show [people] IRL my stomach but I'll post it on a message board for 100+ MOFs to see simultaneously?? Just funny to me. I don't think we'd ever think to do this for Enrichment night, do you?

Leilani: ok here I am ... dh doesn't understand the mentality behind this, but I do. So here are my glorious stretch marks from 5 different pregnancies, up to 65 lb. gains, and weeks spent idle on bedrest! really Ive come so far... after my first pregnancy i was so ashamed of my body. now i embrace it, because it tells a great story about a woman who sacrificed herself for 4 little miracles. literally.

This entire thread exemplifies intimate literacy as a tactic for interruption because the participants shared information—pictures of their stomachs—that they did not have to share with anyone. They also expressed affection and showed emotional connectedness in complimenting each other about being collectively “brave” and “not ashamed.” This thread gave the participants who shared images and those who read the images feelings of personal power to accept their bodies and to assign a different narrative to their bodies. Megan brought this thread up when I interviewed her three months after Deanna had posted “The Shape of a Mother.”

Catherine: Can you think of any discussion threads in particular that have stood out to you or influenced your thinking?

Megan: Well, the tummy picture thread. Yeah, I can't tell you what courage it took to have those people. I actually did post my picture. I just am so happy they did that. It just made me feel so much better . . . made me be more lenient on myself. . . . I read [threads like] that and think "Oh! I'm normal. Phew!" People . . . around here are high maintenance and are beautiful, and I want to be beautiful, but the people on MOF are like . . . "I don't have to be like that," so it's been very valuable for me.

As Megan said, for many of the participants, this thread was about feeling "normal" by interrupting harmful discourses furthered by magazine images or by other people and replacing these with a discourse of acceptance of their bodies. The participants tied their collective visual narrative and their interruption of media portrayals of women's bodies directly to an ethos through which they claim divine and eternal value. This ethos and its accompanying essence enabled them to act with agency in authoring a new "normal" and, as Deanna said, the story of their "motherly bod[ies]."

The MOF members' writing shows that agency can be a claiming with awareness subject positions related to divine power, regardless of the fact that those subject positions work within a patriarchal religious institution. The MOF members' writing also shows that they do find personal power, even within that religious institution—not power over others in relation to politics or economics, but a personal power over self and a spiritual power that comes with claiming and enacting essences connected to divine authority.

"I Don't Want Another Woman to Speak for Me": Stating and Reconstituting an LDS Essence to Respond to Others

Some MOF members take this agency over their own self-concept and use it to inform their criticism of specific cultural discourses that devalue the gender roles that

they believe are divinely appointed. These criticisms are additional rhetorical tactics toward agency because they show awareness of choice and the desire to speak to and for others in the enclave. The following discussion board thread was started by Les, who describes herself as “a happy, deliberate, educated mom of 3 boys who moonlights as an artist and loves keeping up her professional skills in child development.” Les began the thread because she believes that her position supporting the value of the role of a stay-at-home mother, has been silenced in society and the media. In this “stopping point” of ethos (Schmertz 86), Les spoke her essence as “a smart woman” with “my own voice.” The essence Les called up is influenced by the LDS gender doctrine that states the value of nurturing, primarily for women. This essence enabled her to respond to her perception that the value of her role as a care-giver is being silenced. In this thread, Les asserted agency by interrupting specific media discourses that counter her position, by demonstrating that she has chosen with awareness the subject position of stay-at-home mother, and by inviting other women to do the same. Les posted her response to these discourses on the MOF board and on her blog and titled it “My Voice”:

Time for another one of my soapbox posts about women...I am grateful to the feminist movement for paving the way to greater opportunity in work and education. I loved growing up in a post- feminist revolution world, and with parents who provided the perfect scaffolding of security, ability, and confidence. I knew with out a doubt I could be or do anything I wanted. Endowed with power, by always moderated by my own choice. As I selected a profession it was moderated by my life goals (Yes I chose not to pursue certain professions or programs because I couldn't fit them with motherhood in a way that was acceptable to me) As we teach our children every choice has a consequence, and it is a truth of life that you can't have everything- so pick what is most important. This is a choice for men to-- my husband chooses not to have a job that requires heavy travel, long hours, or intense stress- yes he asks his boss for time to volunteer at preschool, yes, he sacrifices career for family for quality of life- is he walking out on manhood? Should he refuse to allow his paid work to be shorted for relationships...

There has been so much talk lately, of this of "us" the "opt out generation". The women who are "turning their backs" on the opportunities now available to them to stay at home. I listened to such an interesting discussion on NPR- polling young women in elite colleges- expressing their likelihood of staying home in the future, many feminists troubled by the numbers. Thinking our society must be sending the message you can't do it all- the clocks must be rolling back. Why is it "Choice feminism" is not accepted. How is choosing to care for others not a choice? I am deeply troubled by the way caregiving is undervalued in our societies. This extends to caretaking professions as well-- the pay and respect meted out to a teacher is far less than that of a lawyer, business executive. Linda Hirshman contends the only way to flourish as a human being is through paid work.

To her I suggest the only way to flourish as a human being is unpaid work. The work that is the great equalizer of men and women across cultures, across all history and time. The work of care. I feel far greater satisfaction at night when I help someone far more than when I get a paycheck. I am not Godless or a slave to the god of self glory-- development of my own personal morality is far more rewarding than another plaque on my wall--

So my social statement is this- I am a woman, a smart woman, I don't want another woman to speak for me. I have a voice, my own voice. The press may not quote me, like Linda Hirschman, so my voice may not be as loud- many whispers can create a great sound--I am one woman just as she is, of equal importance, with a voice as unrelenting, as strong and as valid- Don't pity me, don't trouble yourself that society has done me wrong, don't fear I may never escape this domestic drudgery and become enlightened-- This life, as a mother, as a mother who stays home, is my choice. I walked away from a tenure track college teaching job because I wanted to. I wanted to experience motherhood without distraction. Homemaking is not drudgery, paid work is not bliss. I am still the same girl who grew up knowing she could do anything she wanted--And guess what- world is still on a silver platter before her and she is still choosing all the greatest delicacies of life to enjoy.

In this post, Les fits bell hooks's definition of an agent as one who "speaks as an equal to an authority figure" and "dares to disagree" (5). Les did more than simply express her perspective. She set out to "make a social statement" and to purposefully interrupt a discourse that she describes as furthered by "many feminists," Linda Hirschman, the press, and a society that she believes doesn't value caregiving. In this

interruption, she did not specifically cite religious doctrine, but she did draw on LDS church beliefs in the value of nurturing, caregiving, homemaking, and parenting, as outlined in the following official church statement: “By divine design, fathers . . . are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Proclamation”). Like Tisha in the previous example, she used encomia to praise these choices related to her religious beliefs and to claim the subject position of “a mother who stays home.” Les’s post shows her awareness of her choices and was an act of religious agency. Les used strategies similar to those described by Leming in her study of Catholic women. Like the Catholic women, Les told her story in order to follow what she considers her call and to show her desire to speak, she used confrontational talk, and she located herself within the larger story (Leming 82-83).

In a discourse analysis interview, Les said the following in response to my asking her what she remembers about this post:

Les: It was my very strong reaction against the kind of very pro-working argument that I had read in a few different magazines that all had articles at the same time that were glorifying the CEO mom, and I thought, I’m sorry, but I really don’t think you can do both with young children. You cannot be a CEO of a company and a great mom. You can’t be present in both worlds. Plus, those arguments that you shouldn’t give up your income assumes a standard of living that I think is excessive. Yeah, if I took a break to have kids, I might not make \$400,000 a year, but I’ll make enough. I wanted to refute the arguments and say, how do you think you can balance everything? You’re saying there’s a trade-off of money in the end, but I’d argue there’s a trade-off of everything else. It was just a reaction to feeling like, if you say you’re a feminist, it means you have to work. If you opt out, you opt out of being a strong woman or being an intelligent woman, and somehow being a mother doesn’t use your skills or talents. That that choice is not considered a valid choice anymore if you want to have respect. And it’s funny because as an LDS woman, I feel like

I have the most of a lot of my peers of both worlds. I still have opportunities to use my education. I think a lot more women could do things like that. I still get to use my passions and talents and skills. Why can't that be a valid choice? Because I was just feeling like, sometimes there's not enough women who speak up from our side of the table. I feel no one ever says, I'm doing this because I choose to. I'm not doing this because I'm too stupid to have a job. I'm doing this because I want to be home with my children because I think there's greater power in that than what I would achieve in the workforce or because it's worth more to me than a paycheck.

Catherine: And by greater power, what do you mean?

Les: Like your ultimate influence. . . To me, the power of changing a person is more important than a product. . . . I guess too, it was my backlash against girls I know in LDS culture who think, "I don't need to get an education. I'm just going to be a mom." If you want to be really powerful, get all of the skills and education that you can. Then you make more difference in your family, you make more difference in the world. You have opportunities. You're not passively taking life in, you're active agents. And maybe that's it too. I wanted to portray women who choose to stay home as more active agents than passive. And I wanted to show by example, you need to speak up for your choice. Defend it, make it. I felt kind of like a ring leader, trying to increase people's desire to talk about it. I'd really like to see women get strong in their talking about it. But the way it was set up wasn't really to gain a lot of response from other women. It was more written as a statement than a "tell me how you feel about this issue."

This discourse analysis interview shows that Les was not just speaking an essence as an LDS mother, but, like Nicole, Melanie, and others in Chapter 3, she was also renegotiating it to change it from those essences called up by other "girls I know in LDS culture who think, 'I don't need to get an education. I'm just going to be a mom.'" As Fuss argues, essence is subject to change and redefinition. With this discussion board post, Les both reiterated and reconstituted an essence of an LDS mother. She claimed a religious essence as an LDS mother, but also changed that essence to emphasize her own different experiences.

As Les simultaneously claimed a religious essence and recreated it, she found power to interrupt other discourses. She spoke back as a self-proclaimed “ring leader” both to other cultural discourses about the value of staying at home with children and to others within this LDS community. As that “ring leader,” Les used pronouns, questions, and metaphors in her rhetoric to invite others to join her in interrupting these discourses and in actively claiming and stating their choices. Most of her text was written using the personal “I,” but Les indirectly called to her audience of LDS women by switching to the collective pronoun “we” in “as we teach our children.” She narrowed and attempted to unite her audience even further by using “us” and by presenting the collective pronoun in the context of being labeled by others. Les tried to further inspire her readers to join her interruption by ending her statement with two metaphors, the first of which (“many whispers create a great sound”) hints that collectively, the women can be heard as they each write their own whispers. The last metaphor, that of the silver platter and the idea that she is “still choosing all the greatest delicacies of life to enjoy,” was an attempt to inspire her readers to adopt a common perspective on their choices to stay at home with their children. These metaphors and her comments in the discourse analysis interview show that Les wrote with awareness of the MOF board as an enclave of relatively like-minded women in regards to religious beliefs. Her goal of influencing other MOF women to act by writing with their own “whispers” to “create a great sound” is a goal that is well-suited to an enclave and its support of expressions and actions of solidarity around an alternative concept of the self (Mansfield 57-8). Les’s rhetoric shows that she wrote with agency because, as Herrington and Curtis say, she had a “sense of both speaking for and speaking to others” whose thinking she might affect (17). In Les’s case,

the online enclave (and her blog) provided her with the opportunity to interrupt cultural discourses and act as an agent in controlling the terms of her representation in a way that she might not otherwise have as a stay-at-home mother.

Les's intervention was personally empowering for her, as she described above, and for those who responded to her post. One responder told Les that she "helped something really *click* for me this morning." Others said that because of her post, they blogged about this subject in order to add their own "whisper." One MOF participant called another woman who was taking a break from MOF and told her that she needed to come back to read Les's post.

When I asked Les if she saw her post as relating to her religious beliefs, she said,

Yes, I do because I believe that my view of the role of women is related to my religious beliefs because we have revelation, we have current talks, we have what we believe to be prophetic counsel in regard to the role of women and families. So I take it from that, but that's also where I've seen it in action. My understanding of strong and powerful women have come from women of my faith. In that sense, it supports my position. That's the ultimate evidence if you ask me: the women I think are the most influential in my life or the women who I see doing the greatest things, they are women of my faith, so therefore, I see it as connected. . . . But it would have been interesting for me to hear more women really forcibly articulate their beliefs and positions because I don't think it is the same among all LDS women. I think a lot of LDS women still feel a lot of ambivalence about how they feel it all fits together in theory versus practice, different situations, divorce, just different family situations that require working. So I think a lot of people aren't all in the same place that some would expect, so I would have enjoyed hearing other women's perspectives.

In this comment, Les stated that although her view and "the role of women," or the essences she called up in relation to gender, are closely connected to her religious beliefs, she also realizes that "I don't think it is the same among all LDS women." Les's statement shows her understanding of the existence and negotiation of multiple essences

within LDS culture and her acknowledgment that as the MOF participants write on the discussion board, they do not only speak essences, but they recreate them for themselves.

This example, then, shows how Les used her online writing to praise and claim her religious beliefs and to base her naming of herself on those beliefs in a way that “acknowledges the essences that naming creates” (Schmertz 88). More than that, though, it shows that Les used the online space to act in accordance with this essence to criticize discourses that she saw as challenging her self-concept, with the hope that others would do the same. Although Les’s critical literacy in this discussion board post was directed at transforming media discourses rather than the power structures of her religion, she did exhibit “an understanding of the relationships between language and power together with a practical knowledge of how to use language for self-realization, [and] social critique” (Knoblauch and Brannon 152).

Concluding Thoughts

In an online dialogue among the contributors to *Feminist Cyberscapes: Mapping Gendered Academic Spaces*, Blair and Takayoshi ask if connecting online in women-only places presumes empowerment for the women. They conclude that although “finding other people in the same circumstances can be empowering,” (417), because of the possibility of being silenced by ongoing conversations (416) or by being drained through excessive discussions (426), connectivity doesn’t lead to empowerment, but is instead “a potential for voice” (407).

The discussion threads in this chapter show that the MOF participants can and do find spiritual and personal power by what they do with their connectivity. Through their faith-based writing in the online enclave, they develop agency through “a pragmatics of

naming” (Schmertz) in that they conscientiously identify themselves according to religious-based essences with awareness of the agency that a particular essence and position enables.

The participants construct these essences in order to temporarily position themselves to resist other cultural discourses of beauty and worth. They do so in a manner similar to the ways in which Jacqueline Rhodes describes in her article, “Substantive and Feminist Girlie Action: Women Online,” in which she discusses radical feminist textuality in the late 1960s and on the Internet today. Rhodes says that web technology makes available collaborative and sometimes anonymous collective work, which, because of the form of online text, is temporary (129). Rhodes also describes the creators of the radical online sites as engaging in a “rhetoric of collective identification,” which is a matter of negotiating identification, belonging, and community (138). Cyberspace forms like discussion groups allow “moments of public identity” to develop (Rhodes 129). I see the MOF participants engaging in moments of collective identification as they construct temporary essences and ethos as LDS women. Rhodes also argues that the result of the rhetoric of collective identification and web technology is “a temporary stability of identification, a fictive coherence that serves as a point from which to work for change” (128-29). The changes that the MOF women in this chapter wished to work toward were not within their religion, but outside their religion. And the religious essences that they constructed provided a “temporary stability of identification” through which they criticized larger cultural discourses.

These discussion threads show, then, that essentialism for the MOF women is not necessarily oppressive or unthinking but provides them with a means to agency through

critical awareness of other discourses and with subject positions from which to critique those discourses. As Fuss argues, we should assess individual cases of essentialism by looking at the complexity of the subject's positioning within a particular social field and at "the shifting and determinative discursive relations" which produced the essentialism because "the radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends, to a significant degree, on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated" (2, emphasis in original). Using Fuss's measurement, I argue that the discussion threads in this chapter that call up essences and essentialism are both radical and conservative. They are conservative in that they remain within an essentialist religious structure, but they are radical because of the women's positioning and because of the women's use of the threads. The authors of the essences have been positioned as lesser because of their physical characteristics or because of their choice to stay at home with their children by the cultural discourses that they interrupt. They also have been positioned within LDS gender doctrine as those whose primary responsibilities occur within the private domain of home and family and therefore as those without many opportunities for a public voice. The MOF participants in this chapter are therefore motivated to use essentialism in order to speak out with awareness. They invoke particular religious essences as daughters of God and as mothers to claim spiritual and personal power.

Viewing the MOF participants as both essentialist/conservative and postmodern/radical is difficult because, as Rhodes says, we tend to resist contradictory positions: "We wish to collapse that space or negate it, privilege the 'resistant' site at the expense of the 'dominant' one—all in the interests of an emancipatory textual action to come later" (138). But if we negate the MOF participants' use of essentialism here

because of a hope for emancipatory action against a patriarchal religion, we fail to see that, not only are the MOF participants choosing to use essentialism as a strategy for responding to others, but that their motivations behind and the results of their essentialism is agency.

For the MOF participants, essentialism can be powerful, even though the agency the women achieve does not change the material circumstances of their lives. As Donna LeCourt argues, women's participation in online discussion groups does not guarantee that the power relationships they experience will change or that in speaking their experience, they will automatically challenge masculine discourses that construct power hierarchies (156). Regardless, the essences that the women construct do give the MOF women personal power in articulating a self-concept, in seeing themselves as agents, in claiming self-worth and self-knowledge, in finding a peace and love for self, and in countering cultural discourses that they perceive as harmful. The essences that they construct also give them a sense of spiritual power as they engage in a pragmatics of naming that connects them to their religious discourses and to a higher authority. Supported by their LDS enclave, the MOF participants use online literacy to transform certain aspects of their lives—not their economic or political situations—but their perception of their selves, their value, and their ability to resist through writing others' definitions and perceptions of them. The MOF participants use the positions that they find themselves in (use them, not transcend them) within the LDS church, within the discursive context of the MOF board, and within the discourses that they interrupt to construct meaning (Alcoff 434), including the subjective meaning of being a woman, through a pragmatics of naming that gives them power over other discourses.

This chapter also shows how important it is that rhetoric and composition instructors not dismiss religious declarations and talk as “a sign of dull conformity” (Rand 363) but, as Lizabeth Rand argues, recognize that religious literacy may “involve a complex interrogation of the self; it can in fact be thought-provoking” (363). Similarly, perhaps Chris Anderson was hasty in characterizing students’ use of faith-based literacy as superficial assumptions of personal authority. The MOF participants show us that assuming personal and religious authority in writing can be a matter of personal and spiritual importance as well as a means of agency and empowerment to critique competing discourses.

Whereas this chapter shows the MOF participants engaging in a rhetoric of collective identification regarding religious discourses, the next chapter turns to discussion threads in which the MOF participants discussed their differences in regards to living their religion. So far in this dissertation, the examples and discussions of the MOF participants’ agency have been primarily collective: MOF participants either collectively resisted other cultural discourses of gender, as in Chapter 4, or they collectively re-interpreted their multiple essences and positioning within their religious beliefs, as in Chapter 3. The next chapter provides examples of MOF participants who individually wrote with agency.

CHAPTER 5

WRITING DIFFERENCE USING NARRATIVE AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND OPEN PERSPECTIVES

Even as the MOF participants share a private enclave, they write with agency in claiming individual political and religious positions as Latter-day Saints within a larger public sphere and in interrupting and deliberating with other MOF participants in order to convince others either to accept their way of being LDS or to understand their political or religious position itself. The context of the MOF discussion board is again important in that the participants' agency results from the MOF board's simultaneous operation as a private enclave for its participants and as an LDS public in microcosm. Although MOF is not a public space in the sense that anyone willing and able can participate, the participants often create a public²⁶ LDS community through the style and content of their discourse. Within this simultaneous LDS public and private enclave, MOF participants express and deliberate their different positions as Latter-day Saint citizens. In their deliberations, public and private again operate simultaneously on a different level: the public of politics is also the private of individual participants' positions as Latter-day Saints. The coming together of public and private also allows MOF participants to combine intimate literacy with public deliberation, the success of which influences their ability to develop open perspectives towards difference.

²⁶ As Nancy Fraser argues, there are multiple publics (9), and as Joseph Harris argues, it might be better to use "public" as an adjective rather than a noun: we can write in ways that are "more public" than others (7).

“We Are All Not Cookie Cutter”: Feminist Interventions through Narrative

The MOF participants rely on the simultaneous operation of public and private on MOF to construct a public voice that reflects LDS teachings as well as their individual senses of difference. Although they share a faith, individual MOF participants’ different ethoi as Latter-day Saints are ever-shifting as each renegotiates her own multiple essences (Schmertz 86). The participants show agency in expressing their individual LDS ethos in order to persuade others that their differences are acceptable. One rhetorical strategy that they use for this expression and persuasion is personal narratives.

In this discussion thread, Emily narrated a personal experience in order to express her individual ethos as a Latter-day Saint, to intervene in other MOF participants’ false perceptions of their audience as those who are like-minded and unified in all aspects, and to argue that her ethos and position as an LDS citizen in a larger sphere is acceptable to the LDS community.

This particular thread concerns the LDS church’s official statements against gay marriage. Although the contemporary LDS church never supports particular political candidates or parties, it does rarely issue official statements to support or denounce political matters. One important occurrence of this is the church’s 1995 statement titled “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” from which I have quoted previously. This proclamation declares the church’s beliefs about the divinity of men and women, of marriage between men and women, and of the importance of family as an organization: “We, the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, solemnly proclaim that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal

destiny of His children. . . . The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan” (“Proclamation”).

In this discussion thread, titled “Just a Thought,” Emily, who describes herself as “a mother of two, a director in a direct sales business, and a left-leaning Mormon,” used narrative to describe to the MOF board her struggles with the church’s official stance against gay marriage and to report about her personal attempt to interrupt this discourse by meeting with her bishop, who is the male leader of her local congregation. As a rhetorical strategy, Emily’s narrative allowed her to intervene in a manner not perceived as a direct argument but in a manner that opened up the MOF board for acceptance of her ethos and position:

Totally honestly--I have been having some major testimony issues lately. I was struggling a lot and then over the past few weeks with all the conversation on the board about what is right and what is wrong and the black and white and grey issues I REALLY started struggling. To the point of not wanting to go to church, like ever again. I had a heart to heart with dh and told him that I was done, that I believed certain ways about things and I didn't feel like it was in accordance to what everyone around me was saying and I just didn't feel like I could keep pretending like it wasn't an issue anymore. . . .

So I went to [my bishop] today. I told him I was having testimony issues. I told him that I leaned to the left politically and I felt like some of the things that I believed aren't in accordance to what the church teaches. He asked me about what I thought. I told him that one thing I believe is that gay people should have the same rights as everyone else I told him that I felt so strongly about it that I didn't want to come to church anymore because I felt like it wasn't in line with the gospel and I didn't feel like I belonged. He laughed a little and told me that what I believed was fine. That I can believe that and still be an upstanding member of the church. That I can hold callings, have a temple recommend, and be a leader and still believe what I believed. . . . That what I should focus on is my testimony of the Savior because THAT is why we are here.

Emily initially went to her bishop in an attempt to negotiate how her political beliefs could merge with her religious ethos and to receive validation of her self-

positioning as both a Latter-day Saint and a member of a larger public, political sphere. As Vina said in her response below, Emily wanted to find peace and to see how “to blend [her political position] into a Mormon life.” In this post, Emily called up a public on the MOF enclave in that she criticized and discussed previously unquestioned issues. Discussing issues that are not accepted by a group moves away from the like-mindedness associated with enclaves and communities and towards a public. In like-minded communities whose sole purpose is giving others support, participants rarely need to “offer criticizable validity claims,” explain their own assumptions, or “engage in ideal role-taking” because their purpose leads them to focus on their homogeneity (Dalhlberg). James Bohman argues that one of the contributing factors to establishing a “public” is the type of reasons that citizens give in a public. Reasons must move beyond the “preexisting agreements” and shared values of a collective of people (8, 25-27). Matthew Barton similarly claims that discussions in public environments require participants to “determine their own meaning for cultural commodities,” rather than relying on group norms. In this post, Emily moved beyond shared religious beliefs or LDS group norms which in turn created a type of public within the MOF discussion board.

Emily’s post led to a 42-post thread in which 11 other women expressed agreement with Emily and others expressed support for Emily’s difference and particularly for her courage in taking action to express her own beliefs and question the church’s discourse. Many thanked Emily for “sharing,” even if they did not agree with her position. Here’s an excerpt of the posts on the thread:

Andrea: I'm so glad!! Don't worry about leaning to the left....i'll be right there with you! 😊

Carrie: I struggle too. And FTR [for the record], I hate it when LDS people discuss political-related issues in church as if we're all Republican. As if religion always translates to politics the same way for everyone. I'm glad you had a good talk.

Shelah: Emily, I'm so glad you had the guts to talk to your bishop and I'm even gladder that the talk was good. And you are so not alone, girlfriend

Lee: I always love reading your views.. it is enlightening. Emily I am glad you can come here and talk to us. We are all so different and it is great to embrace our uniqueness and how boring if we were all the same. You are wonderful the way you are. 🍷

Dawn: There is plenty of room in the church for people of all political backgrounds -- it just doesn't always feel that way because there are so many right-leaners. I'm so glad you feel better about things!

Vina: I'm so glad he reacted in a good way and counseled you correctly!! He sounds like an awesome bishop! I'm also happy that you found some peace with your beliefs and how to blend them into a Mormon life.

Emily: Thanks for all your comments guys. I wasn't going to talk about this here at all and then I decided that I should because it might help someone else. I think it's important for all of us to remember that we are all not cookie cutter. Thanks so much for being such a support to me.

Emily reported this experience on MOF for two reasons: first, to provide a “feminist intervention” on MOF, to use Mary E. Hock’s term, and second, to reaffirm the positions and identities of others who might also be struggling to recognize the multiple ways that they might LDS in a larger public sphere.

Mary E. Hock explains that feminist interventions are temporary “communicative acts that bring attention to the shifting power relations within a specific discursive context” (107). According to Hocks, feminist interventions are deliberately political and are important for changing audience perceptions and contexts for communication (112).

In one example Hocks gives from her own research,²⁷ she states that because of the feminist intervention, the participants could see how narrowly they perceived their audience—they were assuming that their audience, or their ideal reader, was a reflection of their own selves (114).

Feminist interventions by Emily and other participants establish an LDS public on MOF and change the perception of audience on the discussion board. Feminist interventions emphasize differences rather than unity and like-mindedness and help participants see themselves as part of a diverse LDS public rather than only as a community. This is important for working against the tendency of communities to suppress discussion and differences in favor of consensus, as discussed by critics of the concept of community (McDowell; Harris; hooks; Rhodes). In phenomenological interviews with MOF participants, I asked each woman if she had ever felt any pressure from others or from their membership on the board about how she should act or who she should be. All of the women denied feeling any such community pressure, but in discourse analysis interviews, two mentioned particular instances where they or others

²⁷ Hocks concludes that feminist interventions create a forum for voices and topics and “provide important opportunities to overtake the discursive power, to form alliance, and to lead a community to action” (117). However, I’m not convinced of the latter, both in the case of the MOF women and in the examples Hocks gives in her article. In Hocks’s examples the interventions didn’t seem to have any lasting impact—they didn’t create a forum, nor does Hocks show how they resulted in a community acting. I also found it interesting that after two interventions on the Technoculture list, which Hocks discusses, a group of women left and formed their own discussion list to discuss feminist politics, share resources, and collaborate on writing projects. Yet scholars like Rhodes and Fraser might consider this a step back because the women left to form an enclave. Perhaps their writing collaborations meant that they eventually went “public” again, but this is an example of how feminist interventions are temporary. The women in Hocks’s article, like the MOF women, tried to establish an enclaved space more lasting for their regrouping.

did not post because they were worried how they would be treated or because they were worried about harming an existing relationship by openly disagreeing. I also emailed or talked with eight women who had left MOF for good to ask them their reasons for leaving. Of these eight women, three cited reasons that included feeling judged or attacked.

In his article “Rehabilitating the Idea of Community.” Mark Wiley establishes that “a community is not a club” (24) nor is a community about creating safety with “familiarity and likemindedness” (31). Rather, says Wiley, “Good communities . . . encourage cooperation, compromise, and consensus . . . develop identity through group norms, standards, and values . . . [and] promote caring, trust, and teamwork” (30). Joseph Harris responds to Wiley by asking, “Whose norms? Whose team?” As Harris’s response implies, Wiley’s rehabilitation of “community” is a difficult line to walk. Can MOF participants encourage cooperation and compromise, “caring, trust, and teamwork” (30) while eschewing exclusionary, club-like feelings and like-mindedness? My interviews indicate that MOF participants do not always succeed at doing so, but that their construction of an LDS public within their enclave is an important step towards Harris’s preferred “open, contested, and heteroglot spheres of discourse” (“Beyond” 4).

As Dawn said in the thread above, “There is plenty of room in the church for people of all political backgrounds—it just doesn't always feel that way because there are so many right-leaners.” The more Emily and others have written with agency to express their individual ethos as Latter-day Saints within a larger sphere, thus providing feminist interventions, the more the MOF women perceive their audience as those who are not just similar to them because of a shared religious background, but as those who are also

different. In my interviews with the MOF women, the most common answer I received when I asked them about what they have learned from MOF is that they have realized that they learn from and value perspectives different from their own. Feminist interventions lead to an awareness of the diversity within the MOF enclave and a valuing of this diversity. They do not, however, change the MOF participants' perceptions of their audience as intimate, as spiritually and emotionally connected. In fact, this intimacy serves as a foundation to encourage the establishment of a public.

In this discussion thread, Emily's choice to post her narrative and intervene on the MOF enclave was a deliberate turning point from her earlier actions, as she said in our second phenomenological interview:

Catherine: How do you try to represent yourself on the board and on your blog?

Emily: Umm. I guess I try to be myself. That was the big thing with this whole testimony thing the past couple weeks. I was not going to talk about that or post it or anything. I was actually at Jenn H's house [another MOF member who lives close to Emily] with the boys and I told her the whole thing on Friday night and we talked for like five hours. She said, "Just post it. Somebody is going to feel the same way as you do." . . . As soon as I went and talked to Jenn and I felt better about it and so I felt like I could post about it.

Catherine: After you felt resolved?

Emily: Yeah. I needed to resolve it myself before I put it out there for people to attack. Sometimes when you have a differing view and you post about it, like someone will write something and it becomes about what someone else wrote instead of what you really posted about and interrupts the whole discussion thing. And then you find that sometimes it gets hard to feel like you are not being attacked or told you are being wrong.

Catherine: Did your doubts and stuff start from reading a lot of earlier posts?

Emily: It contributed very heavily because there are so many people on there that are "This is what you do and do not deviate from that." The little

things that to me don't matter , that matter very much to them. It is like the people that talk the most, that is who is right, that kind of thing.

Catherine: Have you ever thought about leaving the board?

Emily: Yeah, I actually did [leave] last year. It was again because I didn't feel like I fit in. I actually left, was it last summer. I left because of the whole gay marriage amendment thing. I never told anybody that that was why. It was getting heated and it made me sad and I didn't want to do it. It was kind of one of those things that is a really hard issue for me. So, I don't know if I really want to be a part of the church or even a ward [her local congregation] that feels so strongly about this and I don't. . . . I guess that some of the things that people were saying, I felt like were really, really, really bigoted. It was just hard.

As can be seen from this interview, in the past Emily left the MOF board rather than intervene in discourses that she feels are bigoted²⁸, but she has since chosen to express her differences. This choice can be seen in her comments at the end of the discussion thread when she said, “I wasn't going to talk about this here at all and then I decided that I should because it might help someone else. I think it's important for all of us to remember that we are all not cookie cutter.” Emily now sees expressing her individual ethos and positioning to the rest of the board as part of her responsibility, which indicates her perception of the board as an LDS public in microcosm and her responsibility to model the fact that there are multiple ways to be LDS in a larger sphere. Emily repeated her statement that she is not a “cookie cutter” in the following interview excerpt:

Catherine: What responsibility, if any, do you feel towards the board?

²⁸ This is another example of the dangers of community and of women-only spaces because of the potential for silencing dissent or privileging the interests of hegemony (hooks; Rhodes; Harris; McDowell). Jacqueline Rhodes quotes Audre Lorde as arguing for the necessity of differences rather than the “mere tolerance” of difference (qtd in 88). Rhodes also argues that any definition of collective action must include space for a “dialectic among difference” (88).

Emily: I guess I feel that my responsibility towards the board is to try to be honest with stuff. Like, to be myself. Not like I go on there and lie all the time. Just to show people my true self.

Catherine: How would you describe your “true self”?

Emily: Someone who isn’t cookie cutter, I guess. Someone that has gone through a lot of stuff and came out of it. A fighter I guess, but also a good friend.

In our discourse analysis interview, Emily also told me that her narrative was a deliberate rhetorical strategy that she used to achieve acceptance of her ethos rather than a direct argument against others’ views or an attempt to persuade others to adopt her position itself. Emily’s purpose in posting this thread was to get people to understand her and her perspective better. She said, “I just don’t like when people don’t understand me and how I feel and why I do the things I do. I don’t like them to jump to conclusions. And [posting this] was a huge, huge thing for me.” Emily deliberately posted in case others who were also struggling to construct a public voice in line with both their LDS and personal beliefs needed to listen to her own experience. Emily specifically pinpointed her use of personal narrative and her appeal to the religious authority of the bishop as important strategies for helping others understand her better and see her LDS ethos as acceptable. This can be seen in this excerpt of the discourse analysis interview:

Catherine: What strategies do you feel like you used to achieve that purpose?

Emily: Um, well, basically letting them know exactly how I feel. I think when threads are written like that, people tend to be more, thinking about the other side, more open-minded. Whereas . . . you can talk forever about gay rights and people don’t understand things unless you kind of put it into a personal perspective. You can say this and this and this, but if you brought up a story of this person and that’s what happened to them, I think people empathize a little better and understand better. And that’s the one where I told them I’d talked to the bishop, so I feel like I kind of used that because everyone mostly respects bishops, so I could say, “Okay, my

bishop said it was okay that I could feel this way, so all ya'll who think not, you were wrong!" That's how I used that.

In some ways Emily's use of narrative seems to mirror Crowley's first strategy for engaging in contemporary civic situations with religious fundamentalists. Crowley argues that rhetors need to use story to get attention (197). But a key difference between Crowley's suggested use of narrative and Emily's is the end goal. Crowley says narrative's purpose is attention-getting, with the end goal of changing religious beliefs themselves (190-91; 197-201) and changing the meaning of another's experiences (195), whereas Emily's end goal was changing others' perceptions of difference. In the interview excerpt above, Emily said she used the ethos of the bishop to help those who thought that her position on gay marriage was not "okay" realize that they were wrong. Rather than focusing on changing others' beliefs about gay marriage itself, Emily used rhetorical strategies to garner increased empathy and understanding in order to change others' perceptions of what it is okay for her to believe.

This thread does provide a good example of Crowley's theory that subalterns are crucial to change among religious persons. Crowley claims that "an exception to any belief system may be articulated within that system only if and when it begins to circulate among believers" (191). That circulation can occur when people "experience the subaltern or double consciousness . . . when, for example, their experience does not square with what they are being taught" (194). Crowley argues that subalterns, such as women, are more likely to hear and consider new beliefs or to connect beliefs in different ways: "counterhegemonic beliefs may be taken up more readily among those who are not included in a dominant subjectivity, who are reckoned by and within it as different" (192). In contrast, those who are privileged by hegemony are more likely to be single-

minded because they don't often hear arguments that carry enough force to change their beliefs—they're "isolated from dissonance" (193). In this thread, Emily is an example of a believer who experienced this kind of subaltern consciousness.

Nancy Fraser argues that subalterns use what she calls "counterpublics" for withdrawing and regrouping to "find the right voice or words to express their thoughts" (14). Fraser says that deliberating within their counterpublic helps subalterns articulate their interests and therefore prepares them for activities in wider publics (14-15). In her actions as a subaltern within MOF and in this thread in particular, Emily made a similar move on an individual level by using MOF as an LDS public in order to express, receive validation of, and argue for ways in which her choices and individual ethos can work within both the LDS community and the larger community. In this instance, Emily's previous conversations with her bishop and with Jenn, who is another member of MOF who lives by Emily (Emily refers to this five-hour conversation in an earlier excerpt as making her feel better about posting her thoughts), formed a counterpublic within the LDS public of MOF.

As an online space, not sponsored directly by the LDS religion, MOF can allow countering beliefs to circulate. And in her use of narrative, Emily expressed her countering beliefs and her individual LDS ethos in a way that garnered support within the enclave rather than resistance. Emily exhibited agency in actively choosing her individual ethos as a Latter-day Saint and in expressing her position to her bishop and to the public of an LDS community. Emily's narrative and the 11 other women who added their own countering beliefs to hers therefore established on MOF an LDS public and the

existence of one specific type of difference, of an audience not completely known or like-minded, and the possibility for later deliberations of that difference.

“Conversations without Attacking”: Rhetorical Strategies Towards Public

Deliberation

As I discussed previously, the MOF enclave is built on the intimacy developed through the participants’ spiritual and emotional connections and shared religious identity. Because of that established intimacy, MOF participants feel as though they can call up a public for establishing difference and acceptance of that difference, as Emily did in the thread discussed above, and for deliberating in order to change others’ views. Both of these purposes can be seen in the following thread, which was started by Emily on Super Tuesday for the United States 2008 presidential elections. The original thread consisted of 117 posts and various discussions on political differences between MOF women identifying with Republican, Democrat, and Independent parties alike. I’ve pared many posts down because of space and in order to focus on the participants’ public discourse, presentation of LDS ethos, and demonstration of agency in forming their own positions, in speaking out, and in disagreeing with others.

This first group of posts includes Emily’s initial post as well as an exchange in which the participants offered reasons for their different positions while emphasizing their intimacy and connectedness. In the initial post Emily intervened in the conversation going on another thread, which she perceived as univocal, by presenting her perspective in a new thread. Rather than using narrative to express difference, as she did in the last example, in this thread, Emily used a rational and dialogic style to explain why she votes

as a Democrat and to make a case for the acceptance of multiple positions within an LDS identity:

Emily: I read on the "Conservative" thread that people wouldn't vote for the democratic nominees because of their stance on abortion. That they couldn't vote for someone who would do that to one of Heavenly Father's babies. I just wanted to share with you my thoughts on the subject.

I (and a lot of other democrats) vote democratically because of the social issues. Like healthcare and education and stuff. I personally feel like we need to change our healthcare system to allow EVERYONE to be able to be treated, not just the completely poor or the rich. People die because they can't afford to pay for surgeries. People go completely bankrupt trying to pay medical bills. Aren't these people Heavenly Father's babies too?

Then there is the Iraq war. A LOT of people have died. No one knows why we are there anymore. We didn't really know why we went in the first place. Men and women are dying there all the time. For what? Nothing is being accomplished. It is a big fat ugly mess. Aren't all wonderful soldiers who put their lives on the line Heavenly Father's babies too?

. . . there are so many other things that I think are important right now [other than abortion]. There are people dying. There are people suffering! To me, that is just as important as the abortion issue.

Anyway, I wanted to share my stance with all ya'll. I feel like a lot of people don't really look at all the issues, they look at one or two, listen to some talk show radio or hear something on tv and make up their minds without doing all the research.

Happy Super Tuesday to Everyone!



Kristie: Wow... I'm trying really hard to not get defensive, as obviously this thread was referring to me since I'm the one who brought up the abortion issue. . . . Let me make myself a little more clear, abortion is not the only issue in my mind, I never claimed that, I said it was a key issue, and left it at that. There are many other issues that worry me enough to make me choose a man I'm not fond of (McCain) over Clinton or Obama, if it comes to that. . . . I guess when there are three people that don't fit how you believe exactly, you have to go with the one who fits the best.

That's why I completely appreciate hearing your point of view, and understand better that the issues you've chosen to be the most important for you are the reason why you support the candidates you do.

Jenn: Emily, I know you are very passionate about your political beliefs and while I disagree with you, I also respect you a lot. . . .
But I need to say that I think you need to give people more credit than you did in your opening post. I think you very much overgeneralized in stating that you think mormons are republicans because of the abortion issue only. I also think it wasn't fair of you to assume that people are also republican because of what they hear on talk shows or on tv. People aren't republican because they haven't researched out the issues or they can't think for themselves. **People can be presented with the exact same information and come to the exact opposite conclusion.** That doesn't make people wrong, just different. Its not a case of "not seeing the light" or not taking the time to research out the issues. And I don't think there is anything wrong with being more concerned with some issues over others. As individuals, I think it is difficult to 100% align your beliefs with one political party or candidate, so I think its perfectly fine to vote for the candidate or party or issues that you MOST agree with. 😊

Kristin: I don't even perceive abortion as an issue, personally (at least not on my radar). . . (and yes, I will admit here that I am pro-choice). . . . I get sick of defending my stance too, particularly in my in-law's who are staunchly and ignorantly "republicans" without really knowing the issues and why it matters to anyone but themselves. . . . I have been really impressed with how nice the discussions have been on this board. 🌸😊
Anyway, everyone with a primary, GO VOTE!!

Sheree: In my family, we are pretty well split between republicans and democrats. I just don't agree with my dad and his wife, my mom, my brother, and my little sister who are all democrats. It isn't because I am completely uninformed. . . .

Aimee: I also feeling lumping all Republicans or all Democrats into one category is flawed. That's like saying all Mormons think alike. We've already proven that wrong on this board, haven't we? . . . I'm registered as an Independant, and stand in different areas regarding different topics. But, I certainly don't think that all Democrats get their info. from watching celebrities nor do I think Republicans watch talk shows for their views.

Anyway, that's all I have to say. And it may not even make any sense. I just think that people's political views often tend to be very deeply engrained in them and are very personal. It's important to always think about how we say something so that others aren't hurt. Understanding

what is meant by the printed word can often be far more difficult than when we're in a room having a deep conversation.

Sheree: Emily, I do agree with what you are saying about valuing life. Maybe I misunderstood you the first time.

Emily: Wow, you guys went crazy while I was gone! [She's referring to the number of posts.] I just got back from the [state] Democratic Caucus. (which was CRAZY, by the way) . . . I wanted to tell Kristie that I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like I was saying you were dumb and not informed. . 🙄

In these posts, the participants called up an LDS public within their enclave through the style of their discourse. Participants expressed their opinions in a rational, dialogic, and conversational style rather than in long argumentative lines (Dahlberg). Bohman argues that public deliberation occurs when speakers or writers engage in “open and inclusive dialogue in which speakers offer reasons, receive uptake, and provide answers to one another” with the end goal of cooperatively recognizing that all sides have contributed (27-28, 33)²⁹. In the above excerpt, Emily offered reasons for her political position, Kristie clarified her position and recognized Emily's contribution, and Jenn provided Emily with answers and offered reasons for her answers.

The thread participants' establishment of a public reflects their purposes for writing, which are twofold: first, to make a space for multiple LDS public voices, and

²⁹ Like Bohman, Young emphasizes that in deliberation people “are open to having their own opinions and understandings of their interests change in the process” (6). I prefer Bohman's and Young's term “public deliberation” over “argumentation” in reference to the MOF women's writing because public deliberation doesn't require that parties try to agree, but that they sincerely and cooperatively try to contribute. “Argumentation” is similar to public deliberation in that it requires taking into account the opposition's point of view, but different in that it is a process of trying to arrive at agreement (Roberts-Miller). In contrast to both public deliberation and argumentation, merely arguing is expressing views without any obligation to listen to or respectfully discuss others' views. Arguments therefore “maintain the univocality of the group(s) that participate” and create a “localized hegemony” (Roberts-Miller).

second, to convince others of the importance of their own individual voices in order to influence others' political views. In this thread, Emily explained her political position in an effort to show how her political choices do mesh with her religious beliefs. And in their responses to what they see as an overgeneralization by Emily, Jenn and Aimee also alluded to the extent to which their religious identity is reflected in their views on politics and governance.

One of the reasons why the MOF participants create a public for validation of the ways in which they have individually combined their political and religious identity and for influencing others' views is the lack of official LDS church direction on most political matters. The following is the LDS church's official statement of political neutrality from its Web site:

The Church's mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, not to elect politicians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is neutral in matters of party politics. This applies in all of the many nations in which it is established. . . . The Church does . . . expect its members to engage in the political process in an informed and civil manner, respecting the fact that members of the Church come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and may have differences of opinion in partisan political matters. [The Church does] reserve the right as an institution to address, in a nonpartisan way, issues that it believes have significant community or moral consequences or that directly affect the interests of the Church. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Newsroom")

It's also important that the participants call up this public within an already established intimate context because they combine their rational critique with an emphasis on emotional connections. An example of this combination in this thread is Jenn's comment to Emily that "while I disagree with you, I also respect you a lot" and Kristin's compliment about "how nice the discussions have been on this board." These

last two rhetorical moves plus Emily's apology to Kristie were important for keeping the conversation open.

In this next group of posts, the participants' purpose was directed more toward sharing information in order to influence others' political views:

Melodee: Emily - I think you have such a great heart and really care! I just don't think it's government's role to deal w/all these social issues. . . . I've done my homework and just look at what government's done w/Medicaid and education thus far or any other social issue. They only make it messier. Things run much better when done by the private sector. When it's a free system rather than a socialistic system. There are always going to be casualties - no matter what system is used. But I'd like to have some dignity w/it. . . . We've felt the pinch of being uninsured and didn't have proper access to healthcare but I don't feel like it's my neighbors job to pay for my healthcare either. Is it right to demand and take money from "wealthy" people to redistribute to those the government deems "needy". I thought that was stealing. And what's wrong w/being wealthy? Isn't that part of the American dream? Why be punished for it? Why **enable** poverty? . . . America has so many great charities, so much giving, so many people do much good to help others. Isn't that the way it should be? When it comes to many liberal issues it just seems like the wrong fix to me. . . . The government isn't very accurate in ascertaining needs of those who need help—so why on earth turn it over to them? . . . ❤️

Emily: This is completely interesting to me because I feel the opposite way. I feel like BECAUSE we should be Christlike, we should be giving to others. Everyone, not just who we pick and choose. I feel like we should care about other people, we should help them. I hate the "every man for himself" mentality. I have no problem with people being wealthy. I just think there are some things that should be basic rights. Healthcare is one. Education is another. 😊 You know, some of my best friends are Republicans. 🙄

Melodee: Emily - if there was ever a disaster and I could pick someone to live next to it would be you!

I can see the humor in the different end of the spectrum's we feel are right. . . . I have no problem paying taxes to support roads, schools, security, (armed forces), but as far as inalienable rights, I don't feel that anyone has a "right" to healthcare. I think it is a quentessential thing to a fulfilling life and here in America I believe if you're willing to work for it, you can have them. The opportunity is there and I think it is a grand and a good thing. Forcing other people to pay your way is not a good thing. That means your

right to healthcare supersedes their rights to their individual property.

I have roughly \$8000 to pay in medical bills right now. That's w/insurance. Actually they may not cover some of it, because we were uninsured for awhile and now preexisting conditions have come into play, but nevertheless, that's a huge portion of our income right now. . . . We've been dirt poor for 12 years now. Poor enough to qualify for every government program there is. But why ask someone else to foot the bill for what our choices have been? I've been in both the demographics that are considered "needy" and the floating figure of "15 million" uninsured Americans -- and I still don't think it's your job to pay my way. We haven't come from rich families, but we're making a better way for ourselves and I believe most people can -- which is the beauty of living where we do.

I can agree to disagree 😊 . . . And you know, some of my best friends are Democrats!

Emily: Melodee, I totally don't agree with you on so many levels that it isn't even funny. 🤔 I have a hard time wrapping my head around the idea that because someone is poor they do not deserve to have healthcare. The night janitor has as much right to live and be healthy as a CEO. I can think of a thousand things that poor people can live without because they are poor, but health? Nope. I don't think we'll ever be on the same page on this one. 😊

Here, with her reference to being Christlike, Emily was still clarifying how her position connects with her religious beliefs. Her purpose for this clarification was not only to establish multiple ways of being LDS, but also to give Melodee another reason for changing her political views, just as Melodee shared information to try to influence Emily's views.

The simultaneous existence of the intimate and private enclave with the public of an LDS community encourages the MOF board members to engage in public deliberation combined with intimate literacy strategies. This combination of rhetorical moves is important for the success of participants' attempts to both establish acceptance of difference and to influence others' views. Rhetorical strategies for public deliberation include the following:

- offering reasons (Bohman 27-28)
- receiving uptake (Bohman 27-28)
- providing answers to others (Bohman 28)
- cooperatively recognizing that all sides have contributed (Bohman 33)
- remaining open to softening or changing one’s opinions or understandings (Dahlberg; Young 6).

These strategies are usually successful on MOF because of the participants’ use of intimate literacy strategies, as follows:

- expressing affection (Gere 40)
- sharing information that one has the right not to share with others (Gere 40)
- emphasizing emotional connections with expressions of dissent and difference (Gere 42)
- using language of relationships (Gere 47).

In the above exchange, Emily and Melodee combined characteristics of public deliberation (offering reasons and providing answers) with intimate literacy by expressing affection (“Emily—I think you have such a great heart and really care”; “Emily—if there was ever a disaster and I could pick someone to live next to it would be you”; and through emoticons) and by emphasizing the value of both political perspectives (“Some of my best friends are Republicans/Democrats”). This combination of rhetorical strategies encouraged their participation in the conversation, whereas arguing rather than deliberating often leads people to opt out of a conversation. These rhetorical strategies also showed respectful listening.

Instead of just considering the occurrence of public deliberation, Dahlberg argues that we also need to consider the deliberative quality of online exchanges. Dahlberg

determines deliberative quality and publicly-oriented discourse through the following requirements, which he adapts from Habermas's writings:

- reflexivity, or reflecting critically on and possibly softening one's position
- ideal role-taking, which is attempting to put one's self in another's position to better understand it
- sincerity in being upfront with relevant information, including intentions, interests, needs, and desires
- discursive equality and inclusion.

Dahlberg argues that reflexivity and ideal role-taking in online spaces falls short of what's necessary in public spheres. To improve, participants must invest themselves in the conversation (not opt out) and listen respectfully to others' positions.

This last group of posts exhibits this deliberative quality because the participants used intimate literacy within their LDS public in order to influence other church members and because Katy showed a possible softening of her position. The use of intimate literacy strengthened the perception of the space as still safe for expression of political and religious identities and differences.

Paige: I am worried about healthcare.

Katy: Ooo..Ooo..Ooo... I've been wanting to start a thread like this for a couple weeks, but I haven't taken the time to sit down and write out my thoughts. I'll try to do it now because I would love to understand better.

Here are my frustrations with having health care for everyone:

- 1) Medicaid is a broken system right now. It encourages people to stay poor so they can have 100% coverage.
- 2) Foodstamps are the same way. Plus, the more kids you have, the more you qualify for.
- 3) SSI - the income level to qualify for SSI is LOW, but the payment amount is decent.

On top of that, if you can qualify for any of those programs, you can also

qualify for housing assistance and I don't know how many other programs. . . . Our nation, where it is now, rewards people for staying poor. There isn't any reason to go to work, to make more money. They can make more sitting at home. That drives me bonkers. BONKERS. I know there are plenty of people who are legitimately poor, but for all of them, there are SO many more who could actually do something to help themselves but know they will lose their benefits if they make more than x amount of dollars. It is so wrong.

The social programs are the biggest things that irritate me about the democratic party. . . . I do have a BIG problem with this whole notion that we should help the poor and not hold them accountable for helping themselves. . . .

Just my 🙄❤️💋

Paige: Ok, I am taking some issue with the poor stuff 🙄 You can NOT make more just sitting at home and doing nothing. And even if you do have another child, it's not enough to say "Hey, let's have another baby and get tons of stuff!"

We get food stamps and medicaid. We get just over \$500/mo for a family of 7. We are grateful for it and we truly need it. But it's not *that* much to feed a family of 7. \$120/mo of that is JUST milk 🙄 When dh lost his other job last week, I did a calculator thing to figure out if we would get more until he finds another 2nd job and it put at at only about \$30/mo more foodstamps than we get now. 🙄

Katy: Paige, I do believe that you're actually working to better your situation, though. . . . so I'm sorry if I misstated that. You have to admit that there is a lot of abuse with our current system and it's way too easy to lie and get around the rules so you can continue to get aid. That's what my point is. Sorry if I offended you, I really didn't mean to.

When I talk about my disgust with the current system, I think about my bil [brother-in-law]. He has very little education, has some mental issues, but is perfectly capable of working. Instead, he sits in his govt subsidized housing, getting a housing allowance, food stamps, medicaid and SSI payments. He doesn't work either unless he works with my other bil who pays him under the table. If he works, he makes too much money and loses his benefits. How is THAT helping anyone? That's my point.

Paige: Katy, I didn't really look to see who was posting what, so don't apologize. I HERE about people lying and getting around the system, but I still can't figure out how 🙄 With the amount of info we have to give it just makes me 🙄 They look up the bluebook value of your car, your

rent, income, utilities, they ask about insurance, burial plots, etc. . . .

Before dh got his current job, we were getting about \$800/mo, but when he started making just a little more, we went down by more than \$300/mo. in foodstamps.

Vina: I agree with Paige. . . . we ARE choosing to use medicaid for our children so that they CAN have great medical care IF we need it. We do not abuse it, but if someone was seriously hurt, we'd be literally finished without it. We had foodstamps the year before . . .

Paige: Katy, I hope you realize that there are tons of working people on Medicaid. The "working poor." My dh was working 2 jobs until a week ago, and going to school FT. One of his jobs offers medical, but it's \$900/mo and his take home is only \$1500/mo. That is not even feasible. My dad works for the same company, but has to take medical through the VA.

Aimee: This is America. There is no excuse for ANY legitimate citizen to go without food and healthcare. We are the wealthiest nation in the world, and surely can spare a bit to help those with needs beyond their control. . . . We need to remember that not all people who are receiving Medicaid or food stamps are lazy lumps who only invest their time in reproducing.

Vina: I do wish medical coverage was more available to everyone. It sucks not having it and worrying if something is going to happen that will cost you a fortune in medical bills.

Katy: I have some strong personal political views. This board has really helped me see the "other side" of things. That is a good thing. . . . So, I sincerely am asking this, for those of you who are Democrat, how do YOU view the social programs? How should they be handled according to your political beliefs? Is the current system OK to you? If it's not, how do you think it should be run? How would the taxes look? I really see this as one of the biggest differences between me and a Democrat, so I'm curious, honestly.

Kristin: So who is going to be responsible for it? Someone always pays, because I can guarantee that hospitals aren't in the business to not make money. I am certainly NOT for government sponsored healthcare and I HATE the way the system works, but if the people have no other option, then where else are they going to get it? I'm just curious as to what you see as a solution. (not being argumentative I'm just curious, promise!)

Melodee: Kristin - I don't think you're being argumenative at ALL 😊 I totally understand what you're asking because I rack my brain thinking

about it. First all it's a multi-faceted problem. Therefore there is not one easy solution. You're right on. Hospitals want to make money. Insurance companies want to make money. Someone has to pay. But that's the thing. Nothing is free. Someone somewhere pays. There is not one perfect solution, but as a generalizaion I think local communities should take care of their own. Churches and charities.

Kristin: So how else will a group of people band together and make it work? . . . The thing is; I haven't seen a right wing candidate make any kind of real proposal to make things work It's business as usual.

Emily: Katy, I like Obama's healthcare plan. Everyone gets insurance, subsidies for those who cannot pay. Employers can offer their own insurance but if they decide not to offer it they will have to pay into the national healthcare plan. Small businesses will not be responsible for providing healthcare benefits. You can read more about it here: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/healthcare/>

Everyone else, thanks for all your comments, whether they are for or against what I have to say. It has been so interesting to read and I am so happy that we can have these types of conversations without attacking!

In these posts, Paige and Vina offered reasons and provided answers to Katy using narrative that, as Emily did earlier in this chapter, intervened in Katy's perception of audience and that were intimate in that they offered information that they had the right not to share with anyone. I see this exchange as incorporating all aspects of public deliberation because Katy did exhibit reflexivity and the "softening" of position that Dahlberg talks about when she said, "This board has really helped me see the 'other side' of things. That is a good thing." All of the participants on this thread were involved in public deliberation because they continued to offer reasons and to provide answers to each other in a cooperative manner, which they established through their use of rhetorical strategies of intimate literacy. Rather than "being argumentative," as Kristin said, Katy and Kristin tried to express genuine curiosity and sincerity in their questions, which led to others being willing to invest themselves in providing answers. Katy also complimented

Paige, apologized to her, and used emoticons to appeal to goodwill. Paige accepted the apology and also used emoticons. Emoticons draw on forms of face-to-face communication, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, that soften expressions of dissent.

The participants' combination of rational critique and intimate literacy in this Super Tuesday discussion thread resulted in success when measured according to their purposes for calling up a public within their enclave, although it initially seems otherwise.³⁰ The participants did not succeed in changing others' political positions, as both Emily and Katy said in discourse analysis interviews:

- Emily: "It's caused me to reflect on my own position. And it made me understand a little more, but it hasn't made me change my views."
- Katy: "I've thought about my own position more. I've thought about others' situations in regards to social circumstances, but my position remains unchanged."

Yet both Emily and Katy did reflect on their views, as their comments illustrate. And although Emily's political position didn't change, the thread did influence the way she perceived the other participants. In our discourse analysis interview, I asked Emily about her purpose and strategies for posting. She said,

Actually, this thread broadened my mind a little bit because first of all, people aren't as dumb about things as I kind of thought they were. . . . The whole thing made me feel better about stuff like that because they have reasons why they vote the way they do and I have reasons why I vote the way I do. We just see things in a different way, so it kind of made me realize that, whereas before I was kind of like, well, they're wrong and

³⁰ One weakness of my analysis on this particular thread is that I was able to conduct discourse analysis interviews with only two of the participants, and one of those was very short. Two others agreed to participate in a discourse analysis interview, but I could never get a hold of them, on email or by phone. So Emily's perspective is more dominant.

they're dumb if they don't, or how could they do that, and now I just think, okay, they just see things differently than me.

Emily's comments again show a difference in the type of change that the MOF participants experience from their interactions on the discussion board versus the change of beliefs on which Crowley focuses. A change in perspective is an important step towards civil discourse.

One of the different perspectives that MOF participants have gained through calling up a public on MOF is the acceptance of different ways of being LDS within public spheres, particularly relating to different ways of merging political positions and religious beliefs. Both Emily and Brooke referred to this changed perception in the following excerpts from my phenomenological interviews with them:

Catherine: Have any discussion threads in particular influenced your actions or thinking?

Emily: I have a bigger tolerance. . . . It is not like I think people are weird. I just know that people make different choices and it is not for me. And the board has totally helped me to understand that about a lot of different things. . . . I think it has helped me understand other points of view politically and it is kind of like I would never be a Republican, but I can understand why they feel that way. Whereas before I was kind of like "Uhhhh, noooooo." You know what I mean. It opened my eyes and made me see and hopefully I am doing the same for other people.

Emily *is* doing the same for other people. Brooke specifically mentioned her own developing understanding and acceptance of multiple LDS identities when I asked her the same question I asked Emily:

Catherine: Um, have any discussions impacted, any in particular influence your thinking or meant a lot to you? Influenced your actions or anything like that?

Brooke: Yeah, some of the politics, as far as Republican or Democrat. I really didn't, I'm a Republican, you know, and I really didn't understand

how a Mormon could be a Democrat. But their explanations, I understand, totally, that mindset now. So, I'm not as critical.

[some responses and questions excerpted here]

Catherine: Is there anything you expected to be asked about your online writing, or something you think I should know that I didn't get to or ask about?

Brooke: Yeah, I think having both relationships on the board or reading other peoples' blogs and things like that, I became friends with people I normally wouldn't approach in real life. But able to read, at first, and later on commenting on them and them coming to my blog and commenting, um, yeah, it's opened my eyes to the world.

Catherine: And you think you wouldn't have normally approached them because they're different from you?

Brooke: Yeah, I wouldn't think we had anything in common, nothing to talk about.

Brooke's comment mirrors her post on the Super Tuesday thread, in which she said, "Emily, you have totally helped me to understand the heart of a democrat. I still don't agree, but I understand. Thank you."

As we see in this thread, the MOF participants' discussions are not limited to the type of "enclave deliberation" that Cass Sunstein argues occurs in nonpublic spaces, deliberation that causes enclaves to become "a breeding ground for polarization." Instead, the women I interviewed overwhelmingly told me that their perspectives had relaxed and had become less critical through their participation on MOF. Due in part to their construction of publics within their enclave through feminist interventions and public deliberation, the MOF board exposes participants to more views than they might otherwise be exposed to.

In the discourse analysis excerpts, neither Brooke nor Emily said that they now agree with the other in terms of politics, but they do now accept that, "a Mormon could

be a Democrat” (Brooke) or “why [LDS Republicans] feel that way” (Emily). In fact, I believe that agreement doesn’t need to be, nor should it be, the desired outcome of most deliberation because reaching agreement requires rhetors to focus on persuasion more than on listening. This focus can destroy the intimacy so important to public deliberation and uptake of perspectives, as the next discussion thread shows.

“Only a Simpleton Could Deny It”: Rhetorical Moves and Motivations that Inhibit Open Perspectives

In contrast with the last thread, the discussion thread in this section highlights rhetorical moves that inhibited public deliberation, reflexivity, and open perspectives because they destroyed the intimacy on which the MOF enclave and the LDS public within that enclave are founded. In discourse analysis interviews with thread participants, I discovered that the most damaging rhetorical moves to that intimacy are focusing on changing others rather than understanding them and challenging or judging others’ ethoi as religious people. This relates to the discussions in Chapter 4 that reveal how tightly connected MOF participants’ beliefs are to their sense of self. It therefore makes sense that judgments passed on the sufficiency or insufficiency of their religious beliefs are also taken as judgments about the self.

The participants in this discussion thread, titled “Evolution and Mormonism,” also called up an LDS public through their style of rational critical discourse. They initially established a public in order to try to clarify their positions by testing them out in an LDS public forum. Because the LDS church has no official position on evolution, MOF members deliberate publicly in order to establish, affirm, and negotiate their individual positions within an LDS public, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Cara: What are your personal beliefs on evolution and how does that fit in with your spiritual beliefs? I will explain why I asked later.

Kristin: I believe that when true science and true religion are fully explained, they will be the same. I do strongly believe in evolution, but not in the way that it's explained or the timetable with which it's explained. I know that when Heavenly Father created the earth he gathered matter from other creations.

Cara: So was thier death before Adam and Eve. Where do the dinosaurs fit in and what about the prehistoric 'cavemen' that have been found?

Amy: this is something that has always intrigued me. I've never researched it and no one can seem to answer it in a way that makes sense to me. So far MY theory is that there were dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden and then once they were kicked out of the garden dinosaurs fell under the survival of hte fittest law and died off, as far as cavemen I don't know, b/c from what I understand Adam was the first man on the earth, this is where I get confused

Misty: I researched it before and there are several theories but no doctrine. One theory is the matter from other worlds one. That dinosaurs, etc came from other worlds and were placed here during creation. Another theory is that they lived in the Garden of Eden, whether before or after Adam and Eve. Another theory is that there is that 1 day to God = 1000 years to us, so the creation actually took 7000 years in our time and the dinosaurs, cavemen, came and went naturally either during or just after that time.

Susan: I believe a lot of the things that we cannot explain were matter that was taken from other worlds. Where else would the matter come from?? I do believe in evolution.

Cara: Ok, so the reason I ask. Dh used to be a seminary teacher³¹ during and immediately after college. He taught a lesson out of the book and in it was a quote by McConkie (totally anti-evolution). In this quote it talked about how there was no death on the earth before Adam (period). Since then dh has read and studied evolution and he has changed his point of view. There is a book that he loves called Evolution and Mormonism that totally made sense to him. So now with Eyring being in the first presidency³² (who is a pro-evolutionist) he has been thinking about it lots

³¹ Many LDS teenagers take part in a “seminary program” of scripture study.

³² “Eyring” and “the first presidency” are references to the leadership structure of the church, which is led by a prophet and two counselors, who make up “the first

and feel bad about teaching his seminary class wrong. So now all those kids are going to think wrong his whole life. Anyway, I have read parts of the book and it is really enlightening. Basically, my dh believes that Evolution is true. Once Man was where HF needed him to be, he breathed life into him.

Andrea: Ditto. Dh and i have discussed this. My dh believes that Adam was born like everyone else. I'm not exactly to sure about that although the more we talked about it the more plausible it sounded. I do believe that even God follows certain rules. I also think that the Bible is probably not 100% accurate in telling the creation story. Theres alot of stuff we just don't know.

Kristen: I also believe that HF breathed life into mankind when everything was right. The timetable is so big, and the pieces that we have now are so incomplete. Thank you for the book recommendations. I think more along scientific lines and would love to read those.

Dawn: I think 2 Nephi 2:22³³ is pretty clear that there was no death before the fall. I'm not saying I know how it all happened or even that evolution is ruled out, but that scripture seems straightforward to me.

The context of intimacy that the MOF participants have established in the history and founding of their discussion board was important for their initial purposes in this thread because it made the LDS public that they called up a safe place for clarifying and testing their positions. In our discourse analysis interview, Cara emphasized that the MOF board is a safe place for these discussions for her and that the safety of the discussion board was one reason why she began this thread, in addition to wanting to test or clarify how her own position works within the church community:

Catherine: What was your purpose in beginning this thread?

Cara: I remember being interested in what everyone else thought and if someone already believed in these theories since they were new to me [and] my position was still being formed. Maybe someone could offer

presidency,” and by a quorum of twelve apostles. Currently, Henry B. Eyring, a scientist, is a counselor in this presidency.

³³ 2 Nephi and Alma are both books in *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

some deeper insight since I hadn't read the book yet and just heard what my dh had explained to me. I was also interested in hearing other theories on this topic and how they came to believe in that.

Catherine: Did your post get the responses you expected? What did you expect?

Cara: Yes, pretty much. I was hoping that someone else had read the same book and had a deeper understanding or theory of it all. But in reality, it is still mysterious to all of us and nobody knows the entire truth yet. I was also looking for a discussion, and it was interesting to see all of the different opinions and how we related with each other. We all believe in the same basics, but can differ so wildly on the rest of the details. I guess I felt better knowing that other good LDS women had open minds about evolution and still have testimonies of the atonement and the story of Adam and Eve.

Catherine: What made you feel like you could talk about this here?

Cara: I guess this is where I go to have these types of discussions. Maybe because it is safer than real life. Maybe because you can reach a wide variety and large number of women who all hold your same basic beliefs. It's harder for me to disagree face-to-face than over the internet. It is easier to form your statements when you have time to think first. In real life, I would have been more nervous about the conversation. Here, I think we can be more honest with each other, sometimes too honest.

As Cara said, she feels MOF is a safe place for public discussion with a large number of Latter-day Saints who do have different opinions. She began this thread as she was forming her own opinion and needed validation that she can have an open mind about evolution and still be a "good LDS woman."

As this thread continued, however, two participants' posts (Carrie's and Steph's) became particularly heated and they gradually became the primary participants in the thread. In this excerpt below, Steph and Carrie's discussion began to harm the intimacy on which the LDS public is built as the two participants directly or indirectly criticized or ridiculed each other:

Steph: Huh??? Seriously? If that was how it happened, why isn't that what we've been told in the Book of Mormon. The scriptures are plain. There is no temporal death before Adam. Alma 42:9³⁴ Therefore as the soul could never die, and the **fall** had brought upon all mankind a spiritual death **as well as a temporal...**

And John Taylor (who was the prophet at the time that the theory of Evolution exploded for the first time in this dispensation so he's probably the best source to go to for how Heavenly Father views this subject) says this in a book called *Mediation & Atonement: The theory of Evolution negates the Atonement*, there was no death before Adam. Link to the book, in case you're interested [website link deleted]

All I can say is that I would think twice about ascribing to a theory that a prophet has said *negates the Atonement*.

And what if the theory is true that Heavenly Father allowed evolution to go on until the human race was where it needed to be to get someone intelligent enough to be Adam? What did He say to all of those beings that would have had to live and die to get it to that point? "Sorry, but you were just a means to an end! Have fun living in a glacier for a few thousand years! I'll catch ya at the Smithsonian!" He doesn't even do that to the most simple of His creations - of any kind. Why would he do that to beings that led to becoming people who could be exalted. I'll go far enough to believe that it's possible that Adam was born of a woman on another planet and brought to this earth. That could have happened without going against what the scriptures and a prophet have said specifically on the subject. But that's as far as you can take it. And even we as fallible human beings have figured out how to grow an actual, "evolved" human with only the help of the biological matter (egg/sperm) being provided. Doesn't it just go without saying that Heavenly Father can do so much more than that???

I hope I'm not coming across as rude. Sometimes you girls just throw me for a loop with what you discuss. 🤔

Carrie: Evolution exists, only a simpleton could deny it. Just look at the mutation of viruses. Viruses evolve and adapt to their environments. As do bacteria, hence the antibiotic resistant bacteria that are becoming such a concern in the medical community. That is evolution. So it exists. Evolution of humans from cave men? I don't know exactly. There's scientific evidence.

³⁴ "Alma" is a prophet and a book in the *Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

How it fits into God's plan, I'm not sure.
Evolution of other species? Absolutely.
Do I think the earth was created in 7, 24-hour days? No way, man.
Do I think the earth was created in 7, 1000-year days? Once again, no way.

I think the earth took millions of years to form. The scientific evidence is there that the earth is literally millions of years old. Not that the component parts are that old, but the way they are layered and put together indicates the total age.

It is my opinion that when we think about these things we are using our limited perspective of mortality. We are talking about eternity, which is *infinite*. There is no end and no beginning. So what is a few million years to the Lord who has been here forever and will be here forever? It's nothing. I think the Lord's creation had many years to form, evolve, and become what we know it as today. All of it is part of His plan. Personally, I think people who deny scientific evidence and take the story of the creation completely literally (24-hour day and so forth) are not thinking with the brains that God gave them. 🤔

And here I go: 🤔 I don't know that the Church leaders at the time of the first introduction of the theory of evolution had the best perspective on things. Not everything the prophet says is a revelation, eh? Let me give you an example some of us might relate to a little better. When birth control first became available, the prophet and other church leaders found it abominable. They spoke strongly against it, declared it wrong. It was new and shocking and took a while to fully understand its consequences (both good and bad). Fast forward to today and the prophet and other church leaders give much gentler counsel. We are each left to decide for ourselves how many children to have and whether we as a couple feel comfortable with birth control. Its use is no longer considered sinful. It just needs to be used wisely and with an eternal perspective. Anyway, hopefully you understand what I'm getting at. New ideas that challenge our ideas about the gospel may be shunned initially, but that doesn't necessarily make them bad ideas. Does that make any sense.

Anyhoo...I'll go hide now.

Steph: I agree that modern revelation is a great thing. Has any Prophet ever stated that evolution is correct? . . . Science was also convinced (for thousands of years) that the sun revolved around the earth and that the earth was flat. If I have to choose between a Prophet and science, I'll pick the Prophet every single time.

Although Steph and Carrie offered reasons and provided answers, which are two of Bohman's characteristics of public deliberation, their confrontational language shows that neither was interested in "uptake," or understanding the other's perspective. Their dialogue also doesn't exhibit the openness and inclusivity that is the basis for Bohman's description of public deliberation. Steph began the dissent by directly challenging Cara's post ("Huh??? Seriously?"), by indirectly challenging Cara's common base in scriptural knowledge ("The scriptures are plain."), by reprimanding other posters for opinions that she believes goes against revelation from a prophet, by using sarcasm to make the implications of others' arguments sound ridiculous ("What did He say to all of those beings that would have had to live and die to get to that point? . . . I'll catch ya at the Smithsonian!"), and by using second-person pronouns, which left behind the first-person plural pronouns that characterize the rhetoric of community ("Sometimes you girls just throw me for a loop with what you discuss.") Her second-person pronouns also resulted in a tone of superiority. Carrie responded with indirect insults ("only a simpleton could deny [evolution]" and "people who deny scientific evidence and take the story of the creation completely literally [24-hour day and so forth] are not thinking with the brains that God gave them" and telling Steph to go back and re-read scriptures). She also adopted second-person pronouns, yet she still used the collective "us" and "we" in reference to parts of her own beliefs as a means of giving her opinions the weight of the community.

Both of the participants talked about this confrontational language in our discourse analysis interviews. When I asked Steph if her posts got the responses she expected, she said:

No way. I can truly say that I was shocked by many of the responses. . . . I expected to be treated differently. The ‘people who don’t believe in evolution are simpletons who aren’t using the brains God gave them’ that Carrie said (maybe she erased it or you left it out of the copy but it was there originally, I promise you) really hurt me a lot.³⁵ I was surprised by how much, actually. I shouldn’t still remember it to this day, either. It’s silly that I do, it’s silly that it hurt me so much. I expected people who say they are so willing to look at all points of view and sometimes draw conclusions that aren’t typically equated with general LDS belief to be more understanding of my view and kinder about it, even if they didn’t agree.

Steph’s interview excerpt indicates that intimacy had been destroyed for her because of an insult and lack of kindness and understanding that hurt her to the extent that she remembered the insult over a year later in our interview. Carrie acknowledged her use of what she called “harsh” language when I interviewed her. When I asked Carrie how reading this thread makes her feel now, she said:

Of course it embarrasses me. When I say that “evolution exists only a simpleton could deny it,” that embarrasses me. That was pretty harsh language. So I don’t like that when I started I very quickly went to a defensive mode because that’s what it seems like to me, that I was very quick to jump into defensive. . . . I went into it already with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder on that topic. . . . My parents are both scientists, so we always talked about science and religion in our house and how they intermingle and work together. You tend to hear in church sometimes people that just fight against the idea of evolution in almost any form . . . pure religion, unable to think about science and religion working together.

Although Carrie recognized her own harsh language and the fact that her prior experiences influenced her defensive reaction to Steph, she also told me that as she reads through the thread now, she can see elements of Steph’s language that were harsh to her also:

³⁵ Steph didn’t notice it was there in the post I’d sent her prior to our interview and thought I had edited it out.

Carrie: I think there's some justification for why I got quickly defensive, . . . Stephanie's language got pretty harsh right off the bat and mine did pretty quickly too.

Catherine: You felt her harsh language justified your . . . ?

Carrie: Yeah, where she says—very quickly after she comes in. It might be one of her first posts. She says, “I hope I'm not coming acrossed as rude” and to me that was the nicest thing she says in there and then immediately says what I consider the rudest thing of all and that is “Sometimes you girls just throw me for a loop with what you discuss.” So that was the statement that I think set me off to respond with this.

Catherine: Why that statement? How did you read that?

Carrie: It seemed like she was kind of just making an accusation like, you shouldn't even be discussing this. I can't even believe you're talking about it. Whereas, I don't see the harm in discussing ideas. Certainly not in this one. It seemed like that statement was very judgmental to me, so that's why I kind of fired back with this rude comment that I don't like now.

In this interview Carrie said that she felt as though Steph was saying that as a Latter-day Saint, Carrie should not be discussing ideas about evolution. Carrie therefore felt that Steph was judging her religiosity. It's interesting to me that Carrie perceived an underlying value argument about if she is a “good” LDS person to be the most hurtful rhetorical move or the move that destroyed the intimacy so important for quality and successful deliberative discourse. Emily expressed feeling similarly hurt in our discourse analysis interview about the Super Tuesday thread:

When I'm feeling attacked, I usually won't respond. . . . I'm fine with us being different, but it's when people are condescending about it. They might not even mean to be condescending, but I see it like that. Like, you're wrong, you are not a good LDS person. I feel that it's a judgment on my character and on the way I view things. That I'm not a spiritual person. . . . That is the hard thing with all of this because I feel like that's the underlying thing people are saying. And it's hard for me.

This relates to Chapter 4's discussion of how important the women's construction of an LDS identity is to their writing and to the rewards of their writing. This also emphasizes

the importance of respect and sincerity in public deliberation with religious people or in religious contexts.

I believe that another factor harming the intimacy of the public that the women call up is participants' motivations for contributing to a discussion. The importance of motivation is illustrated in Steph's and Carrie's interview comments:

Steph: Initially, I was just really shocked. Then I was fired up because of the viewpoints that I didn't and don't agree with. I wanted to make sure that my viewpoint was represented. . . . I wanted to stand up for what is right. It breaks my heart to see people be so blinded.

Catherine: Was this thread "successful" for you?

Steph: No.

Catherine: How would you define "success" in relation to what you were trying to do on this thread?

Steph: I would define success as having board members who had previously thought of the theory of evolution as the explanation for the existence of our mortal bodies to have changed their views on the subject. I don't feel like my purpose was achieved. I don't think that anyone changed their viewpoints on either side. There was far less board peace.

Steph's characterizations of the other participants as "blinded" and her position as "what is right" not only affected her own rhetoric at the time of the discussion but also illustrates, as she said, that her motivation and focus was persuading the others to change their views rather than persuading others to accept and understand her differences. As a result, the thread was unsuccessful and frustrating for her. It was also a catalyst for her leaving the board, which was something she had been thinking about prior to this thread

and then acted on after this thread.³⁶ In leaving the board, she also opted out of the possibility for similar discussions or public deliberations.

Carrie's motivation for posting initially seemed to be similar to Steph's. Although Carrie wasn't trying to persuade to the extent Steph was, her approach was similar, as can be seen her answer to my questions about her purpose for posting:

Initially when I started posting, it was just to say that it all works together somehow. That we might not quite understand how it all fits, but that I really think that it works, that God uses science. So just to give my perspective on that and really just to talk about it. . . . I really didn't go into the thread looking for new ideas or looking to understand myself better. It was more, "Let me tell you what I know." And there are times when I go in to try to figure something out or to try to learn something, but this wasn't one of them. Although I did get some new perspectives, that wasn't my purpose.

Carrie's later interview comments, however, do show that in addition to her "let me tell you what I know" purpose for writing, she also tried to understand Steph:

Her statements to me seemed really harsh and judgmental of my perception, so I kept trying to come and make sense, first of all, of what she was saying because some of what she was saying really did not make sense to me. So one of the reasons why I came back was to say, okay, really, what are you trying to say. And then as I did start to understand what she was saying, I came back just to offer another perspective. Hey, I disagree with that and here's why. So then I found she was still coming back pretty hard, so at that point I tried to find some common ground and say here's what we both are saying here. One of the things that she mentions that I really disagree with was this interpretation of Alma 42:9 and it took me a while trying to clarify what she thought. . . . I was trying

³⁶ I asked Steph if this thread contributed to her leaving the board. She said, "Well, at that time I had been thinking that I needed to not be so involved on the board because I have a tendency to spend way more time than I should. I would get intense and involved in something or really interested in something and I would check it repeatedly, so I'd been talking with my husband and said, you know, I really need to take a break. And then this thread really hurt my feelings, so I said, okay, if I'm so invested that something is making me this upset, then I need to step back and so I did. And I don't hate anybody or anything. It was just that at this time I needed to step back and then I didn't need the board so much anymore."

to find common ground, but as I look back, I think, oh, maybe I didn't find any!

Catherine: Were you trying to convince her, do you think?

Carrie: No, I really was trying to find some common ground. What I was really trying to say is "Some of what you and I are saying, it's the same thing. Things change." So there I was trying to explain that in some ways we do have common ground there.

Catherine: Did you feel like you both listened to each other? Do you feel like you understood Steph or her position better?

Carrie: I didn't feel like I wasn't listened to or that it was a matter of misunderstanding, just disagreement. I listened, I just disagreed. I tried really hard to understand what she was saying. It took me a while to figure out exactly what she was trying to say. By the end, I understood her. I just disagreed with her.

As Carrie said, because she sincerely tried to understand Steph's position, she focused on common ground, listening, and clarifying Steph's argument rather than on persuading her. As a result, the discussion was not a negative experience for her, as it was for Steph. In fact, Carrie told me that she didn't realize it was so negative until Steph disappeared from the board:

In this thread I was trying to figure out her perspective and trying to share mine and maybe a little agitated, but not mad, so when I walked away from the conversation, I thought, that was interesting, there were some ideas there that I disagreed fully with but had never heard before and it wasn't until I realized that [Steph's] been missing that I thought, oh crud, did that go bad? Because I didn't really think it went that bad. And then as I re-read it thought, oh, maybe that didn't go well at all. So I thought, she's clearly not going to change her ideas, so why does shoving my ideas down her throat. It doesn't change anything. It just makes her feel bad. So I kind of changed the way I respond on topics that I get heated about because of that. If people feel strong about it, I can holler all I want about it online and they're not going to change their minds, so it's not worth creating conflict. I will just try to very briefly state my perspective and move on instead of preaching it. So from my perspective with this thread, I walked away from it without a problem. But if she hadn't disappeared for a while, I never really would have thought about it again.

I see Carrie's changing the way she responds on heated topics as both positive and negative. When she returned to the thread to re-read it in our discourse analysis interview, she realized the harshness of her rhetoric and the reality that certain rhetorical moves aren't effective when someone is "clearly not going to change her ideas." This returning to read her own words therefore increased her recognition of the rhetorical moves that improve and inhibit deliberation. She's now letting that realization change the way she responds on threads, to move away from "preaching" her perspective. However, she also is now trying to avoid lengthy discussions of controversial topics. She now briefly states her perspective and moves on, which actually inhibits public deliberation by refusing to call up a public within the enclave. Instead of deliberation, she now just expresses her opinion. Although the "Cookie Cutter" discussion thread with Emily at the beginning of this chapter shows that expression through narrative can act as a feminist intervention, can invite others to share their perspectives, and can result in more open-mindedness, public deliberation is also important for uptake and for broadening perspectives and is more suitable to some topics, such as this one.

Concluding Thoughts

The MOF participants establish an LDS public within their enclave for the process of negotiating multiple ways of being LDS in larger public spheres and for arguing for the acceptance of the individual ways in which they have merged political and religious identities. They also establish a public in order to share information and deliberate in order to influence others and possibly change their views. As the MOF board operates simultaneously as a public and private forum, MOF participants write with agency in individually negotiating their public voices and identities as Latter-day

Saints and in speaking out with those voices to influence others. This process takes another step towards answering Derr's suggestion that Mormon women will find strength in union as they "honor diversity because their common goal is not to conform but to contribute" (200).

MOF participants' formation of an LDS public in microcosm and the success of that public for deliberation depend on the intimacy and shared sisterhood that the participants established and have developed throughout the history of the board, as described earlier in this dissertation. This intimacy encourages the participants to trust that the majority of the other participants are actually members of the LDS church and are sincere in their discussions. Dahlberg argues that such sincerity is crucial for discursive participants to understand and make rational assessments of others' positions. This sincerity also helps participants in deliberations stay committed to the conversation long enough for uptake to occur.

The intimate enclave influences participants to use rhetorical strategies of intimate literacy, such as expressing affection, using language of relationships, sharing information that they have the right not to share with others, and emphasizing emotional connections along with expressions of dissent and difference (Gere 40, 42, 47). These rhetorical moves involving intimate literacy help establish goodwill, soften dissent, and keep the MOF participants focused on understanding and respect rather than on persuasion. This understanding can then further their development of an open perspective toward difference. Intimate literacy also helps the MOF women stay committed to participating in deliberations rather than opting out.

As long as this intimate foundation is maintained in their creation of LDS publics on MOF, participants' purposes for establishing LDS publics in microcosm can be realized. This can be seen in the discussion threads in this chapter. It was also emphasized in many of the phenomenological interviews I conducted. This excerpt of an interview with Taffi is one example:

Catherine: Tell me a little about how and why you came to participate on this discussion board, your first experiences with it, and your history with the board.

Taffi: Jenn H invited me to this private board, and I came because I was intrigued by the private board factor—no more trolls or lurkers. . . .Over the past year I feel I have opened up more to the board than ever before. I'm becoming more comfortable with who I am, and I'm sure in a large part, that can be attributed to the board.

Catherine: That really interests me. Can you talk about it a bit more? Like, who do you see yourself as and how do you feel like you've become more comfortable with yourself?

Taffi: This group of women has opened me up to a lot of new ideas and opinions. I've always lived in the same area my whole life. Within a 25-30 mile radius, probably. I hadn't been exposed to a lot of different perspectives. When someone would talk about their home birth, or how they were adamant against circumcision, or what-have-you, it would be a new idea and perspective to me. By listening to other women's experiences and opening myself up to their ideas, it helped me form my own opinions on issues that I'd never contemplated before, because in my area there was pretty much one way to do things. I still see myself pretty much as a conservative person in most areas of my life, but at least now I have gone through the thought processes about issues and know why I feel the way I do. Also, even though I may not believe the same way others do, now I am more educated about things and feel I am more well-rounded because of that. I've learned to listen to others' viewpoints and see their side, even if I don't agree with it. I don't think I ever would have experienced that around here without the board. Most of my in-real-life friends and family all think the same way about things.

As Taffi said, through the MOF board, she has encountered different ways of thinking about things and different ways of being LDS. She also formed her own opinions on

issues, which indicates that she has been influenced by information others have shared. Like many of the other MOF participants highlighted in this chapter, Taffi has become more open to difference within the safe space of the MOF enclave.

This chapter therefore shows that we need to rethink the role of subaltern counterpublics. Nancy Fraser sees two purposes for subaltern counterpublics: First, subaltern counterpublics are places of withdrawal and unity for members of subordinated groups, places where subordinated members can talk together about “their needs, objectives, and strategies” so that they might “find the right voice or words to express their thoughts” (14). Fraser here assumes that those needs, objectives, and strategies will always be similar within the group. Second, subaltern counterpublics are “training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (15). After subalterns withdraw to articulate their needs and wants, they then stand up for their interests in larger public spheres. When applied to the MOF board, the discussion threads in Chapter 4 show this kind of collective work in expressing religious beliefs and religious essences and “circulat[ing] counter discourses” so that they might stand up for those beliefs in the face of other discourses. However, the discussion threads in this chapter show a very different use of counterpublics and an expanded role for them. In this chapter the MOF enclave functions as a public itself for individuals who may or may not take action outside the enclave.

Understanding this expanded role of counterpublics is important because it allows us to see how religious people live their religions in different ways, and it allows us to see the complexity of religious literacies. If we realize that religious people might use enclaves as a public and if we view enclaves themselves as valuable, even if religious

people do not take action outside their enclaves, then we can counter false assumptions about difference in relation to religious identities.

Understanding this expanded role of counterpublics also helps us see how important it is that people have the opportunity to negotiate their beliefs within an enclave because this gives others within the enclave the opportunity to see and accept different possibilities for being religious in a larger sphere. This role of subaltern counterpublics as a type of public within itself is therefore important for the possibility of helping others develop open perspectives towards difference, which works best in a safe space rather than a contested one. James Davison Hunter, Neil White, and other investigators found that conservative Christian students who attend religious colleges matriculate with less fundamentalist beliefs and less “hyperrational” reading practices, whereas conservative Christian students attending public institutions tend to become more so (qtd in Perkins 594). Priscilla Perkins speculates that this relaxing of fundamentalist beliefs occurs because students at church-related schools are “enabled by some combination of peer support and culturally sensitive teaching to become more questioning than their relatively embattled and isolated counterparts at secular schools do” (594-5). In her own teaching, Perkins has discovered that when she brings the Bible into the conversation in a writing class, students seem less threatened and less concerned that they might be corrupted by unfamiliar ways of thinking and living. As her students “become invested in the production of culturally relevant knowledge,” Perkins argues, “They can begin to hear what very differently positioned writers are trying to say” (601). Perkins’s experiences with her students parallel the majority of my observations on MOF. The combined public and private aspects of MOF encourage reading and writing tied to

the participants' religious belief system, but participants also have the opportunity to hear and consider other perspectives without feeling threatened by the potential to lose or to be challenged in their own beliefs beyond a certain degree. This finding suggests the need to alter how we think about critical thinking in relation to our composition students, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE MY ONLINE FRIENDS DISCUSSION BOARD AND ITS PARTICIPANTS?

Religious discourse is already a part of the public sphere, regardless of our tendency to treat it as belonging in private spheres, and it isn't likely to go away. Stephen Carter writes,

The battle for the public square is already over. The rhetoric of religion is simply *there*; it is far too late in America's political day to argue over "shoulds." The important question is not whether religions can act as autonomous, politically involved intermediary institutions or whether religious people should have access to the public square. Those questions history has already decided. The question crying out most vitally for resolution, given the presence of religions in the public square, is whether and how to regulate that presence. (6)

We should refocus our efforts, as Carter contends, not on arguing about whether religious discourse should be present in political public spheres, but what to do about its presence. Given that people's faith-based literacies influence their identities and their literacy practices in many different contexts, we need to decide how to treat faith-based literacies in the contexts that we help shape, such as the composition classroom. We have tended to treat them mainly as negative forces, as the cause of sermonizing, witnessing, and refusal to look at academic sources of knowledge and meaning-making, but the MOF participants show us that agency can occur within religious discourse and using faith-based literacies.

Religious agency for the MOF participants includes the following three aspects: (1) acts of claiming and choosing religious essences with awareness; (2) acts of negotiating or altering those essences based on individual experiences; and (3) acts of voicing awareness or voicing those essences for a purpose, whether that purpose be

directed within their religious online community itself or outside their religious community.

The women who read and write on the LDS My Online Friends discussion board fashion their literacy practices in relation to their religious beliefs, which in turn influence the subject positions that they take up and the discursive identities that are possible for them. Religious beliefs and religious subject positions are crucial to the MOF participants' literacy practices. The MOF participants write when they don't have to in order to connect themselves with a group that values their religious beliefs. They write to find support and power in their conscientious construction of multiple essences informed by those religious beliefs. They write to respond to cultural discourses that they perceive devalue those religious essences. And they write to construct a public voice that is in accordance with both their religious beliefs and with their individual differences.

The MOF participants write with agency to negotiate what it means to be an "LDS woman" in relation to church doctrine and in relation to other cultural discourses, and to negotiate what it means to be LDS within a larger public sphere. Although the MOF discussion board is an enclave for connection and support for a group of women who share a religion, it also makes a space for discussions of differences within LDS theology and for reinterpretations of LDS beliefs to account for differences that the participants experience in trying to live their faith.

Reconsidering agency in connection with religious communities sheds light on theories of agency, which I'll discuss in the first section below, and it helps us see the importance of including faith-based literacies in the composition classroom and

pedagogical moves that might encourage understanding and civil discourse by all parties. I'll discuss these in the last part of this chapter.

Lessons for Theory

The MOF participants help us see how, although religious people can claim agency as it's traditionally understood in rhetoric and composition, the concept of agency itself must be revised to account for mythic communities.

The MOF participants show that uses of religious discourse and that writing in religious enclaves does not always constrict open-mindedness or critical agency but may in fact contribute to it, depending on the nature of the literacy community and the space for reading and writing. The MOF discussion board does function at times as a subaltern counterpublic as Fraser defines it, in which its members plan for, discuss, and take action on larger publics (15) on behalf of a variety of causes. For example, MOF participants have written on the discussion board to challenge others to get involved in micro-lending through kiva.org and report back on it; to advocate involvement in state and national venues on behalf of causes like newborn hearing screens or legislation supporting midwives; and to request that other participants send letters and emails regarding disability access for public libraries, local mistreatment of those on WIC, funding for different diseases, judicial rulings about parents' due process and privacy rights in regards to their children's schooling, and so forth.

MOF participants also act on larger publics in behalf of each other, as they did when Michelle, whose husband was deployed to Iraq, was mistreated by her local radio station. The radio station offered free concert tickets to family members of military personnel and then hung up on Michelle when they were off the air. Board members

emailed the radio station about their oversight, and after receiving only rude phone calls in return, they set up an Internet campaign via Diggit.com, reddit.com, My Space, their own personal blogs, and other discussion boards to which they belonged. As a result, one of the participants who blogged about it received over 3,000 hits on her blog; her blog story was ranked on reddit.com; the local news station emailed her about the story; and the radio station ended up calling Michelle, apologizing, and giving her free tickets.

In addition, in 2006 the MOF participants self-published a cookbook. They therefore took action to claim the value of their food- and cooking-knowledge and to counter the idea that professional chefs and publishing companies should be the primary source for such knowledge by self-publishing a cookbook. The cookbook, which contains over 300 recipes, is 8 ½ by 11 and is 77 pages long. It is indexed and referenced by individual contributors, is bound and professionally formatted. The cookbook is one example of the MOF participants writing with agency to interrupt traditional processes of institutionalizing information.

Although these examples show the MOF participants writing with critical awareness and taking action in larger publics, a focus on these uses of their online literacy would give us an incomplete look at how they write with agency because it would ignore the agency they experience in relation to their religion, which is much more common than the agency they experience in relation to larger spheres. As this study has shown, MOF participants demonstrate religious agency by actively and conscientiously engaging in the pragmatics of naming (Schmertz) to claim religious essences and subject positions. As people in a mythic community who rely on religious narratives to find purpose in life and to construct a sense of self, MOF participants do not often use their

online writing to revise or resist the overall power relations within their religion or to find power over others. Instead, they use their online faith-based literacy practices to find spiritual and personal power in the form of self-knowledge and self-worth and in the form of the peace and dignity that accompanies the ability to see themselves as agents, to claim value for their essences, and to separate their own beliefs about the self from others' beliefs. The MOF participants also find power to resist other cultural discourses and definitions while fashioning their own perceptions of their value.

Agency, as the MOF women show, can occur within a fixed structure, a religiously affiliated organization, without necessarily questioning that structure. This agency is possible because there are choices within fixity. For example, the MOF participants show us that religiously devout people can have multiple relationships to religious doctrines even as they accept those doctrines. Also, fixity can offer a position from which to resist other discourses with critical awareness, as it does for the MOF participants who write against cultural discourses of beauty and cultural perceptions of the worth of care-giving. Similarly, accepting a religious foundation that includes essentialist definitions of gender does not preclude agency or automatically result in a unified subject position for the MOF participants. As Fuss argues, there are ways to work with the idea of essence that aren't ahistorical, apolitical, empiricist, or reductive (55). The MOF participants show fluidity as they negotiate multiple essences within their theology. Even as MOF participants accept binary differences between men and women, they claim multiple essences based on their individual experiences: they claim multiple ways of being members of their faith and of being women within their faith. Essentialism therefore does not always translate into anti-feminist, unthinking, unified positions of

oppression. It can provide a basis for agency by offering temporary fixed positions from which to critique other discourses. Essentialism can involve choices among multiple essences, and these choices can result in the power to resist other discourses. It can also be a place from which people prepare for agency as they test out, affirm, and negotiate their individual positions.

As we recast some of these definitions and assumptions, we open up more pedagogical possibilities and more research possibilities. These possibilities come with assuming that faith-based literacies are potentially multiple and by assuming that there is room for negotiation within faith, rather than beginning with assumptions and definitions that lead us to automatically question faith-based literacies.

Lessons for Pedagogy

As discussed in the previous section, religious discourses can offer positions of resistance from which to speak. Religion itself is therefore not necessarily opposed to critical pedagogy. Religion can be a subversive force, and in fact, religion often serves as a mediator between the citizen and the state (Carter 37; Rand 361). Stephen Carter claims that “A religion is, at its heart, a way of denying the authority of the rest of the world” (41). Carter elaborates by explaining that although a religion is a means for understanding the self and for considering the nature of the universe and the purpose of existence, because religions are “autonomous communities of resistance,” adherence to a religion is also a refusal to accept the will of the state when that will clashes with religious creeds or a religious-based sense of right and wrong (40-41). A religion denies others’ authority in that it is an independent source of meaning for its constituents.

Composition instructors can therefore start from the premise that religious discourses “may reflect an oppositional and critically resistant stance” (Rand 363). Goodburn similarly argues that “In many ways, the responses of students with fundamentalist beliefs serve as a mirror (albeit some critical educators might suggest a dark one) that reflects the principles of critical pedagogy from a different location” (349). Goodburn believes that critical educators miss important opportunities to find commonalities with fundamentalist students when they ignore that fundamentalist discourses, like discourses of critical pedagogy, can have the purpose of social critique (334). The MOF participants show this social critique in their discussions questioning the basis upon which mass culture assigns value and questioning the authority of mass culture itself.

With revised assumptions regarding faith-based literacies and agency, as composition instructors, we can then focus our efforts on understanding how to help religiously devout students use their faith-based literacies for agency rather than, as Crowley does, focusing on devising rhetorical strategies that may lead religiously devout people to change their beliefs. The MOF discussion board shows that important to all pedagogical endeavors is welcoming and accepting religious- and faith-based literacies in the composition classroom³⁷. This is important for both religious and nonreligious students alike.

³⁷ By arguing this, I do not mean to imply that all religious voices should prevail in the classroom, particularly those that are themselves uncivil or openly hostile, for example. I do mean to argue that in all cases, even those of incivility or hostility, we should not treat students’ faith and the literacies that accompany them as trivial or imply that something is wrong with those who are devoted to their religion.

The benefits of welcoming faith-based literacies in the classroom are most obvious for religious students. As the MOF participants' literacy practices show, faith-based literacies can be integral to students' identities and to their meaning-making. Not only is it unfair to ask students to separate religious subject positions from their literacy practices, but it may be impossible without asking them to wall off a part of their self. In addition to benefitting religiously devout students, welcoming religious- and faith-based literacies in the composition classroom can help all parties know how to receive and respond to religious discourse when they experience it in other public spheres. In the remainder of this section, I review other scholars' pedagogical suggestions for making a place for faith-based literacies in the composition classroom, and I make some suggestions of my own, based on my ethnographic study with the MOF participants. More qualitative research on private as well as public contexts for faith-based literacies is necessary to add to these suggestions.

As I discussed earlier, classroom rhetorical situations for writing often evoke more public uses of faith-based literacies, such as sermonizing or witnessing. Although we cannot replicate an intimate, self-sponsored enclave like the MOF discussion board in the composition classroom, we can take some steps towards it by trying to incorporate different characteristics of this space in our classrooms and through the types of assignments we give. This might then encourage students to draw on their faith-based literacies for purposes other than sermonizing.

As composition instructors, we need to try to provide rhetorical situations that encourage other purposes for using faith-based literacies. Part of these rhetorical situations should include establishing a supportive and respectful writing space. For the

MOF participants, the nature of their discussion board space for writing was crucial to their use of writing for developing agency and for negotiating the complexities of their religious ideologies. The participants deliberately changed commercial literacy sponsors in order to ensure that they were not ridiculed, criticized, or challenged by those outside their faith and to establish instead a writing environment that was supportive of their religious beliefs and essences. The existence of support and respect for the MOF participants to claim their own positioning was necessary before they were willing to voice and negotiate differences and before they were open to other perspectives. Perhaps some of our religious students might never publicly take up literacy in a way that explores their individual relationships with their faith-based discourses. In fact, we can't expect them to do so in an atmosphere that they do not perceive as "safe" enough. Feeling isolated in one's identity tends to lead to more defensive rhetoric. The MOF participants' negotiations of their multiple gendered subject positions occur because in their enclave, their faith is accepted. This suggests the need for composition instructors to approach students' use of faith-based discourses with acceptance of their place in the composition classroom and their importance to students and to students' literacy practices. In her article "A Radical Conversion of the Mind': Fundamentalism, Hermeneutics, and the Metanoic Classroom," Priscilla Perkins writes that she has realized through her own teaching that the wrong pedagogical approach is to get or make students replace "evangelical approaches to textual authority with more 'liberal,' more dialectical ones" (589). Perkins understands the importance of religious people seeing themselves as faithful adherents to their beliefs and the personal and spiritual power that many find through claiming essences based on a relationship with divinity.

This lesson learned from the MOF board can also be seen in Nowacek's ethnographic study, in which a religiously devout student named Alan felt free to be critical of one of his own religious traditions partly because he is loyal to it and is a part of it and partly because he felt as though Villanova University supported his theological inquires (161). In contrast, a student named Betty was suspicious that her professors had an agenda and were judging her level of religiosity, which Nowacek argues affected Betty's writing in the course. As Alan's situation and the MOF participants' writing shows, if students feel that the classroom rhetorical situation is not judgmental or one that pressures them to be either devout and defensive of their faith or critical of it, they might be better able to merge faith-based and academic writing to claim, negotiate, and respeak religious essences in ways that are empowering to them and enlightening to others who know little about faith-based literacies.

Another part of an effective classroom rhetorical situation is focusing on the goal of understanding and listening rather than persuading or challenging. The MOF board shows us that this focus on understanding is important for encouraging students to draw on faith-based literacies for identity work, negotiation, and deliberation. As Perkins says, "The task I shared with my students had much more to do with understanding than with persuasion" (591). A context of understanding and respect encourages quality deliberative discourse. I believe composition instructors can establish such an environment through the specific pedagogical moves I discuss below.

First, composition instructors can assign students to analyze discussion board exchanges, classroom exchanges, or other written exchanges in order to identify rhetorical strategies that impede dialogue or that continue the conversation. As I

analyzed discussions on MOF, it became clear that intimate literacy in particular, as well as role-taking, sincerity, reflexivity, and more, were important for public deliberation. Analyzing discussion threads also revealed that challenges to a person's religious subject positioning, convictions, or level of religiosity and value judgments about a person's character destroyed the intimate literacy on which public deliberation depended for success. This kind of analysis can help students realize how people might respond to attempts to persuade versus how they might respond to attempts to understand or listen. Helping students to recognize rhetorical moves in others' discourse might encourage them to respond to others' work in the classroom with effective strategies that promote listening and understanding rather than criticism. Ideally, this might lead to students' own use of both public deliberation and intimate literacy and would further the development of a supportive place for discussion and uptake of perspectives. Like Carrie and Steph, who realized the harshness of their language in the "Mormonism and Evolution" discussion thread and, in Carrie's case, changed her approach to disagreements after going back to read the exchange, religious and nonreligious students can improve their abilities to engage in quality public deliberations by studying rhetorical strategies and discussions.

Second, composition instructors can establish that school literacy is one of many literacies. Shannon Carter does this in her "pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity" by asking students about their expressions of membership in religious communities, the rules of the community, the strategies that they use for being taken seriously or heard in the community, and the requirements for becoming literate in that community. She then asks students to apply this assessment of literate and cultural codes to academic literacy and

what they need to do, learn, and recognize before becoming literate in a school contexts (587). I like Carter's goal of helping students become flexible in negotiating rapidly changing literacies (592) and of "flatten[ing] hierarchies among literacies" (579). Carter's pedagogy emphasizes that school literacy is not autonomous.

However, Carter uses these assignments in order to teach appropriateness, emphasizing to students that faith-based literacies are valid, but are simply not appropriate for academic contexts. Labeling faith-based literacies as inappropriate for academic contexts still implies that a part of one's identity is not appropriate for school. Although this approach then allows students to maintain their faith-based literacies as one of many, students quickly learn, as Patricia Bizzell writes, that a language not allowed in school is not valued by the school, regardless of what a teacher says, and this is not empowering (12).

Instead, composition instructors can establish an environment supportive of faith-based literacies by assigning personal genres, such as autoethnographies or narratives, or by asking students to write about their literacy communities and what they know as a result of these literacies. For example, we might invite religious students to explain why religious literacy is significant to them in their lives (Rand 364); how others' portrayals of their religion compare with their experiences; how their faith-based knowledge connects or conflicts with empirical knowledge; or how aspects of their religious identity affect their interactions with others (Williams 517). These assignments should try to elicit discussions of how faith-based literacies have affected students' self-concepts and discursive choices rather than only discussions of their beliefs themselves, which may be more likely to be sermonizing in nature. Another example is Perkins's use of the Bible in

her classroom as a generative text to ask students to compare how reading it relates to other reading that they do. Perkins's goal is helping students understand the power of literacy and how all textual interpretation depends on outside contexts and concerns (592-3). Assignments similar to these will help establish the classroom as a place for listening to and understanding others' histories, literacies, and ideas and the value that those might have for individuals. For the MOF participants, this listening and understanding comes through narratives, which also serve at times as interventions. Carter's assignments, which I discussed above, are an example of this type of pedagogy, as are Hansen's pedagogical suggestions. Hansen bases her suggestions on Pratt's pedagogical arts of the contact zone. Hansen argues that oral autoethnographies and exercises that help students identify with the interests and histories of others are important for establishing contact zones in the classroom in order to "help students find the language that will allow them to bring religious values into public discourse without crippling the dialogue that a democracy depends on" (33).

As composition instructors, we also need to be careful that we phrase comments on student papers and that we phrase course assignments and the questions that we ask in ways that show sincere efforts to understand. Perkins explains that "a judgmental stance, no matter how sympathetic, risks shutting down possibilities for dialogue, individual development, and social change" (610). Perkins found that in her own comments on students' writing, she was able to show students "our collective responsibility to listen to each other, to articulate our own responses to the readings and our experiences, and to ask questions that were intended not so much to challenge but to amplify thought" (605). Rand suggests course assignments that ask individual students questions about their

religious identities with the goal of connecting with them as people and writers.

Although this concept is a good one, I believe that some of the specific questions Rand suggests might evoke defensiveness rather than establishing a context of acceptance. For example, she suggests asking students the following: “If human beings are ‘sinful,’ are they limited in their understandings of a Supreme Being in any way? How are you limited in your understanding of Truth? Do human imperfections require men and women to guard against pride (which is the source of all sin) and arrogance?” (353). These questions require students to focus on the limitations and constrictions of their beliefs. They also seem to require students to take a critical approach to religious beliefs, which is not an effective initial assignment in establishing a writing space focused on understanding and listening.

The simple act of speaking their religious essences in an academic context may have more impact on or more value for religiously devout students than we realize. Schertz argues that when we put an experience into a new context, we take on a different relationship to that experience. Schertz says, “In naming this moment, however belatedly and provisionally, I create a new ethos, a new speaking location. I recreate my subjectivity, act with agency, create a ‘me’ available only in retrospect” (89). As students then speak about their religious identities in an academic context, they may change that religious identity slightly because they have to think about that identity differently: “x would not always and only be x—it would be recognizable as x1 or x2, as context shifts, or as a rhetorical situation changes” (Schertz 88). The changed rhetorical situation may also lead students to think critically about what each different context for speaking asks of their religious identities.

After assigning discourse analysis and personal writing, composition instructors could assign students to write from the perspective of another worldview, which is an assignment that Peter Elbow says is important to students' abilities to practice the Believing Game (qtd in Bizzell 11), and which would also emphasize the goal of understanding and listening. Bizzell turns to Elbow's Believing Game as important for assisting composition instructors with coming to terms with religious discourse and emotion in the composition classroom (13). A more extensive assignment with a similar goal would be to have students conduct their own mini-ethnographies of literacy communities³⁸.

Admittedly, my discussion of pedagogical moves and their resulting scenarios are idealistic and could certainly benefit from additional research. Regardless, designing curricula to welcome faith-based literacies in composition classrooms and altering our own attitudes towards and assumptions about those literacies is an important step towards bridging the liberal and religious divide and to making efforts to teach rhetorical approaches that will encourage civil public discourse in the classroom and beyond.

Looking Ahead: Questions for Literacy Studies and Composition Scholarship

The MOF discussion board has helped us reconsider what agency means. For the women who read and write on the LDS My Online Friends discussion board, religious agency is conscientiously claiming multiple religious essences and then reconstituting those essences based on their material experiences. Religious agency includes altering, but not rejecting, religious essences. Religious agency is also using those essences as

³⁸ I like Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein's book *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* for ideas for establishing a pedagogy in which students conduct their own ethnographies.

positions to critique other cultural discourses to claim personal power to name oneself and to speak one's own value. Religious agency for the MOF participants is speaking out within their religious community, which also functions as an LDS public in microcosm, to carve a space for different constructions of religious essences.

Reconsidering agency in the context of religious communities allows us to see ways in which religious people are actively engaged in identity construction and negotiation, rather than just passive recipients of religious discourses. Recognizing religious agency also helps us see that religious essences can be both fixed and fluid and that as religious people treat them as such, they can find personal and spiritual power in their faith-based literacies.

Misconceptions about the lack of agency in mythic communities and in connection with faith-based literacies may have developed because of a focus solely on public uses of or contexts for faith-based literacies. The history of the MOF discussion board shows that public contexts for faith-based literacies may not be deemed by religiously devout people as safe places for discussions of complexity or fluidity within their faith. Therefore, what we can learn from text-based research using public religious texts (e.g., Crowley) or teacher-based research on religious students in the composition classroom (e.g., Rand; Shannon Carter; Goodburn; Anderson; Leathers Dively; Perkins; Nowacek) is limited. The public texts Crowley uses are written by authors of prophecy interpretation or apocalyptic nonfiction, televangelists, and preachers for the purpose of sermonizing and persuading members of their own religious affiliations to be even more devout and unyielding. The texts written by most composition students also occur in a rhetorical situation that tends to lead to sermonizing, in this case because the audience is

perceived as potentially hostile. Both of these types of public rhetorical situations involve the perceived need to convince people of the validity of religious thought and action. In public research on faith-based literacies, we do not often see religious people dialoguing their beliefs with secular knowledge, and we cannot learn more about why they do or do not engage in this dialogue and the nature of writing situations that might encourage them to do so. We therefore need more qualitative research on rhetorical situations that lead to uses of faith-based literacies other than sermonizing or witnessing. More “little narratives,” to use Beth Daniell’s term, of faith-based literacies are needed to help us understand faith-based literacies as complex and multiple.

My research with the MOF participants raises the following questions for literacy studies and composition scholarship:

- What does religious agency look like in different religious communities and what power exists in relation to it?
- How do different religious doxa influence people’s uses of and motivations for reading and writing in private as well as public contexts?
- What relationships do different communities’ religious beliefs have with their members’ discursive practices, specifically the subject positions that they take up in writing?
- In what rhetorical situations do religious people dialogue their beliefs and what is the result of these dialogues?
- Given the complexity of faith-based literacies and people’s uses of them, what rhetorical tactics might be effective for public deliberation with the religiously devout, tactics that might lead to understanding and respect by all parties?
- When and how do individuals, religious and nonreligious alike, not only widen their perspectives but also change their actions due to discursive exchanges with each other?

- Finally, what do the answers to the above questions mean for how we respond to and incorporate religious discourses in our composition classrooms?

The relationships among religious discourses and secular and academic discourses are important for composition pedagogy and scholarship in general to address right now because of the increasing liberal/religious divide in public discourse. Crowley discusses how discussions of civic issues often shut down in our present discursive climate because they are dominated by literalism and Christian fundamentalism. An inability or reluctance to discuss differences with civility, Crowley contends, makes maintaining democracy difficult (1-3). Stephen Carter argues that our political and legal culture and the attitudes that result from it are also contributing to the liberal/religious divide. Carter says that our fear of religious domination of politics tends to take over our respect for freedom of conscience (specifically religious-based), which is actually very important to our political ideology. Because we want to keep religion from dominating our politics, we ask the religiously devout to act publicly as though their faith does not matter to them (3). In doing so, we ask citizens to “split their public and private selves,” telling them that it’s okay to be religious in private, but not to mention religion in public or to let it influence their public actions (8). Carter argues that such a stance treats religion as a hobby or a fad, “rather than as the fundamentals upon which the devout build their lives” (13-14). This view of religion and fear of religion deepens the liberal/religious divide because it can lead to resentment, defensiveness, sermonizing, and misunderstanding on the part of the religiously devout and to misunderstanding of the nature of religion and negative assumptions about faith-based literacies on the part of those who are not religiously devout.

Religious agency gives us a different perspective on faith-based literacies, that, if applied to the composition classroom and other spheres, might begin to blur the liberal/religious divide in a way that encourages religious students to find personal and spiritual power with their uses of faith-based literacies, and that encourages all students to develop rhetorical strategies for civil discourse in the face of difference.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
IRB-APPROVED LETTER SOLICITING VOLUNTEER RESEARCH
PARTICIPANTS

Dear online friends,

As many of you know, I've been enrolled in a Ph.D. program in English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst for the past six years, and I'm currently working on my dissertation research on the online writing practices of women. I'm now to the point in my dissertation where I need women to participate in my study, so I asked the managers if I could post and see if any of you are willing to help.

I'll tell you a little more about my research study and what I would ask of you if you agree to help:

My research examines women's writing on discussion boards and blogs. The purpose of my research is to explore how women bring historically private writing into the public space of the Internet to develop their voices and their sense of self and to negotiate different forces in their lives.

If you volunteer or agree to participate in my research, I will contact you for three interviews (either via email, the phone, or face-to-face—whichever is best for you). I may also ask to use some of your posts, responses, or blog entries as examples that are relevant to my research. I will provide you with a copy any time I use any of your writing or words so you will know exactly which posts, responses, entries, and interview segments that I use. I'll do this so that you may have an ongoing means of giving or denying permission (that way, if there are certain posts or entries that you don't want me to use, then I won't use them). Also, if you don't mind if I use some of your posts or responses but don't have the time to be interviewed (or vice versa), then please let me know—I'd love any form of participation that you feel comfortable with.

In my research, I will only quote from materials for which I have permission to do so, and if I quote from you, I'll change your name and any other identifying information. In fact, you can choose your pseudonym, if you'd like. Also, if you agree to participate and then later change your mind, I'll withdraw all information related to you from the study.

If you're willing to participate, please email me at cpavia@gmail.com or post here with your email and I'll contact you. I'll need to mail you the university's official consent form for you to sign and return. (I'll provide you with the postage/envelope for it, of course.) Please post here if you have any questions at all. Thank you so much for your help!

Catherine Pavia
cpavia@gmail.com

APPENDIX B
IRB-APPROVED CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Your Name: _____

Researcher: Catherine Matthews Pavia

Title of Research Study: The Public and the Private: Women's Blogging and Boarding Practices in Online Discourse Spaces

Intro to the Study. My dissertation research focuses on the online writing practices of women. In particular, my research examines women's writing on discussion boards and blogs. I'm asking you to participate in this study because of your membership on the LDS MOF discussion board.

The purpose of my research is to explore how women bring historically private writing into the public space of the Internet to develop their voices and their sense of self. I hope that my research will (1) contribute to literacy scholars' and educators' understanding of women's identity formation in the context of recent commercial and technological developments; (2) provide composition instructors with an understanding of the nature of the type of public space and community that women need for their writing in order to develop their voices, define a sense of self, and negotiate cultural forces through writing; and (3) help women reflect on the importance of their online informal writing and community-gathering in their individual lives.

The results of this study will be published in my dissertation and may appear in conference presentations or in articles written for such journals as *Computers and Composition*, *Kairos*, or *College Composition and Communication* or in a book based on my dissertation.

What the Study Entails.

(1) By agreeing to participate in this study, you agree to be contacted for three interviews (conducted either via email, over the phone, or face-to-face at a place of your choosing). I anticipate that each of these interviews will take approximately one hour. In the interviews I may ask questions about your Internet and writing background, your experiences writing on the discussion board and your blog, the reasons why you write on the discussion board, the function and meaning of the discussion board/blog in your life, and so forth.

(2) By agreeing to participate in this study, you agree to allow me to copy some of your posts, responses, or blog entries that are relevant to my research to be used only in my research. I will analyze the types and content of posts on the discussion board in order to examine why and for what end the women on the board choose to write online and the effects their online writing has, if any, in their development of voice and self.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may choose a type of participation with which you feel comfortable. In other words, you may feel comfortable being interviewed, but not with allowing me to use your posts/blog entries, or vice versa. If you agree to either or both types of participation, I will provide you with a copy of all of my uses of your words in my written conference papers and dissertation. In other words, you will know exactly which posts, responses, entries, and interview segments that I use in my writing so that you may have an ongoing means of giving or denying permission for the use of your words.

How Participants' Privacy Will Be Protected. If I quote from your posts or interviews, your name, screen name, and any identifying information, such as your family members' names, will be changed to preserve your privacy. Also, although I do not foresee the need to copy photographs, if the need does arise, I will not use a photograph of yours without signed consent. Any information I collect from you in the course of the study that lets me know who you are will be recorded with a pseudonym. If you agree to be interviewed, I will transcribe the interview tapes using pseudonyms. After I have finished the transcriptions and shared them with you for your approval, I will destroy the tapes.

Risks, Discomforts, and Benefits. I do not foresee any risk or discomfort to you in this study. However, it may be possible for other members of the board who have read your posts and responses to identify you, given the close nature of the board. I also do not know of any way you will personally benefit from this study.

Your rights. You should decide on your own whether or not you want to be in this study. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to be in the study. Your decision to participate in this study is not a requirement of membership on the LDS MOF board. If you agree to participate in the study and then later decide you would like to withdraw, you can notify me by email or phone, and I will withdraw all information related to you from my study.

Where To Go with Questions. If you have questions about this research study or any other matter related to your participation in this study, you may contact me, Catherine Pavia, at (480) 539-3933 or at cpavia@gmail.com.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of Massachusetts Amherst has approved this study. If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this study or if you would like to speak with someone not directly involved in the research study, you may contact the Human Research Protection Office via email (humansubjects@ora.umass.edu); telephone (413-545-3428); or mail (Office of Research Affairs, 108 Research Administration Building, University of Massachusetts, 70 Butterfield Terrace, Amherst, MA 01003-9242).

* * * *

When signing yes on this form, I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I understand that, by signing this document, I do not waive any of my legal rights. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

YES, I agree to participate in this study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

* * * *

NO, I do not wish to participate in this study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS

Interview 1: Focused History

How long have you been participating on discussion boards in general?

How long have you been on this particular discussion board?

Tell me a little about how and why you became interested in discussion boards in general and about your experiences participating on other discussion boards.

Tell me a little about how and why you came to participate on this discussion board, your first experiences with it, and your history with the board.

Are you involved in any other women's groups right now (both online and offline)? How are they similar to this group? How are they different from this group? What do you think the reasons are for those similarities and differences?

If you don't have a blog, why have you chosen not to blog?

Additional Questions for Bloggers:

How long have you been blogging?

Tell me a little about how and why you began reading blogs and about your experiences with blogs in general.

Tell me a little about why you began writing your own blog.

Tell me a little about how you began writing your own blog.

Interview 2: The Details of the Experience

Tell me about a typical day for you on the discussion board—about your daily experience with the board.

Follow-up possibilities: When do you check the board? How do you decide what to read, what to post about, or which posts to respond to? How often do you post a new thread? How often do you respond to others' threads? How often do you get on to read the board in a typical day? For what reasons do you get on the board? Which areas of the board do you read and why?

Are there things you would not write about on the discussion board? Why or why not?

What kinds of things do you find yourself talking about with friends or others in your life that you either wouldn't talk about on the board or that don't come up on the board?

In contrast to the last question, what would you discuss on the board that you might not bring up with others in your life?

How many people on the board have you met face-to-face (in “real life”)? How many had you met when you first joined the board?

Tell me about your first experience meeting others from the board.

Tell me about a recent experience meeting others from the board.

If you’ve gone to a GNO or gotten together with friends from the board before, how is talking face-to-face different for you than writing on the board? How is it similar to writing on the discussion board? Do you talk about the same kinds of things you write about?

To what extent do your online writing and your online relationships mix with the rest of your life? Have you chosen to keep any aspects of your online and “real” life separate? If so, why? If not, why not?

Do you feel like the people on the board know you better than others in real life? Why or why not?

Has your online writing and your offline life ever crossed in ways that you weren’t comfortable with or caused you any embarrassment?

Has anyone ever teased you about your online writing or given you grief about it? If so, tell me about that experience and your response to it.

Do you think of the board as public, private or both?

How do you try to represent yourself online? How do you think others see you?

Do you feel like you are different online than offline?

Have you ever thought about leaving the board? If so, tell me about that time. Also, if you’ve ever left the board, tell me more about why you left and why you decided to come back.

Tell me a little about your experiences with the hosting sites in the history of this board (msn, xsorbit, BabyCenter). What did you like and dislike about each hosting site that you have experienced? Which do you prefer and why?

Additional Questions for Bloggers:

How do you choose what to write about on your blog?

Tell me a little bit about your process when writing a blog entry.

Are there things you would not write about on your blog? Why or why not?

Are there things you write about on your blog that you would not talk about with others in your life? Why or why not?

How often do you write a blog entry?

What's the difference between what you write on the board versus what you write on your blog?

Have you ever written anything on your blog as a result of something written on the board or vice versa? If so, can you give an example?

Who hosts your blog (typepad, blogger, etc.)? What do you like and dislike about that host?

Have you changed the look or structure of your blog at all from what it was when you began blogging? Why or why not?

Can you choose a few of your entries that you feel most represent you and why you feel they most represent you?

Can you choose a few that you feel are your "best" entries and why you think they are your best?

When you blog, do you have anyone or any type of audience in mind to whom you are writing? If so, why that particular audience?

Do you feel like this is, in fact, the people who are reading your blog? Have you ever been surprised by who reads your blog?

Do you feel like your intended audience for your blog ever changes? Why or why not?

Have you ever felt like not blogging anymore? Why or why not? If so, tell me about such a time.

Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning

How do you see the role of discussion boards in people's lives in general? In your own life?

Why do you write on the discussion board? Why is the board important to you?

What do you want from your participation on the board?

Can you tell me a about any particular discussions that have meant a lot to you or that have impacted your life in some way?

Have any discussion threads influenced your thinking? If so, in what ways?

Have any discussion threads influenced your actions or your decisions (daily decisions or life decisions)?

What social, political, cultural, or other forces do you see yourself responding to or negotiating when you write online?

Do you think you as a woman and/or mother are different because of your online writing? If so, how?

Do you think your life is different because of your online writing? If so, how?

What responsibility do you feel towards the board? The other women who post? What responsibility do you think the board has towards you?

Additional Questions for Bloggers:

Why do you have a blog?

Why is your blog important to you?

How do you see the role of blogging in people's lives in general?

What do you want from your blog?

Can you tell me a little about a blog entry of yours that means a lot to you?

Has there been a time when someone else's blog entry influenced your thinking?

Has there been a time when someone else's blog entry influenced your actions or your decisions?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS INTERVIEWS

Questions for “Super Tuesday” Participants
and “Mormonism and Evolution” Participants

What do you remember about this thread?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

What strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

Was this thread “successful” for you? How would you define “success” in relation to what you were trying to do on this thread?

Did participating on this thread cause you to reflect on your own position more?

Did participating cause you to revise your own position at all?

At any time in this discussion, did you put yourself in someone else’s position?

Do you feel like you understood someone else or their position better?

Did you leave the conversation with a more open perspective?

Did you leave the conversation more sure of your own position?

Did the conversation help you see your perspective through another person’s eyes?

Did you feel like you were really listened to? Do you feel like anyone ever misinterpreted or misunderstood your intention?

Did you feel like you really listened to others?

What made you stay committed to this conversation?

One of the many things I’m exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for “We Are All Not Cookie Cutter” Participants

Questions for Emily

What do you remember about this thread?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

What strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

Was this thread “successful” for you? How would you define “success” in relation to what you were trying to do on this thread?

Did you feel like you were really listened to? Do you feel like anyone ever misinterpreted or misunderstood your intention?

One of the many things I’m exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for Other Participants

What do you remember about this thread?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in responding to this thread and what strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

Did participating on this thread cause you to reflect on your own position more?

Did participating cause you to revise your own position at all?

At any time in this discussion, did you put yourself in someone else’s position?

Do you feel like you understood someone else or their position better?

Did you leave the conversation with a more open perspective?

Did you leave the conversation more sure of your own position?

Do you feel like you really listened to others?

One of the many things I'm exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all? Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for "Finding Me" Participants

What do you remember about this thread?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

What strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

Did this thread change you, your thoughts, your actions in any way?

One of the many things I'm exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for "Stand in Your Majesty" Participants

What do you remember about this thread?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

Did this thread change you, your thoughts, your actions in any way?

One of the many things I'm exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for "I Don't Want Another Woman To Speak For Me" Participants

What do you remember about this post?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

What strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

One of the many things I'm exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Was this thread "successful" for you? How would you define "success" in relation to what you were trying to do on this thread?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

Questions for "The Shape of a Mother" Participants

What do you remember about this post?

Did this post get the response you expected? What did you expect?

What made you feel like you could talk about this here (on MOF or online)?

If you had this conversation face-to-face, would it be different, do you think? How?

How does reading this post make you feel now?

What was your purpose in posting this?

What strategies do you feel you used to achieve your purpose?

One of the many things I'm exploring in my dissertation is the relationship between religion and literacy. Do you see this thread connected to religious beliefs at all?

Was this thread "successful" for you? How would you define "success" in relation to what you were trying to do on this thread?

Is there anything else you would have liked to see in this thread?

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MISCELLANEOUS INTERVIEWS

Questions about Corporate Sponsors

Why did you want to invite somebody to the board?

Before you invited somebody, what kinds of things did you consider?

What did you have to do as part of inviting somebody? (Did you email them/talk with them? If so, what did you say? What kinds of things did you have to do--describe, persuade, etc!)

What responsibility do you feel you have when inviting somebody?

What responsibility do you feel your own "sponsor" has toward you?

What do you feel you've gained from inviting another person to the board?

Have there been any drawbacks to inviting somebody (you can email me or pm me if you want)?

Questions for Those Who Have Left

My dissertation is on women and online literacy practices and on the relationships between literacy and religion. A lot of the women on LDS MOFs have been good to let me interview them and use their posts and words for examples, so in my dissertation I'm focusing on LDS MOFs as an online community for reading and writing. There are a lot of critiques about communities in the research I've been reading, so in my dissertation I want to make sure I address these—for those who have stayed, it's been a positive thing, but I know that's not the whole picture. Would you be willing to tell me a little bit about why you left MOF and maybe answer a few questions I have?

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