

2019

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Recommended Citation

Shurtz, Charlotte "Heavenly Mother in the Vernacular Religion of Latter-Day Saint Women." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 29-57.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol10/iss1/5>

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Charlotte Shurtz[†]

HEAVENLY MOTHER IN THE VERNACULAR RELIGION OF LATTER-DAY SAINT WOMEN

Creativity is one of the few culturally appropriate ways that Latter-day Saint women seek for and learn about Heavenly Mother. In my research, I draw on twenty-six interviews with women ages 21 to 55 from around the world who self-identified as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or “Mormon.” According to their interviews, these women seek Heavenly Mother because She is the manifestation of their potential, a topic I will discuss in more detail. Their beliefs and practices—which I define as vernacular beliefs, that is, personal rather than official expressions of religion—are centered around the idea that creativity is a uniquely female power. For example, some women drew on visual art and music as a vehicle for interacting with the female divine, while others feminized scripture, adopting female pronouns and imagery where women were otherwise absent from the scriptural canon. As such practices are unofficial and have been discouraged at times by the Latter-day Saint Church hierarchy, many informants expressed their fears surrounding unsanctioned practices, most particularly the fear of praying directly to the divine Mother. However, I have found that creativity—both physical art forms and more abstract forms of creativity, such as childbirth—offers women greater freedom to create and express their personal theologies.

[†] This is where you can put the author’s attributions.

SHURTZ: HEAVENLY MOTHER IN THE VERNACULAR

To situate myself within this discourse, I am a woman and a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a child, I learned about a Heavenly Mother and was taught that She is the wife of God the Father. This was the only information I had about this divine parentage. After my marriage in 2017, I started to have questions about my role as a woman in the Church, both here and in the afterlife. Thus, I started researching the topic of Heavenly Mother. I was particularly interested in how She exemplified my potential as a woman. While my personal beliefs and practices related to Heavenly Mother are not discussed in this article, my research on the topic was motivated by those religious beliefs, and my religious beliefs are not wholly separate from those of the women who I have interviewed.

Methodology and Sources

The following questions were pertinent to the analysis of this article. 1) How do women first learn about Heavenly Mother? 2) What vernacular beliefs do women hold about Heavenly Mother? 3) Are there unique traditions associated with Heavenly Mother which women maintain or practice? 4) Are there distinct tropes that stand out in the folklore I have collected? These questions guided my interactions with the women whom I interviewed.

While Latter-day Saint men may also hold unique beliefs about Heavenly Mother, I have limited my scope to women who are religiously and culturally LDS or “Mormon.” First, because I had access to a much larger group of women through my participation in several women’s social media groups. Second, because I was explicitly interested in how women interacted with Heavenly Mother. Participants were sought among friends, family members, acquaintances, and from among two social media communities. Using social media to find women who were interested in participating proved especially effective, and over seventy women volunteered to be interviewed. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, only twenty-six of those women were able to participate. The women who participated live in or are from the United States, Europe, Brazil, and Australia. (See the Appendix for additional demographic information.) Although it was not a requirement for participation, most of the women who volunteered already held strong beliefs about the subject. As such, this paper does not reflect LDS women broadly. Because most of the responses were collected from the Aspiring Mormon Women Facebook

group, which provides support for women interested in or currently pursuing a career, the sample also leans towards educated and, in my experience, politically liberal women.

Interviews were carried out face-to-face in my home or on Brigham Young University campus. For non-local participants, I captured audio recordings from our conversations on Facebook messenger video calls or phone calls. Interviews ranged from six minutes to forty-seven minutes long. The interview questions were very open-ended and are as follows:

- Do you remember when you first learned about Heavenly Mother?
- Can you tell me about what you've heard about Heavenly Mother from others? You don't have to personally agree with what you've heard.
- Do you have any personal beliefs or feelings about Heavenly Mother that you would be willing to share?
- Do you have any practices, traditions, or rituals associated with Heavenly Mother?
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me relating to Heavenly Mother or the things we have talked about?

There were a couple of obstacles to conducting these interviews. First, because historically it has been culturally taboo to talk about Heavenly Mother, some women were apprehensive about participation. Multiple women expressed concerns about the potential repercussions of sharing their personal beliefs. As a result, I decided to only use first names and last initials of my informants in this paper.

In addition to drawing heavily from the interviews I conducted, I acknowledge that my work intersects with the broader scholarship on Heavenly Mother. I would like to recognize David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido's "A Mother There?: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven" as an influential resource for approaching this topic. Their research examines what church authorities have said about Heavenly Mother and the myths that surround the figure. The belief that She is too sacred to talk about, for example, is folklore that has been widely adopted by Latter-day Saints. Many of the women I interviewed had previously found comfort in Paulsen and Pulido's assertion that instead of promoting secrecy, "many General Authorities have openly taught about" Heavenly

Mother.¹ Susana Morrill's "Mormon Women's Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven" was also useful in my exploration of the historical discourse among members of the church. Morrill argues that to fully understand modern women's discussion of and beliefs in Heavenly Mother, scholars must look outside of official church publications. Amy Easton Flake's "Poetry in the Women's Exponent: Constructing Self and Society," similarly examines how early Mormon women used poetry to share personal beliefs in the public sphere and discuss "vernacular theology"² with other women. My work suggests that contemporary women in the Church are using art for some of the same purposes, carrying forward a tradition held among LDS women from as early as the 1840s. Additionally, there are many creative works related to Heavenly Mother—from Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Carol Lynn Pearson's poetry, to Caitlin Connolly and J. Kirk Richard's paintings that I perceive as integral to this conversation. Finally, I analyzed and compared the content of the interviews using a folkloric lens, which was heavily influenced by the works of folklorists Lynne S. McNeill, Eric Eliason, and Leonard Primiano.³

¹ David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 16, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.)

² "Vernacular theology is a phrase coined by Christine Blythe in her master's thesis "Vernacular Theologies, Home Birth and the Mormon Tradition." See Christine Blythe, "Vernacular Theology, Home Birth and the Mormon Tradition," Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland (2018), 25, <https://research.library.mun.ca/13350/1/thesis.pdf>.

³ Lynne S. McNeill, *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies*, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013).

Eric Eliason, "Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment: PBEs, First Vision Accounts, Bible Scholarship, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Mormon Folklore," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014), <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/spirit-babies-and-divine-embodiment-pbes-first-vision-accounts-bible-scholarship-and>. Leonard Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in

Folklore Definitions

Members of the Church hold a wide variety of personal beliefs which stem from official doctrine, including the doctrine of Heavenly Mother. This is partially because of the lay-leadership structure of the Church. As Richley Crapo writes, “It is mainly by unofficial means—Sunday School lessons, seminary, institute, and BYU religion classes, sacrament meeting talks and books by church officials and others who ultimately speak only for themselves—that the theology is passed from one generation to the next. Indeed, it would seem that a significant part of Mormon theology exists primarily in the minds of its members.”⁴ Because local Church leadership positions are held by unpaid and untrained lay members, theology is often filtered through the personal beliefs of local church leaders. This theology that is verbally passed from one generation to the next and which exists primarily in members’ minds rather than institutional publications can best be described as folklore.

I draw my definition of folklore from *Folklore Rules* by Lynne S. McNeill, which defines it as “a part of informal culture, it moves via word of mouth and observation rather than by formal or institutional means.”⁵ Because of this, folklore is not limited to a single correct or true version but is marked by variations between people, times, or places. As Eric A. Eliason writes, folklore is interesting because it provides “a window into *actual* beliefs and practices rather than the ideal types sometimes proffered by normative proclaimers.”⁶

Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995),
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1499910.pdf>.

⁴ Richley Crapo, “Grass-roots deviance from official doctrine: A study of Latter-day Saint (Mormon) folk-beliefs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 4 (1987), 467.

⁵ Lynne S. McNeill, *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies*, (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013), 11.

⁶ Eric Eliason, “Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment: PBEs, First Vision Accounts, Bible Scholarship, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Mormon Folklore,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014), 22,
<https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/spirit-babies-and-divine-embodiment-pbes-first-vision-accounts-bible-scholarship-and>.

The religious folklore discussed in this paper is what Leonard Primiano calls “vernacular religion,” which he defines as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.” Vernacular religion includes “the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief.”⁷ Drawing on these definitions and using folklore as a lens, I examine not the official, but the personal beliefs which are informally shared by Latter-day Saint women.

History and Context on the Latter-day Saint Heavenly Mother

Over the past ten years, there has been an increase of public interest in and discussion of Heavenly Mother by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The LDS Church, which is a Christian restoration church, was founded by Joseph Smith Jr. in 1830.

The Church is organized with a president, a global leader who is revered as a prophet by church members. Under him are twelve male apostles, followed by other male general authorities whose responsibilities include overseeing the Sunday School and youth programs. Local congregations are led by lay male priesthood leaders. Although women cannot be the highest-ranking leaders of the global or local church, women lead the women’s and youth programs on both local and global scales. The church functions as a patriarchal system, with only men eligible to hold the priesthood and the highest ecclesiastical positions. Thus, conservative, traditional gender norms are the standard, and men’s roles and opinions are often privileged.

Unlike the traditional view of the trinity, in the theology of the Church, each member of the trinity is a separate being. The Godhead consists of God the Father and Jesus Christ, who are separate divine beings each with a body and a spirit, and the Holy Ghost, who only possesses a spirit. Heavenly Mother is the spouse of God the Father and also has a body and a spirit. She does not replace God the Father, but is His partner. However, She holds no recognized place in the Godhead. As spirit children of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, all human beings

⁷ Leonard Primiano, “Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife,” *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995), 44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1499910.pdf>.

are what John Taylor (a president of the Church) referred to as “gods in embryo.”⁸

The belief in a Heavenly Mother figure is rooted in the belief that God the Father is a resurrected being with a body that is anatomically and biologically similar to man’s. That is to say, according to current policy practices, gender is believed to be a divine feature, and is integral to mankind’s divine purpose, specifically that of creating families which are eternal in nature. Note that within the Church, the word “gender” refers to both performance of traditional gender roles and binary biological sex. In contrast, in academia gender is a social construct and biological sex exists on a spectrum. Joseph Smith taught Zina Diantha Huntington Young that when she reached heaven she would “meet and become acquainted with your eternal Mother, the wife of your Father in Heaven”⁹ Both W.W. Phelps and Eliza R. Snow, early Church leaders and poets, wrote songs that mention a Mother in Heaven.¹⁰ The concept of Heavenly Mother was widely accepted in the early Church, as writings about Heavenly Mother in Edward Tullidge’s *Women of Mormondom*, the *Women’s Exponent*, and the *Relief Society Magazine* show. Written by

⁸ This specific quote is from John Taylor. However, other presidents of the Church have taught the same concept in different words, including Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. “The Origin and Destiny of Mankind,” *Teachings of John Taylor*, (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 2,

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-john-taylor/chapter-1?lang=eng>

See also Joseph Smith Jr. “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1971.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng> and “Knowing and Honoring the Godhead,”

Teachings of Brigham Young, (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 30.

⁹ Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *4 Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 107.

¹⁰ Jill Mulvay Derr, “‘The Significance of ‘O My Father’ in the Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1996-97):100, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/significance-o-my-father-personal-journey-eliza-r-snow>.

Tullidge under Eliza R. Snow's direction and published in 1877, *Women of Mormondom* was an attempt to show the rest of the world what Mormon women were like and what they believed. One chapter, titled "Eliza R. Snow's Invocation," explains the belief in Heavenly Mother and describes how the hymn now called "Oh My Father" had been "familiar in the meetings of the saints" for almost forty years.¹¹ In 1888, a poem by Emily H. Woodmansee, called "Apostrophe," was published in the *Woman's Exponent*, a periodical written and published by LDS women.¹² This poem envisioned Eliza R. Snow returning to her Heavenly Parents and being welcomed by Heavenly Mother in death. Other poems and stories including Heavenly Mother were published in the *Woman's Exponent* and the *Relief Society Magazine*.¹³

In 1909, the First Presidency of the Church issued a statement in the *Improvement Era*, an official magazine for the youth of the Church, which taught that all humans are literal sons and daughters of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother.¹⁴ However, between 1930 and 1970 there was one mention of "Mother in Heaven" and no mentions of "Heavenly Mother" during General Conference addresses.¹⁵ According to Susanna

¹¹ Edward Tullidge, "Eliza R. Snow's Invocation," *Women of Mormondom* (New York, 1877), 187-194,

https://books.google.com/books?id=KWkWAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹² The *Women's Exponent* was a magazine run by the women of the Church for the women of the Church from 1872 to 1914 with approval from President Brigham Young and Eliza R. Snow. The *Women's Exponent* was replaced by the *Relief Society Magazine*.

¹³ Susanna Morrill, "Mormon Women's Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven," *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 83.

¹⁴ First Presidency of the Church, "The Origin of Man," *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (Salt Lake City: General Board, 1909), 75-81, <https://archive.org/details/improvementera1301unse/page/74>.

¹⁵ General Conference is a semi-annual worldwide meeting where the president of the Church, the twelve apostles, and other general church leaders speak to the entire membership of the Church. Their words are treasured by members as modern-day scripture. This information about the use of "Heavenly Mother" and "Mother in Heaven" was gathered by

Morrill, the hymn “Oh My Father” also “became less pervasive and authoritative than it had been in the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries.”¹⁶ Morrill suggests that the decreasing frequency with which Heavenly Mother was discussed in official channels during this period was a result of the attempt to “create a unified, smoothly functioning institution that would be accepted within the wider American religious landscape” through correlation and centralization.

In more recent years there has been a resurgence of conversations that include Heavenly Mother. References to “Mother in Heaven,” “Heavenly Mother,” and “Heavenly Parents” in General Conference addresses began to surface in 1970’s and have increased, with fifty-seven references to Heavenly Mother, explicitly or implicitly, in General Conference from 2010 to 2019.¹⁷ In 1995 President Hinckley, then the president of the Church, shared “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” which states that each individual is “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents,” thus implicitly giving space to the feminine divine.¹⁸ In the last fifteen years, discussion of Heavenly Mother has become much more open. Publications unofficially associated with the Church—such as Exponent II (a Mormon feminist blog and magazine) and Sunstone Magazine (a periodical devoted to sponsoring “open forums of

searching those phrases in the LDS General Conference Corpus. The phrase “Heavenly Parents” was also rarely used, except for the decade from 1940-1949 when it was used six times. However, five of those uses were by a single speaker, Elder Milton R. Hunter, suggesting it was just the word choice of an individual rather than a common cultural phrase. (See Mark Davies, “Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851-2010,” LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.)

¹⁶ Susanna Morrill, “Mormon Women’s Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven,” *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 84.

¹⁷ Mark Davies, “Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851-2010,” LDS General Conference Corpus, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

¹⁸ “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (Salt Lake City, 1995), <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng&old=true>.

Mormon thought and experience”¹⁹)—have published numerous essays about Heavenly Mother. Online discussion boards from the same timeframe show a multitude of posts discussing Heavenly Mother and sharing questions and beliefs about Her. These discussions go outside of the official doctrine of the church.²⁰ In 2011 BYU Studies published “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,”²¹ as discussed above. Because this article was published by a church-sponsored school, it carries more weight with the general church membership than publications like *Exponent II* and *Sunstone*. Then, a gospel essay titled “Mother in Heaven”²² was posted on LDS.org—the official website of the church—in 2015 which provided an overview of the theology surrounding Heavenly Mother and its historical evolution. The “Mother in Heaven” essay was written as one within a collection of essays on more controversial topics such as plural marriage, race and the priesthood, and the Book of Mormon and DNA studies.

Paulsen and Pulido’s article” is the most comprehensive summary of the public words of church authorities about Heavenly Mother. To summarize Paulsen and Pulido, ecclesiastical leaders of the church have taught that Heavenly Mother is the Wife of Heavenly Father, the Mother

¹⁹ “Sunstone Magazine,” (Sunstone Education Foundation), accessed November 19, 2019, www.sunstonemagazine.com/.

²⁰ For a few examples of blog posts and online discussion boards discussion Heavenly Mother, see the following.

Gaia. "Heavenly Mother." *ThirdHour*. July 01, 2012. Accessed July 29, 2019. <https://thirdhour.org/forums/topic/6173-heavenly-mother/>.

MarriedJen. "R/lds - Could Someone Tell Me More about Heavenly Mother?" *Reddit*. November 2017. Accessed July 29, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/lds/comments/7fw6wm/could_someone_tell_me_more_about_heavenly_mother/.

Rachel. "What I First Learned about Heavenly Mother." *The Exponent*. February 01, 2016. Accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.the-exponent.com/what-i-first-learned-about-heavenly-mother/>.

²¹ David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 85, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.

²² “Mother in Heaven,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (2015), <https://www.lds.org/topics/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>.

of the spirits of all humans, co-creator of the world, co-framer of the plan of salvation,²³ that she is involved in Her children’s mortal lives, and that after death, humans will return to both Heavenly Parents.²⁴ This short list summarizes all the “official” doctrines²⁵ taught by church leaders on the topic of Heavenly Mother. These were gleaned from over a hundred years of church talks, showing how Heavenly Mother has been a relatively minor focus within the official instruction of the church.

As Heavenly Mother is infrequently discussed at official church meetings, some believe that members are not allowed to talk about Her at all.²⁶ This belief is not wholly without precedent. Several Latter-day Saint scholars have been excommunicated for their published works on controversial topics, including works about Heavenly Mother. Most notably, Maxine Hanks, Janice Allred, and Margaret Toscano were

²³ The plan of salvation is a plan created by God to bring his children back to heaven through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

²⁴ David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 85, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.

²⁵ The generally accepted definition is that official doctrines are teachings that have been repeatedly taught by multiple prophets or apostles in public settings. However, which teachings are and which teachings are not doctrine is sometimes contested. See Anthony R. Sweat, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat. “Evaluating Latter-day saint Doctrine,” *Foundations of the Restoration: Fulfillment of the Covenant Purposes*, ed. Craig James Ostler, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Barbara Morgan Gardner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 23–44.

²⁶ The earliest known explanation that Heavenly Mother is too sacred to mention was by Melvin R. Brooks, a seminary teacher, and has not been repeated since by prophets or apostles. This is an excellent example of folklore in the Church. It started with one man orally passing on his personal theology, which was then passed on, and passed on again until it became a common belief. (David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 85, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.)

excommunicated from 1993-2000.²⁷ However, Paulsen and Pulido have argued, “We have found no public record of a General Authority²⁸ advising us to be silent about our Heavenly Mother; indeed, as we have amply demonstrated, many General Authorities have openly taught about Her.”²⁹

Vernacular Beliefs about Heavenly Mother

Among the women that I interviewed, the most consistent belief that I encountered was that Heavenly Mother is a divine woman from

²⁷ Maxine Hanks was excommunicated on September 19, 1993. She edited the book *Women & Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism*, which includes essays on Heavenly Mother. Janice Allred was excommunicated on May 9, 1995. She is known for writing on child abuse within the Church and on Heavenly Mother, including in the book *God the Mother and Other Theological Essays*. Margaret Toscano was excommunicated November 30, 2000. She co-wrote the book *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* with her husband Paul Toscano (who was excommunicated on September 19, 1993), as well as authored many papers on Heavenly Mother, priesthood, and other topics. Although for each of these women, their published works on Heavenly Mother were only partly and not primarily why they were excommunicated, Margaret Toscano later observed “No doubt the publicly discussed excommunications of feminists like Janice Allred, Lynne Kanel Whitesides, Maxine Hanks, and me, all of whom were disciplined in part simply for talking about the Heavenly Mother, adds to the general sense that discourse about her is strictly forbidden.” (Margaret Toscano. “Is There A Place For Heavenly Mother In Mormon Theology? An Investigation Into Discourses Of Power,” *Sunstone: Mormon Experience, Scholarship, Issues, & Art* 133, (July 2004), 16.)

²⁸ General Authorities are a group that includes the prophet, apostles, and other global church leaders over Sunday School, and youth and adult class organizations, such as Relief Society, Young Men’s, Young Women’s, and Primary.

²⁹ David Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 85, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.

whom women inherit an innate creative power. In many ways this belief aligns with the gender norms³⁰ of the Church, but it also expands upon them.

For example, nearly all women that I interviewed shared the belief that Heavenly Mother was involved in the creation of the world. For some women, like Amy,³¹ this belief was based on logic. “If Abraham is right, and the creation is the work of gods - then it makes sense to believe that Heavenly Mother was there at the creation (maybe even the main architect if nurturing/creating is a divine woman thing).”³² Amy referred to the scripture Abraham 4:1, which states “and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth.”³³ Heavenly Mother is not explicitly described in these verses, nor have general authorities officially interpreted it to include Her. By including Heavenly Mother among the “gods” who created the earth, Amy broadens the canon with her interpretation. While most informants described this belief more simplistically, like in Sarah N.’s statement, “I also believe that Heavenly Mother was involved in the Creation,”³⁴ others were more imaginative, such as in Ariana B.’s interview.

And if God was like, ok, so when we create our world, I want to have this, this, this, and this. And She was like m-mhh, we need to cut out a little bit of this. . . Maybe create a couple more practical things, like maybe trees should be this color . . . like you have your creative vision, my dude, but I’m here to level with you. We have all these little celestial babies running around and I kinda want to give them a nice place to live and be tested and all that. . . So I picture God as being like above and beyond in his aspiration. He’s just so lofty sometimes. He’s got these great big ideas. And I

³⁰ The Church teaches that mothers are “primarily responsible for the nurture of their children,” and that women, more generally, are stewards over the youth. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (Salt Lake City, 1995), <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng&old=true>.

³¹ Amy requested that only her first name be used.

³² Amy, interviewed by the author, October 26, 2018.

³³ The Book of Abraham, which details the Biblical prophet Abraham’s life, was translated by Joseph Smith Jr. from Egyptian papyri. Members of the Church consider it scripture, like the Bible. (Book of Abraham 4:1.)

³⁴ Sarah N., interviewed by the author, September 28, 2018.

picture Heavenly Mother being like, that's really good, but let's think about the practicality of this a little bit. Let's find a compromise to see your creative vision but also like maybe have less explosions. And let's desaturate this color a little bit, let's even out these values a little bit. And we'll make something really beautiful together.³⁵

Ariana B.'s imagery portrays Heavenly Parents as having not only a very human relationship but a distinctly gendered one, as well. According to her beliefs, Heavenly Mother is a practical mom, engaged in child-rearing and homemaking. Such a portrayal reinforces gender roles as taught by the church. Yet, by describing in detail what she believes Heavenly Mother does, Ariana B. also writes women into Latter-day Saint cosmology.

Another common motif that I encountered was the belief that women are created in the image of Heavenly Mother, the female goddess. As Callan O. explained, "I'm not created in the image of God the Father, but God the Mother."³⁶ Once again, some women talked about how this is a very logical belief. For example, Kristen S. explained,

Also, just the whole thing that we're created in God's image. And, I guess I've, I don't know that I've always understood this, but I'd say that my understanding of that would be that as a woman I must be created, not just, not in my Heavenly Father's image, but in my Heavenly Mother's image because I'm a woman. And that makes more sense to me than being created just in Heavenly Father's image.³⁷

This group of beliefs uses logic to expand on the Genesis creation account. Genesis 1:27 reads, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them."³⁸ That is, that God is either androgynous or that women were created in the image of their mother. And for Latter-day Saints who believe in eternal biological gender, the latter is a logical extrapolation. As Nicole G. explained, "my

³⁵ Ariana B., interviewed by the author, October 26, 2018

³⁶ Callan O., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

³⁷ Kristen S., interviewed by the author, September 22, 2018.

³⁸ Gen. 1:27 KJV.

body is an inheritance of my Heavenly Mother, [and] that She has a real woman's body."³⁹

Some women discussed their belief that their creativity was also inherited from their Heavenly Mother. Sarah N. explained, "Women are creators. You know, even by their mortal sleeve, if you will. There's the flesh that they live inside of. The flesh in and of itself is a creative force."⁴⁰ She believes that women are essentially creators because creative (and life-giving) powers rest in their reproductive organs. Nicole G. shared a similar belief. However, her belief was more expansive.

You know, God created man in his own image, but we are created in Goddess's image, in our Heavenly Mother's image. And that there is power in Her body. And I'm not really one that subscribes to the idea that Motherhood is the end-all-be-all and that creation, or that when we describe ourselves as creative beings that we are referring directly to anything relating to Motherhood. That's not part of my personal theology. I mean, I understand the power of that rhetoric, and the power of believing in that rhetoric, but it's not really something that I subscribe to. So when I say Her body has power, our bodies have power. I'm not even really sure what that means exactly. I know it's related to creative power, but I'm just thinking I don't want to limit that to having a baby or Her having children. But that that is also an inheritance from Her. She is also a creative being and that is inherent in me because I have Her body. And men can also be creative, but it is given to them as a blessing whereas in me and in Her, it is inherent, it is inseparable from our physical and spiritual identity.⁴¹

Nicole G.'s responses remind me of Valerie Hudson's "The Two Trees" which argues that women are given the gift and responsibility of bringing life to the world through motherhood and men are given the gift and responsibility of leading life to the next world through priesthood ordinances like baptism.⁴² Hudson defines a woman's "apprenticeship to become like their heavenly mother" as pregnancy, childbirth, and

³⁹ Nicole G., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁴⁰ Sarah N., interviewed by the author, September 28, 2018.

⁴¹ Nicole G., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁴² Valerie Hudson, "The Two Trees" (presentation, 2010 FairMormon Conference, Sandy, UT, August 2010).

<https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2010/The-Two-Trees>.

lactation—creation of life. She also claims that only by “being a woman married to [her] sweetheart and having children forever” can a woman have the fullest joy. Thus, Hudson excludes unwed and childless women from apprenticeship to Heavenly Mother. Generally, the women I interviewed view gifts of creativity and power from their Heavenly Mother as encompassing more than just reproductive creation. By expanding the definition of creative gifts from Heavenly Mother, they include women who are unable or who choose to never physically give birth as equal heirs.

Customs that invite Heavenly Mother

Because there are no official or culturally accepted practices associated with Heavenly Mother in Latter-day Saint culture, I did not expect that many women would have specific customs that invite Heavenly Mother into their day-to-day devotion. Thus, I was surprised at what I found. The most common customs included either praying directly to the divine mother or incorporating her into their personal prayers, using feminine or inclusive pronouns when discussing God or reading scriptures, and performing creative acts to express and explore their personal theologies about Heavenly Mother.

Traditions related to prayer were varied. Many of these women identified a sense of conflict between the words of the late church president, Gordon B. Hinckley, and their own personal yearning for a direct relationship with Heavenly Mother. In an address to the membership of the church, Hinckley stated, “I have looked in vain for any instance where any President of the Church, from Joseph Smith to Ezra Taft Benson, has offered a prayer to ‘our Mother in Heaven. I suppose those ... who use this expression [of prayer to Heavenly Mother] and who try to further its use are well-meaning, but they are misguided. The fact that we do not pray to our Mother in Heaven in no way belittles or denigrates her.”⁴³ Because this statement has neither been supported nor refuted by more recent presidents of the church, some members consider it doctrine, while others consider it an opinion or suggestion. About praying

⁴³ Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God" (speech, Salt Lake City, UT, October 1991), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1991/10/daughters-of-god?lang=eng>.

to Heavenly Mother, Abby A. explained, “This is one that I, well, over the last five years I’ve been like kinda grappling with this. I really want to have more of a relationship with Heavenly Mother—sorry, I’m getting emotional. . . . But I just don’t feel like we’re allowed to. I know President Hinckley talked about not praying to Her, but I’ve always had this question in my heart of if we can’t pray to Her, then how can we have a relationship with Her, if we can’t talk with Her?”⁴⁴ Brittani M. expressed a similar feeling of conflict about praying directly to Heavenly Mother, but has come to a different conclusion. Describing her journey to develop a relationship with Heavenly Mother, she said, “One major step of that was beginning to pray to Heavenly Mother, which I felt very conflicted about initially because of President Hinckley’s talk about that, but, so I think I had started before that talk and I think I stopped briefly, but I started again.”⁴⁵ She didn’t explain why she started praying to Heavenly Mother again but did acknowledge the conflict she felt between her positive experiences praying to Heavenly Mother and President Hinckley’s direction not to pray to Her.

Some women have identified ways to work around the direction not to pray directly to Heavenly Mother but still feel like they are including Her in their prayers. For example, Melissa A. explained, “when I’m in really, really dire straits, when I’m really feeling down, sometimes I’ll ask Heavenly Father, hey, can you send Heavenly Mother down here to send me some guidance.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Callan O. said, “So when I pray, I think of Heavenly Mother kinda being on a speaker phone. So, maybe I can’t pray directly to Her because we’ve been told not to do that. At least, that’s my belief that She’s somewhat inaccessible that way, even though I don’t know why. I try to think of Her as being there and being available and my Heavenly Parents being a team.”⁴⁷

There is also a group of women who have developed the practice of praying directly to Heavenly Mother through reasoning and revelation. Adrienne W. was very logical in how she talked about praying to Heavenly Mother. Comparing her Heavenly Parents to her mortal parents, Adrienne said, “I believe you can pray to Her and that’s fine. Sometimes you’re just sick of men. You don’t really want to talk to Heavenly Father,

⁴⁴ Abby A., interviewed by the author, October 25, 2018.

⁴⁵ Brittani M., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁴⁶ Melissa A., interviewed by the author, October 26, 2018.

⁴⁷ Callan O., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

which I think makes sense, because sometimes you don't want to talk to your mom, you just want to talk to your dad and vice versa."⁴⁸ Similarly, Ariana B. said, "I include Her in my prayers and sometimes I like very, very occasionally, I'll pray specifically to Her. Like if there's something going on that I'm like I need another woman's touch in this. Sorry, dad. But I need mom right now."⁴⁹ One thing that is interesting about Ariana B.'s prayer tradition is that she also believes that Heavenly Mother plays a unique role in answering prayers as well. "I think a lot of times people get revelation; they'll think it's from God, but I wonder how many times it's really from our Heavenly Mother. She's like, this is a lady problem, I've got this. I'll see you in like five minutes. I'm gonna go down and comfort this child right now."⁵⁰ In these narratives, women depict Heavenly Mother as actively engaged in their lives.

Although she does not pray to Heavenly Mother herself, Rachel O. said, "I think if a person feels personally prompted to and especially, in particular, Mormons, or whatever, if that's something they need for their spiritual connection with God, then that's totally valid."⁵¹ Other informants also expressed a general openness towards privately praying to Heavenly Mother or including Her in prayer if the individual feels it is beneficial to their own spiritual journey. The women's openness to these practices reflects the deeply personal nature of their vernacular theology of Heavenly Mother.

Another tradition among the women I interviewed is changing words to songs or scriptures in order to include Heavenly Mother in their daily devotion. Among Latter-day Saints, applying scriptures to oneself by adding one's own name to the scripture where pronouns are used or a personal challenge where a scripture character faces a challenge is a common practice for spiritual learning. These women described how they have adapted this practice to fulfill their desire to learn about Heavenly Mother. Several women talked about changing the words of songs to include Heavenly Mother as something that helps them feel close to Her. Abby A. said, "I don't know if this is sanctioned or not, but I change the words to 'I am a child of God' and I sing it as 'I am a child of God / And

⁴⁸ Adrienne W., interviewed by the author, September 22, 2018.

⁴⁹ Ariana B., interviewed by the author, October 26, 2018

⁵⁰ Ariana B., interviewed by the author, October 26, 2018

⁵¹ Rachel O., interviewed by the author, October 25, 2018.

They have sent me here.”⁵² In comparison to Abby’s inclusive “They,” the original words to this song, “I am a child of God / And He has sent me here” only describe a male God.⁵³ Callan O. described how she and her husband include Heavenly Mother in scriptures and songs.

When we read scriptures with our kids, we do the little picture books that have the animations. But he tries to, when it says Heavenly Father, tries to incorporate Heavenly Mother, too, and our Heavenly Parents. And I try to do that too. Just kinda switching the language around sometimes. Which is hard to do because literally everything is Heavenly Father. Even singing “I am a Child of God” and being able to help our children understand that that means they are children of two Heavenly Parents and that both of those people are significant to them has been helpful.⁵⁴

In addition to changing lyrics in songs, Callan O. and her husband also regularly teach their children about both Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. Brittany O. said that this is a tradition she and her husband are currently trying to implement for when they have children in the future. “We started kinda a tradition where when we are referring to Heavenly Father, we say ‘and Heavenly Mother’ when we are talking about gospel related topics. We acknowledge that they are both up there and we want to create a home where we will teach our future children that they are both there and we use Her name more often.”⁵⁵ By including the words “Heavenly Mother” in their daily scripture study and in conversation, these women lead their families in reinterpreting the scriptures and doctrine of the church.

Many women also found that artistic expression was a powerful means for articulating and exploring their beliefs, even within more public settings. Other women discussed how consuming that art—poetry, plays, children’s books, music, and visual art—invited them into a conversation about Heavenly Mother that radically shaped their beliefs.

⁵² Abby A., interviewed by the author, October 25, 2018.

⁵³ Naomi Ward Randall. “I am a child of God,” *Children’s Songbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 2.

⁵⁴ Callan O., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

⁵⁵ Brittany O., interviewed by the author, November 1, 2018.

Poetry seemed to be a major force for shaping personal beliefs. *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* by Rachel Hunt Steenblik seemed to have a powerful impact on the women I interviewed. Although I was unable to interview Rachel Hunt Steenblik for this project, the introduction to *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* is important to understanding the book's role in these women's lives. The introduction to *Mother's Milk* reads, "These are the poems I could write with my questions, my hurt, my hope, and my reaching. Others could write other poems with theirs. I hope that they will. We need them all."⁵⁶ As both the title and the introduction say, in writing poetry Steenblik seeks for Heavenly Mother. She also encourages other women to write their own poems to seek Heavenly Mother and interact with their belief in Her. Abby N. described how she had "heard whispers or small mentions from people, but not enough" about Heavenly Mother and then a friend introduced her to *Mother's Milk*. She explained, I "immediately purchased it on Amazon. I was like I need this right now! I love reading through those short poems and just being able to recognize that other people know Her and have experiences with Her and are discovering Her too, and I'm really thankful for that."⁵⁷ For Abby N., reading *Mother's Milk* was both a way to learn about Heavenly Mother and realize that she is not alone in yearning to know more. Brittany O. shared that when others have asked her how they can learn more about Heavenly Mother, she "would always recommend *Mother's Milk*, the book of poems by Rachel Steenblik."⁵⁸ *Mother's Milk* was not the only literary work mentioned. *Dove Song*, a collection of poetry about Heavenly Mother, was also discussed as being influential. As an anthology, *Dove Song* gives voice to many women's vernacular beliefs about Heavenly Mother. Lorraine M. also pointed to the renowned Carol Lynn Pearson's work which has impacted the beliefs of women for several decades. Carol Lynn Pearson described her one-woman play *Mother Wove the Morning* as "an historical and personal search for the Divine Mother."⁵⁹ For Pearson, writing and performing this play is

⁵⁶ Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Common Consent Press, 2017), introduction.

⁵⁷ Abby N., interviewed by the author, October 19, 2018.

⁵⁸ Brittany O., interviewed by the author, November 1, 2018.

⁵⁹ Carol Lynn Pearson. "Healing the Motherless House," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 241.

engaging in a creative process to seek Heavenly Mother by being creative like Her. For Lorraine, Pearson's poetry and her play *Mother Wove the Morning* was the main sources from which she has learned about Heavenly Mother. Lorraine also identified a recent children's book, *Our Heavenly Family, Our Earthly Families* by Caitlin Connolly, Bethany Brady Spalding, and McArthur Krishna, as a source for teaching children about Heavenly Mother. She said "There was a book I found at a church bookstore recently that I got for a friend who just had a baby, and it's about just our Heavenly Family and all of the art is very much our Heavenly Parents. And you know, it's just like, I think it's neat that that's something that is being marketed to mainstream members of the church now because, you know, because so many people believe it. We don't have very much information about it, but we want our children to grow up seeing and hearing about it. . ."60 Lorraine has consumed art to seek Heavenly Mother and is now encouraging others to do the same.

Another type of art described in the interviews is visual art. Sherry M. talked about appreciating paintings as a way to learn about and remember Heavenly Mother. After talking about how little of the artwork in church buildings shows women, Sherry M. mentioned, "I think it is important to point out our Heavenly Mother. We are made in Her image and I think that's important to point out. I love the Heavenly Mother artwork. There's one by J. Kirk Richards that I think is amazing. I love Caitlin Connolly, the one that shows Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father and all of the children in all their varieties. That really touches me. I really love the artwork that includes Heavenly Mother."⁶¹ For her, viewing artwork depicting Heavenly Mother is comforting and touching. It teaches that she is made in Heavenly Mother's image and reminds her that she has a Heavenly Mother.

Kay B. talked about two different art projects at BYU that helped her learn about Heavenly Mother: a maze of white cloth with embroidered references to Heavenly Mother created by Katie Payne and a collection of photos with quotes about Heavenly Mother created by Anna C. (whom I also interviewed). Kay B. also collects artwork depicting Heavenly Mother.⁶²

⁶⁰ Lorraine M., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁶¹ Sherry M., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁶² Kay B., interviewed by the author, November 2, 2018.

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Anna C. talked extensively about art and as a way she has come closer to Heavenly Mother, both through appreciating the art of others and creating art herself. As an undergraduate student at BYU, she saw Katie Payne's art installation, a maze of white cloth and quotes about Heavenly Mother.

When I started my BFA project at BYU, right before I started it I saw Katie Payne's installation at BYU. She did this really lovely installation piece with like white sheets and she'd embroidered quotes about Heavenly Mother, or she'd changed the YW theme to say like "We are daughters of a Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother who love us and we love them" and things like that. . . And she had all these white, embroidered panels kinda organized in a circle and you'd walk through them. When you got to the center, there was a giant pillar of light, essentially. It was really beautiful. . . And as soon as I saw it, I was like this is something I want to talk about. Like this is something I want to hear more about, and I want to hear how other people think, what other people think about Her. And if other people have similar feelings as I do, or if other people have been taught similar things as I have and things like that. So that, I feel like, kinda opened the desire in me to like learn more and explore about it.⁶³

For Anna C., Katie Payne's artwork led to a desire to learn more about Heavenly Mother and eventually, to her own artwork on the Divine Mother. As a photographer, she used photographs and quotes from a survey of women to create a beautiful collection of images that were displayed at BYU. In our interview Anna C. spoke extensively about this project. She identified the creative process, from the survey to planning and taking photos to the actual exhibit, as how she has learned the most about Heavenly Mother.⁶⁴

Other women described seeking Heavenly Mother through creative processes, such as music. Julie de Azevedo-Hanks (a popular LDS songwriter) shared a song that she wrote a called "Mother, where art thou?" expressing her yearning to find Heavenly Mother. Rachel O. said "I have one child, so I think that while nursing my son when he was an infant or singing to him, and especially like singing primary songs that

⁶³ Anna C., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

⁶⁴ Anna C., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

talk about motherhood or about childhood, I've found those to be ways to help me connect to the Divine Feminine or to Heavenly Mother."⁶⁵

Although she doesn't write her own songs like De Azevedo-Hanks, Rachel O. creates music by singing. She creates this music more informally and privately than De Azevedo-Hanks. While singing to her son, Rachel O. is being creative like Heavenly Mother and at the same time inviting Heavenly Mother into her relationship with her infant.

One woman talked about feeling connected to Heavenly Mother when cooking. Sarah N. shared how cooking food for her children has recently become a spiritual experience.

So, women are creators. And I think too, you know, it's actually, just, literally been in the last month of my life that I have had the experience of, of seeing how when I make dinner for my children I am, I am infusing my love. That my love is part of the ingredients of the food that I am sharing with my children. And that was, that has been really surprising to me. It's not something that I've ever been or felt spiritually connected to. Though, I will say this, I have been, I've associated cooking with creativity, that's why I love it so much.⁶⁶

Again, we can see how women are making meaningful their lives through exploring their creativity as a means of connecting themselves with a divine heritage.

A final, and perhaps more traditional expression of women's creative power in which women encounter the Divine Mother is pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. Callan O. explained,

There have been some special spiritual moments in my mothering journey that I just feel like . . . I feel very connected to Her. And like the birth of my children, for instance. Those moments when it's just like . . . [connection cut out] of course She's part of that process, these are Her children, too. [I asked her to repeat what she had said when the connection cut out.] I was just saying the birth of our children, I think you're really connected to the veil. So close to it. Because you're literally bringing a spirit child down from heaven, giving them a body, and now they're on earth. And I think, of course She would be involved in those moments. She would

⁶⁵ Rachel O., interviewed by the author, October 25, 2018.

⁶⁶ Sarah N., interviewed by the author, September 28, 2018.

have to be. They are Her children, too. There's no way as a mother that I would not be involved in that kind of process. I think those moments drive that home.⁶⁷

Callan O. felt that when giving birth she is interacting directly with Heavenly Mother as the newborn is passed from its heavenly to its earthly mother. The process of birth thus connects women, mortal and immortal, in the perpetuation of life.

Folklorist Christine Blythe came to such a conclusion in her thesis “Vernacular Theology, Home Birth, and the Mormon Tradition.” One of her informants, Kayte Brown (a doula) explained that “When I am at a birth I pray for the presence of my Heavenly Mother, because that is her realm of responsibility—over her daughters as they bring their children into physical existence.”⁶⁸ As Blythe points out, such beliefs carve out space for Heavenly Mother's authority and provides flesh to her identity. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, another participant in Blythe's research, echoed Kayte's words.

A midwife friend told me that she doesn't even think of praying to Heavenly Father when she is helping women in that sphere. She feels so strongly that it is Heavenly Mother's domain. I did pray to Heavenly Father, but for Heavenly Mother to be with me and to support and sustain me. I do believe it is a sphere She is especially over. . .⁶⁹

Drawing on their belief in Heavenly Mother's creative powers, Steenblik and her midwife friend attribute responsibility for the divine duties of answering prayers and watching over childbirth to Her. Thus, they attribute to Heavenly Mother power and authority that have not officially been declared to belong to Her.

Where official Latter-day Saint doctrine has not provided room for roles and responsibilities of Heavenly Mother, Latter-day Saint women—

⁶⁷ Callan O., interviewed by the author, October 27, 2018.

⁶⁸ Christine Blythe, “Vernacular Theology, Home Birth and the Mormon Tradition,” Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland (2018), 110, <https://research.library.mun.ca/13350/1/thesis.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Christine Blythe, “Vernacular Theology, Home Birth and the Mormon Tradition,” Master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland (2018), 114, <https://research.library.mun.ca/13350/1/thesis.pdf>.

in informal and creative ways—have. Through various forms of creativity, they have set aside space for women to discuss their vernacular theology and created community to support each other in their desires to talk and learn about Heavenly Mother.

In the weeks following my interviews, several women reached out to me to express their craving to know more about Heavenly Mother and their desire to creatively display their personal beliefs through art, writing, and music. There is a thriving tradition of seeking and creating related to Heavenly Mother among some Latter-day Saint women, a tradition which I predict will continue to grow in the coming years.

In fact, many women felt that despite their lack of access to the priesthood or ecclesiastical position, that it was women's responsibility to bring more knowledge of Heavenly Mother to light. As Lorraine M. explained, "I believe that She is somebody who, you know, one day we'll learn more about Her. That's just what I believe. . . You know, just that I think the women of the church today are very much part of how we eventually will continue to learn more about Her."⁷⁰ Lorraine believes that the "women of the church" are essential to the process of learning more about Heavenly Mother. Sarah N. felt similarly.

I also believe that it is the women's responsibility to bring it forth. And so, in my mind, the men have to be willing to make room for the women to have, not even to have it [because] they have it, to be recognized as having the authority to bring forth the doctrine and power of Heavenly Mother.⁷¹

Both Sarah and Lorraine's beliefs are consistent with how belief in Heavenly Mother was transmitted even in the earliest period of the church.

For example, both Wilford Woodruff and Joseph F. Smith, two previous presidents of the Church, recognized a woman, Eliza R. Snow, as receiving revelation or inspiration about Heavenly Mother—a belief she incorporated into the hymn "Oh My Father," which is one of the earliest mentions of Heavenly Mother in LDS history. It is currently published in the official hymn book of the church (Wilcox 5).⁷² Speaking of "Oh My

⁷⁰ Lorraine M., interviewed by the author, October 23, 2018.

⁷¹ Sarah N., interviewed by the author, September 28, 2018.

⁷² Linda Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, ed. Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 5.

Father” in an 1893 General Conference, Wilford Woodruff said, “That hymn is a revelation, though it was given unto us by a woman—Sister Snow. There are a great many sisters who have the spirit of revelation. There is no reason why they should not be as inspired as men.”⁷³ Until recently, Snow’s hymn “Oh My Father” was one of the only sources on Heavenly Mother known by a major population of the church. Because of its centrality to LDS doctrine, I find it fascinating that it was transmitted by a woman; furthermore, that women, then and now, have drawn on poetry and other creative forms for authority where they otherwise have little institutional authority.

In a recent *Exponent II* Magazine book review, Emily Updegraff made a similar observation about poetry. She writes, I think I do not overstate things when I say the recently published work of Latter-day Saint poets in *Dove Song* and in *Mother’s Milk* are portals to revelation on Heavenly Mother. And given the cooled lava mentioned above, poetry may not be just a possible portal, but one of the very few ways to access Her at all. I’d go so far as to say if we’re going to learn anything new about our Mother in Heaven, we will learn it from our poets.⁷⁴

Like the women I interviewed, Updegraff recognizes that there are few officially approved ways to seek and to learn about Heavenly Mother. She identifies poetry as a portal to seek and learn about Heavenly Mother without needing official Church approval. Through poetry and other means, Latter-day Saint women are actively developing theology about Heavenly Mother outside the constraints of the official religion.

Although there is relatively little official Church doctrine about Heavenly Mother, the folklore about Her is plentiful and diverse. Carrying on the traditions of their religious fore-mothers, the women I interviewed express this folklore in the rituals of their daily devotions, the physical forms of their artwork, and the words they use to describe more abstract forms of creation like childbirth. Drawing on their belief that they have

⁷³ Wilford Woodruff, “The Power of Faith,” in *Collected Discourses Delivered by President Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others*, comp. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank, CA: Brian H. Stuy Publishers, 1989), 3:410-11.

⁷⁴ Emily Updegraff, “Book Review - Dove Song and Mother’s Milk,” *Exponent II* 38, no. 2 (2018), 36.

inherited gifts of creativity from Heavenly Mother, Latter-day Saint women claim authority to develop vernacular theology centered on Her. They create deeply personal theology around themselves and their experiences as women while expanding the limits of the Divine. I suspect that as this doctrine is developed further, it will be by women within a growing community of creative works. The responses of the women I interviewed introduce many additional possibilities for research and suggest that this is a relatively untapped, although important, topic within Latter-day Saint culture.

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Appendix

Table 1.

The table below contains demographic data collected during the interviews, with minimal editing to standardize white and Caucasian, The Church of Jesus Christ to LDS, etc.

	Birthplace	Current Location	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Duration of Church membership
1	California	Arizona	44	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
2	Idaho	Utah	42	Caucasian	LDS	[no data]
3	Wisconsin	Utah	23	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
4	California	Utah	47	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
5	Utah	Utah	31	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
6	Stockholm, Sweden	Texas	35	Caucasian	Mormon/post-Mormon	lifetime member
7	Texas	Colorado	35	Caucasian	LDS	convert of almost a year
8	Utah	Utah	24	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
9	Utah	Utah	28	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
10	Utah	California	41	Caucasian/European ancestry	Mormon Feminist	lifetime member
11	Colorado	Arizona	39	Caucasian	LDS	convert
12	Utah	Arizona	42	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
13	California	Michigan	37	Caucasian	LDS	member for 29 years, since age 8
14	Utah	California	29	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
15	Utah	South Carolina	55	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
16	Florida	North Carolina	28	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
17	Lakinghays, England	Texas	35	Chicana	LDS	lifetime member
18	Arizona	Vermont	24	Caucasian	LDS	since age 7 or 8
19	Idaho	Florida	39	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
20	Idaho	Massachusetts	30	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
21	Utah	Australia	38	American-Islander	LDS	lifetime member
22	Utah	California	21	Caucasian	LDS	started attending at age 5
23	[did not provide information]	California	21	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
24	Nevada	United Kingdom	28	Caucasian	LDS	lifetime member
25	Utah	Arizona	36	Caucasian	LDS	convert in 1994
26	Brazil	Washington	25	Mixed race - Latino, Spanish, White and Middle Eastern	Christian/LDS	lifetime member