

SHE SIMPLY WANTED MORE: MORMON WOMEN AND EXCOMMUNICATION

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In September 1993, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints excommunicated several scholars who had challenged the Church's positions on gender, sexuality, and the family. In her 1992 book *Women and Authority*, for example, Maxine Hanks had argued that the refusal to grant authority to Mormon women created a church that denied female spiritual power and expected women to find meaning in a male god with a "male body." She believed that women would experience the recognition of female spiritual power not as "something new" but as "a loosening of bonds" that would allow them "to use something they had always had." It would be "a spiritual liberation."¹ D. Michael Quinn, another excommunicated member, had written an article demonstrating that the practice of polygamy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had not ended with the Second Manifesto.² Lavina Fielding Anderson had spent hundreds of hours compiling examples of Latter-day Saint leaders using their ecclesiastical power to intimidate intellectuals into silence.³

1. Maxine Hanks, "Introduction," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xxvii–xxviii.

2. D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 9–105.

3. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology (1992)," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189–92.

Like many scholars of my generation, I had no idea that these excommunications happened or how important they would become. My mother had just decided that I was old enough to stay home alone, and I reveled in my freedom. I spent much of my time after school watching *Murphy Brown* and *Ghostwriter*. I was obsessed with Jonathan Taylor Thomas and Rufio from *Hook*. My life, of course, was not perfect. The year 1993 was also a time of mourning for my family. My uncle Christopher died in November of that year at the age of seventeen. My great-grandfather died less than a week later. Although he was ninety-four, his death hurt just as much as Christopher's. My great-grandfather was one of the few people who seemed to understand me. He complimented my drawing skills, told me that I had a beautiful singing voice, and encouraged my love of reading.

As an adult, I learned that 1993 represented a kind of death for members of the Mormon studies community. Since the 1970s, Latter-day Saint women had been challenging the limited role the Church provided for female spirituality. The excommunication of Sonia Johnson, an outspoken ERA supporter, was the Church's response to the challenges the feminist movement offered the Church in the 1970s and 1980s. According to poet and former *Dialogue* editor Mary Bradford, Johnson became "a folk figure of sorts"—"a litmus test of loyalty on the one hand and a symbol of revolution on the other." She claimed that Johnson was "almost as ubiquitous as the Three Nephites."⁴ In 1995, the Church responded to the expansive theology of feminists like Maxine Hanks and Margaret Toscano with "The Family: A Proclamation to the World." It reiterated the Church's fundamental belief that "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God" and that gender roles are eternal.⁵

4. Mary L. Bradford, "The Odyssey of Sonia Johnson," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 23.

5. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

As time passed, the September Six became a symbol of the numerous ways in which the Church disciplines Latter-day Saint intellectuals. Kristine Haglund has written that “the ugliness of the 1990s” meant it was “never again . . . possible for an earnest Mormon with academic ambitions and liberal political inclinations to believe that her religion, her scholarship, and her activism belong integrally to Mormonism.”⁶ Although Haglund was writing specifically about the literary scholar Eugene England, many people regarded the September Six with a similar sense of loss. Their disciplining caused an entire generation of Latter-day Saint scholars to pause before writing. Although I was only a child when they occurred, the disciplinary hearings shaped my own experience as a Mormon historian. This essay is my attempt to reckon with the legacy of the Church’s decision—both in my own life and for the field of Mormon studies as a whole.

As with many scholars of Mormonism, for me, Mormon history is family history. I was born into an interfaith family. My father was a seventh-generation Latter-day Saint whose ancestors had converted in upstate New York before moving with the Saints to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally, Utah and Idaho. My mother’s family, on the other hand, combined Catholicism with folk belief in the *fae*. Her grandmother held meetings of the Portneuf Community Club in her home. Members read tea leaves and performed “spiritual work.”

According to my mother, my father left the Church long before it instigated disciplinary measures against the September Six. He had served as president of his high school seminary in the late 1970s but lost his faith after the death of his newborn child in 1981. Family members describe him flitting between atheism, a kind of reconstructed Mormonism, and general Protestantism for much of their marriage. By the time I was born in 1983, he no longer felt the need to bless his children in an LDS ceremony or raise them within the Church. He and

6. Kristine L. Haglund, *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 23.

my mother divorced four years after I was born. My mother's family distrusted the Church after experiencing years of discrimination as one of the very few non-Mormon families in the area. My father was largely absent. As a result, I learned about the Church as a child through the writings of people like Sandra and Jerald Tanner. The Christian bookstore in the heavily LDS town of Pocatello, Idaho, had an entire section devoted to anti-Mormon pamphlets. As teenagers, my friends and I giddily perused its shelves. It felt like a transgressive act against a Church that controlled our lives even though none of us were members or believed its truth claims.

It wasn't until graduate school that I became interested in a more nuanced version of Mormon history. I first started attending the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association (MHA) in 2009. The consequences of the Church's decision to discipline the September Six shaped my perception of Mormon studies. The University of Michigan immersed its graduate students in a culture that valued women's studies. At the Mormon History Association, however, I discovered that the aftermath of the September Six had decimated the study of Mormon women's history. Although there were important women scholars present, including Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Sarah Barringer Gordon, men far outnumbered women at the meeting.⁷

7. For their works, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *Proclamation to the People: Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, ed., *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and*

By the 1970s, Latter-day Saint women had begun to question the Church's privileging of male careers and spiritual power. Claudia Bushman has described the trepidation and excitement with which Latter-day Saint women greeted the wider feminist movement. She gathered with a group of educated women in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1970s. In her introduction to the 1971 "pink issue" of *Dialogue*, Bushman wrote that they had "no officers, no rules and no set meeting time." They rejected many of the claims of the nascent feminist movement but "read their literature with interest."⁸ The women who produced the pink issue of *Dialogue* insisted that they were not radicals and claimed to be "shocked by [the] antics" of their more "militant" sisters.⁹ Their rejection of extreme "antics" distanced them from controversial figures like Sonia Johnson. Over time, however, the discussions the group had about women's lives radicalized some of the participants. Bushman described the excitement of being part of a group of women who were "working together, engaged in frontline enterprises, researching, thinking, and writing for ourselves." She wrote just a sentence or two later that they "felt invincible."¹⁰

Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

8. Claudia Bushman, "Women in Dialogue: An Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 5. I have a copy of the pink *Dialogue* and have reflected on this quotation before. I was reminded of it, however, while preparing for this essay by reading Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 49.

9. Bushman, "Women in Dialogue," 5.

10. Claudia Bushman, "My Short Happy Life with *Exponent II*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 186, quoted in Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," 52.

While Latter-day Saint women were meeting in Boston, a similar group coalesced in Utah County. Feminists from Orem, Provo, and the surrounding areas met at Brigham Young University before being banished to the public meetings spaces in Provo in 1979 for their support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Like their Boston sisters, the women did not see themselves as “radicals.” According to historian Amy L. Bentley, the women “identified strongly with the LDS Church and concerned themselves with ‘family’ issues.” Their meetings covered a wide range of topics—“sex discrimination, depression among Mormon women, political lobbying, the rhetoric of polygamy, female bonding and networking, a history of sexual equality in Utah, growing up black in Utah, suicide, rape, planned parenthood, historian Juanita Brooks, the legitimacy of responsible dissent, the John Birch Society, and the pamphlet ‘Another Mormon View of the ERA.’”¹¹ Together, the women who met in Boston and Provo created a definition of faithful Mormon feminism. Faithful feminists argued for change and sought to improve women’s lives. They did not, however, challenge the legitimacy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or its emphasis on traditional family values.

The growth of feminist consciousness among Latter-day Saints led to a flowering of women’s history. A coterie of Latter-day Saint scholars combed the archives of the *Woman’s Exponent* to understand the place of Mormon women within the first wave of feminism. In 1982, Kenneth Godfrey, Audrey Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr published *Women’s Voices*, a collection of excerpts from women’s diaries that allowed Latter-day Saints to see the contributions that their grandmothers and great-grandmothers had made to the Church.¹² In time, the flowering

11. Amy L. Bentley, “Comforting the Motherless Children: The Alice Louise Reynolds Women’s Forum,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 47.

12. Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

of Mormon women's history provided evidence that Latter-day Saint women had once spoken in tongues, healed each other's bodies, and even prophesied. Inherent in many of these women's scholarly writings in the 1980s was an acceptance of Church hierarchy—they weren't "radicals," they insisted. Although these Mormon feminists believed that Church had previously minimized women's experiences in its history, they reaffirmed the authority of male leaders. Individual Mormon feminists could publish about their own lives and research early Mormon women's history. They did not, however, explicitly challenge the Church's authority.

In the 1990s, some feminists began to pull on the more radical threads of Mormon feminism. In 1992, for example, Margaret Toscano called for the "transformation of the entire Mormon priesthood" so that it recognized both male and female spiritual power. She believed that the resulting Church would be a better reflection of the kingdom of God, a place she believed was populated with "priestesses and priests, with equal right to know and speak in the name of the Godhead."¹³ Although she was not excommunicated until 2000, she too faced a disciplinary council in 1993. The Church's distrust of feminists extended to some of the women who had been involved in the groups formed in Boston and Provo in previous decades. The same year that the Church excommunicated the September Six, Brigham Young University denied a proposal to have the historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich present at its Women's Conference. Ulrich had been a prominent part of the Mormon feminist movement in Boston and received a PhD from the University of New Hampshire. Her work on colonial New England marked her as

13. Margaret Toscano, "Put on Your Strength, O Daughters of Zion': Claiming Priesthood and Knowing the Mother (1992)," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 188.

an important scholar of early American material culture and women's lives.¹⁴

In choosing to discipline feminists like Margaret Toscano and Maxine Hanks, Church authorities demarcated the boundaries of acceptable Mormon thought. They suggested that scholars could not directly challenge the Church hierarchy or its emphasis on the traditional heterosexual family. Sara Patterson has written that excommunication allowed Mormon scholars to reject the association of adulthood with heterosexual timelines marked by marriage and reproduction.¹⁵ The non-Mormon scholar Sara Jaffe has argued that the milestones white Americans associate with adulthood are “based on outdated assumptions about class and gender.”¹⁶ Both authors use the term “queer time,” theorized by Jack Halberstam in the early 2000s, to represent a future in which heterosexual timelines no longer define individual lives.¹⁷ Toscano and others called for a radical reimagining of the Church that undid hierarchies so that men and women could flourish. They imagined a future in which marriage and family would not be the only meaningful demarcations of people's lives. In September 1993, however, the Church reasserted the importance of the family and submission to the Church hierarchy. The publication of the family proclamation two years later underscored this point.

The lack of women scholars that I saw at MHA in the 2010s seems to me directly related to these excommunications. Mormon studies already

14. “Brigham Young Rejects Pulitzer Prize Winner as Speaker,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* Feb. 24, 1993, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/brigham-young-rejects-pulitzer-prize-winner-as-speaker/>

15. Sara M. Patterson, “The *Straightjacket* of Times: Narrating D. Michael Quinn,” in *DNA Mormon: Perspectives on the Legacy of Historian D. Michael Quinn*, edited by Benjamin E. Park (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022), 40.

16. Sara Jaffe, “Queer Time: The Alternative to ‘Adulthood,’” *JSTOR Daily*, Jan. 10, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/queer-time-the-alternative-to-adulthood/>.

17. J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

offered few rewards to women. Although there were women faculty at BYU and within the Church History Department, hiring committees often preferred to give positions to men, whom they assumed were primary breadwinners and thus needed income to support their families. Women also faced limited opportunities for advancement within BYU and the Church History Department. The threat of excommunication made Mormon history even less attractive as an area of study. By the 2000s, it was apparent that there was a second “lost generation” within Mormon studies. This time it was made up not of novelists from the period following World War II but of the scholars who might have been if the Church had not excommunicated the September Six.¹⁸

The arrested development of Mormon feminism has been deeply painful for Mormon women. In preparation for this reflection, I spent several days reading the memoirs and blogs of Mormon feminists. So many of their stories are about the difficulty of fitting their lives into the narratives that the Church has written for them. In *East Winds*, for example, Rachel Rueckert describes the painful disjuncture that she felt between her desires for her life—which included traveling to India, walking the Camino de Santiago, and ultimately becoming a writer—and the expectation that she marry young.¹⁹ In some ways, Rueckert’s writing is a plea that she be allowed to play in “queer time”—to develop herself even if it comes at the expense of a traditional Mormon life. Likewise, a blogger at Feminist Mormon Housewives lamented in an essay on being a stay-at-home mother that she had never been encouraged to “[consider] anything else.” She found that the Church’s insistence that being a stay-at-home mother was the “best thing” for her children was a hollow promise. Although she wanted to fulfill the expectations others

18. For an article on the original “lost generation,” see Edward A. Geary, “Mormondom’s Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Jan. 1978): 89–98.

19. Rachel Rueckert, *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2022).

had for her, she found the thought that being a mother to small children was the “best thing” that would ever happen to her “depressing.”²⁰ She simply wanted more.

In addition to reading published narratives, I also asked Mormon women on Twitter what they felt was the biggest tension between their faith and their feminism. The people who answered expressed frustration with the limited vision that the Church offered them—a vision that they did not believe was in accordance with Mormon theology or scripture. One woman wrote that the Church’s theology offered women an opportunity to be “co-creators and co-equal gods” but was unable to fulfill the grandeur of those promises in everyday life. Instead of honoring the creative nature of female spirituality, the Church often “siloes” women and limited their power.²¹ Another woman saw the “logical conclusion” of Mormon doctrine as “full partnership and equality” for men and women. Instead of being offered a breathtaking vision of female potential, however, she found herself mired in a “sexist, patriarchal structure that defies both [Mormon] doctrines and the teachings of Christ.”²² I came to see these women as petitioners asking the Church to allow them to experience the fullness of the gospel. Latter-day Saint feminists have found themselves in an awkward position. Although they believe that the LDS gospel offers an expansive

20. Thunderchicken, “The Imbalance of Stay-at-Home Motherhood,” *Feminist Mormon Housewives* (blog), Mar. 23, 2015, <https://www.feministmormonhousewives.org/2015/03/the-imbalance-of-stay-at-home-motherhood/>.

21. Kristine A. (@_Kristine_A), “Our potential versus our reality. Co creators and co equal gods working together to plan form and create without false hierarchies imposed,” Twitter, Dec. 29, 2022, https://twitter.com/_Kristine_A/status/1608571589221814272.

22. Joy Grows (@thrifty_joy), “the biggest tension for me is that we don’t actually follow our doctrines to their logical conclusion—full partnership and equality,” Twitter, Dec. 28, 2022, https://twitter.com/thrifty_joy/status/1608302137468981248.

view of the eternities in which women have equal power to men, they find the current reality of the Church restrictive.

As an outsider to Mormonism, I hope that feminist scholarship continues to flourish—for personal as well as academic reasons. Because I cannot be excommunicated, I often comment on women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ issues in the LDS Church. But insiders need to be able to do this work as well. Of course, the excommunication of the September Six did not fully arrest the development of Mormon feminism or the study of Mormon women's history. The current generation of Mormon scholars has built upon their work. Scholars like Christine Talbot, Andrea Radke-Moss, and Rachel Cope have continued to write interesting books about Mormon history, even though they are some of just a few women doing so.²³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A House Full of Females* has shown scholars outside of Mormon studies what a close, careful analysis of polygamous family structures can tell us about nineteenth-century America.²⁴ Hannah Jung has examined how the federal government disciplined Mormon families using birth certificates, gossip, and formal legal structures.²⁵ Blaire Ostler and Taylor

23. Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852–1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Andrea Radke-Moss, "We Also Marched: The Women and Children of Zion's Camp, 1834," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 147–65; Andrea Radke-Moss, "Silent Memories of Missouri: Mormon Women and Men and Sexual Assault in Group Memory and Religious Identity," in *Mormon Women's History: Beyond Biography*, edited by Rachel Cope, Amy Easton-Flake, Keith A. Erikson, and Lisa Olsen Tait (Lanham, Md.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017), 49–82; Rachel Cope and Zachary McLeod Hutchins, eds., *The Writings of Elizabeth Webb: A Quaker Missionary in America, 1697–1726* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2019).

24. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

25. Hannah Jung is currently a PhD candidate at Brandeis University, where she is finishing a dissertation on secrecy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Petrey have applied queer theory to the study of Mormonism.²⁶ Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Kristine Wright write beautifully about feminist theology and ritual practice.²⁷ Recently, the work of Elise Boxer, Farina King, Sujey Vega, and Janan Graham-Russell has challenged Mormon scholars to take a more intersectional approach to their studies and recognize the inflection of race in Mormon women's experiences.²⁸ Joanna Brooks, whose 2012 memoir *The Book of Mormon Girl* made her the face of Mormon feminism, has published extensively on the Church's role in promoting white supremacy and settler colonialism.²⁹ Kate Holbrook's work integrates material culture and food into the history of

26. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2021); Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

27. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2017); Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Ashley Mae Hoiland, *I Gave Her a Name* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2019); Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–85.

28. Elise Boxer, "'The Lamanites Shall Blossom as the Rose': The Indian Student Placement Program, Mormon Whiteness, and Indigenous Identity," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 132–76; Farina King, "Diné Doctor: A Latter-day Saint Story of Healing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 81–85; Sujey Vega, "Intersectional Hermanas: LDS Latinas Navigate Faith, Leadership, and Sisterhood," *Latino Studies* 17, no. 1 (Mar. 2019): 27–47, and Janan Graham-Russell, "Roundtable: A Balm in Gilead: Reconciling Black Bodies within a Mormon Imagination," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (2018): 185–92.

29. Joanna Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of An American Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, eds., *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018).

Mormon women, while others like Amy Hoyt and Melissa Inouye have expanded their studies beyond the United States.³⁰

When I first began studying Mormon history in the late 2000s, it seemed as though the Church was opening up its history. Other scholars frequently asked how the Church had responded to my scholarship. They assumed that the Church hierarchy would try to deny me access to the archives and limit my ability to ask important questions about race and sexuality. I told anyone who asked that I found the Church to be open and welcoming. Recently, however, I feel like the Church hierarchy is retrenching. Discussions of scholars being asked to make their research conform with LDS doctrine and calls for “musket fire” make me pause when I answer that question now.³¹ In the past, I felt as though the Church was completely open to discussing difficult questions, and the specter of the 1993 excommunications was receding. I’m not so sure anymore. It’s possible the September Six represent both the past and future of Mormon studies.

This saddens me. I want my Mormon sisters to have access to a fulfilling theology. While I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, my own

30. Kate Holbrook, “Radical Food: Nation of Islam and Latter-day Saint Culinary Ideals” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2014); Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye and Kate Holbrook, eds., *Every Needful Thing: Essays on the Life of the Mind and the Heart* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2023); Caroline Kline, *Mormon Women at the Crossroads: Global Narratives and the Power of Connectedness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022); Amy Hoyt, “Maternal Practices as Religious Piety: The Pedagogical Practices of American Mormon Women” in *Women and Christianity*, edited by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Karen Jo Torjesen (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2009).

31. Tamarra Kemsley, “BYU Faculty Members Urged to Align Their Teaching, Research Better with LDS Tenets,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, Jan. 29, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2023/01/29/byu-faculty-urged-align-their/>; Haley Swenson, “Crushingly Cruel,” *Slate*, Sept. 3, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/09/mormon-lds-church-gay-rights-controversy-byu-speech.html>.

church congregation called a divorced single mother as our pastor. Because I had grown up in conservative southeastern Idaho, I had few examples of female spirituality or leadership as a child. As a child of divorced parents, I believed my family was broken. In my new pastor's sermons, she spoke about the pain of her husband's rejection and the peace that she found in a gospel that promised she was loved in her imperfection. She talked about the challenges of being a single mother and the difficulty she had in seeing herself as beautiful. She saw me in my uncertainty and assured me that I was loved as I was. Her words were gospel for me in a way that no man's could have been.

Mormon theology offers a similarly empowering vision to its women members. For some women, Rachel Hunt Steenblik's poetry has captured their experience of hungering after God. She describes women as searching for God "the way a baby roots for her mother's breast."³² This vision is somewhat limited. It does not necessarily capture the experiences of childless, queer, or trans women, or even women who find breastfeeding to be an awkward, cumbersome experience. For many women, however, reading Steenblik's poetry is an experience in being "seen." The threat of Church discipline, however, is always present. As I read the memoirs, poetry, and tweets of Mormon feminists, what I want most for them is a church that recognizes their prayers and their activism as a fundamental part of the kingdom of God rather than a challenge to the Church hierarchy and potential disciplinary council.

32. Steenblik, *Mother's Milk*, 148.

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