Rethinking Mormonism's Heavenly Mother

Taylor G. Petrey
Kalamazoo College

When feminists interrogate the symbolic realm of religion, they often expose much of theological discourse as an idealized projection of a masculine subjectivity.[1] In response to androcentric theological discourse, some feminists' approaches have reframed religion in support of feminine subjectivity. For example, Luce Irigaray experienced an important, constructive turn to religion in her writings in the 1980s and 1990s following her early criticism of phallogocentric Western philosophy. She argued provocatively:

> Monotheistic religions speak to us of God the Father and God made man; nothing is said of a God the Mother or of God made Woman, or even of God as a couple or couples. Not all the transcendental fancies, or ecstasies of every type, not all the quibbling over maternity and the neutrality (neuterness) of God, can succeed in erasing this one reality that determines identities, rights, symbols, and discourse.[2]

Elsewhere, she contends: "as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming."[3] For Irigaray, "to become divine" means

[1] I presented oral and written versions of this paper in several fora and wish to thank audiences for their questions and feedback. I wish to thank specifically Susanna Morrill, Joseph Spencer, and the members of Patrick Mason's "Gendering Mormonism" course at Claremont Graduate University in spring 2014 for their critical input in the late stages of this paper, and Grant Adamson for his keen eye. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers who provided important perspectives and encouragement.

[2] Luce Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?," in *The Essential Difference* (ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994) 76.

[3] Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (trans. Gillian C. Gill; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 63–64.

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to become a subject, as opposed to being a term that defines the other. Fertility, motherhood, and female genealogies are central to Irigaray's divine woman as a way to establish female subjectivity.

Distinctive among other Christians, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) not only affirms the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but an additional divine figure known as Heavenly Mother. The existence of Heavenly Mother is an official doctrine of the church emphasized in hymns and sermons, and taught in multiple official statements and venues.[4] Irigaray's call for divine women has resonated with Mormon feminist thinkers.[5] Even before Irigaray, since the 1970s, Mormon feminists have perceived Heavenly Mother as a source of empowerment for women, though they have not always agreed on how best to represent her. In thinking about the representation of women in religion as a source of subjectivity, I want to bring to bear a few questions on this feminist theological project by looking specifically at Mormon feminist theologies of Heavenly Mother: what does it mean to imagine a divine character as the universal for all women? What does it mean to imagine that divine woman in a relationship with a divine man, and what kind of relationship do they form? What does it mean to speak about her roles and characteristics as a woman?

Irigaray's vision of a female deity is realized in part within Mormon feminist theology. There are, however, important critiques leveled at Irigaray's project that implicate Mormon feminist analysis of Heavenly Mother as well. For some, the mere assertion that there is a feminine or female divine is an empowering act, but such a gesture does not examine what kind of symbolic representation of the feminine or female is offered. The juxtaposition of Mormon feminist theorization about a Heavenly Mother with critiques of Irigaray's concept of a "Divine Woman" reveals the common limitations that both face in accounting for the diversity of women (and men) with respect to sexuality. While critical engagement along these lines has been an important part of the legacy of Irigaray's proposal, the lingering gender essentialism of Mormon feminist theologies of Heavenly Mother has not yet received significant attention. Mormon feminist theology of Heavenly Mother has been complicit in heteronormative theories of sexual difference. I offer one speculative solution to this theological exclusion within the boundaries of a generous orthodoxy.

[4] First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Origin of Man," *Improvement Era* 13 (1909); repr. in *Ensign* (February, 2002), https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/02/the-origin-of-man. The affirmation of "Heavenly Parents" is made also in the 1995 document, First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," http://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation. The Church also produced a "Gospel Topics Essay" dedicated to the issue. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mother in Heaven," https://www.lds.org/topics/mother-in-heaven.

[5] Margaret Toscano, "Heavenly Motherhood: Silences, Disturbances, and Consolations," *Sunstone* 166 (2012) 72–79.

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Irigaray and "Divine Woman"

In her 1984 essay "Divine Women," Irigaray argues that women must be divine in order to attain social, economic, and political power.[6] Her argument begins from Ludwig Feuerbach's notion that religion is a projection of human ideals. She adds that the projection of a female deity would ground female subjectivity.[7] Irigaray proposes an alternative feminine imaginary to traditional patriarchal divine ideals.[8] Rather than women accepting the male ideals in the constraints of an ontology of sameness, women stand in need of an alternative framework of their own so as not to be subsumed into the male. Irigaray's call, however, for divine women/divine woman contains internal tensions with some of her earlier critiques of sameness. Her constructive work often falls prey to her earlier arguments.

Birth and maternity are central features in Irigaray's articulation of a divinization of woman. She argues both for the centrality of maternity as a symbol, but also against the restriction of women's identity to motherhood. Her call for a divine female aims to give women a point for personhood apart from being a vessel for reproduction. To be only a mother is to not be divine. Motherhood can be restricted to a function rather than to an identity and/or autonomy. Further, this divine female must be both independent and in relationships: "If there is ever to be a consciousness of self in the female camp, each woman will have to situate herself freely in relation to herself, not just in relation to the community, the couple, the family."[9] One must be divine first, and then one may be for the other.

Still, the maternal holds a central symbolic function for Irigaray. She explains, "we also need to discover and declare that we are always mothers just by being women. We bring many things into the world apart from children, we give birth to many other things apart from children. . . . We must take back this maternal creative dimension that is our birthright as women."[10] While Irigaray is keen not

[6] Irigaray's interest in the subject of religion has continued in subsequent books. Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (New York: Continuum, 2012); Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (trans. Stephen Pluhácek; New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[7] Irigaray's deployment of Feuerbach's theory of God as a projection has been the subject of critical assessment of her work. Some have pointed to this approach as a safe appropriation of religion, while others have noted that religion does not work without sincerity of belief, which Irigaray deconstructs in "Belief Itself" (Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 69–72). Amy Hollywood critiques Irigaray's assumptions about religion that bypass belief, suggesting that Freud was correct when he argued that religion works when the dynamics are hidden (Amy Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical," *Hypatia* 9 [1994] 158–85; Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002] 211–35).

[8] Grace Jantzen has argued for a new religious imaginary based on Irigaray in *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999). Pamela Sue Anderson argued that projection is the way to understand religion in *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998).

[9] Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 69.

[10] Ibid., 18.

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to reduce motherhood to children and not to reduce women to motherhood, in her analysis the mother remains the decisive symbol of woman that includes any "creative dimension."

As part of this shaping of the category of women, Irigaray emphasizes the centrality of sexual difference, which she understands in terms of complementarianism. She explains: "There is physiological and morphological complementarity between the sexes. Why deny it? This complementarity should be lived in such a way as to facilitate growth."[11] Theologically, Irigaray suggests, "In our tradition hasn't God always been sick because he never married?"[12] Irigaray depicts sexual difference in naturalized imagery in order to establish the difference of women from men and also to establish male and female cooperation as a source of health. In religious terms, women are better suited to prayer and poetry, while men are better suited to ritual. In this view, the two sexes relate differently to the world, and such difference requires different rights and obligations, where both sexes teach and learn from one another.[13] This sexual difference is a shift toward a certain kind of essentialism, as even her defenders have suggested.[14]

In this case, the charge of essentialism requires some unpacking. Irigaray's notion of a separate, different subject position for woman is both freeing and constraining in its difference from maleness. For Irigaray, the difference between men and women is not biological essentialism, but "a relational identity that is held between nature and culture, and which assures a bridge from which it is possible to pass from one to the other while respecting them both."[15] This relational identity, however, places sexual differences as the root of difference itself. She argues, for instance, "sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem . . . and the same goes for other cultural diversities."[16] Irigaray's notion of complementarity and difference rests on a premise of "natural" distinctions, whether that is cultural, physiological, biological, or something else. In this formulation, Morny Joy has pointed out that Irigaray proposes "an inflexible dimorphism" and "a natural heterosexuality."[17]

[11] Ibid., 107.

[12] Ibid., 70.

[13] Marie-Andrée Roy, *Women and Spirituality in Irigaray* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 16–18.

[14] Alison Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[15] Luce Irigaray, "Toward a Divine in the Feminine," in *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence* (ed. Gillian Howie and J'annine Jobling; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 13–26, at 13–14.

[16] Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 47.

[17] Morny Joy, *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) 34.

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The heteronormative ideals, among other limitations, of Irigaray's complementarianism threaten the multiplicity of female subjectivity. Joy continues:

> There are thus two paradoxical forces at work in Irigaray's explorations regarding the way in which women become divine. One approves a mode of becoming for a woman that is unfettered by patriarchal constraints, with indefinite possibilities, while another uncritically prescribes self-selected imaginative assumptions as the most appropriate for women to pursue.[18]

The prioritization of the maternal is its own projection of woman, romanticizing motherhood as connection to others and to the earth.[19] Such an idealization threatens to essentialize woman in precisely the opposite ways her earlier critiques of woman had gestured.[20] Judith L. Poxon has argued, "an idealised image that would function as a goal for becoming cannot help but retain a normativity that dominates the process of subjectification. It is precisely this normativity, I would suggest, that provokes critiques of much feminist theology by lesbians, working-class women and women of color."[21] The constraints of such a theology on race, class, and sexuality, expose the limiting normativity of such a divine woman as representing only some women. Further, postcolonial critiques of Irigaray point to the problems with arbitrarily absolutizing and privileging sexual difference as the primary human difference, thereby erasing all other difference as secondary or irrelevant.[22]

Irigaray's turn to a unitary divine woman lies in tension with her previous scholarship in *Speculum* and *This Sex Which is Not One* on the ways in which women challenged the unity of male subjectivity. In this prior framework, Irigaray explains: "Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there will not be enough. We can never complete the circuit, explore our periphery: we have so many dimensions."[23] In her earlier work, Irigaray corrects

[18] Ibid., 34.

[19] Judith L. Poxon, "Corporeality and Divinity: Irigaray and the Problem of the Ideal," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives* (ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon; New York: Routledge, 2003) 41–50.

[20] Serene Jones, "Divining Women: Irigaray and Feminist Theologies," in *Another Look, Another Woman: Retranslations of French Feminism* (ed. Lynne Huffer; Yale French Studies 87; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 42–67.

[21] Poxon, "Corporeality and Divinity," 45.

[22] Ellen Armour, "Divining Differences: Irigaray and Religion," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought,* 29–40; Morny Joy, "Irigaray's Eastern Explorations," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought,* 51–67.

[23] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 213. See also Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. Gillian C. Gill; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

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the masculinist assumptions of Jacques Lacan's imaginary with the addition of a female imaginary, characterized not by unity, but plurality and fluidity.[24] In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Irigaray moves away from a plurality and limitless woman, moving towards a singular ideal.

In reenacting the idealization of God the Father in God the Mother, Irigaray forecloses the multiplicity of women and the undoing of any such idealized transcendence.[25] The logic of the Same invades this divinization of the female. Ellen Armour critiques Irigaray on this point: "Simply reversing the gender of the divine will not extract the thought of divinity from its ontotheological container, which conceives of transcendence in terms of a presence that subsumes difference in an ultimate similarity."[26] That is, the collapse of difference in the male deity is simply repeated in the female deity who collapses the difference of women into a singular representation. Singularity and sameness are the threat to women in both cases.

Mormon Feminisms and Heavenly Mother

Irigaray's divine woman makes a useful comparison with Mormonism's Heavenly Mother not only because of the emphasis on motherhood as a site of female subjectivity, but also because of Irigaray's link between anthropology and theology. Whereas some other feminist theological approaches continue the broader theological project of disembodied deities, Irigaray thinks about embodiment and women's corporeality, especially around symbolic morphology and maternity, as a starting point of her theological project.[27] Mormonism's framework for thinking about God in human form also merges anthropology and theology as a starting point, in what Terryl Givens has called, "the collapse of sacred distance" in Mormon thought.[28] Irigaray's theological turn and Mormonism's theologies of divine embodiment start from different theoretical points, but they converge on the question of thinking about the divine to articulate what it means to be human. Mormon analysis of Heavenly Mother, then, is not abstract theorizing, but rather it articulates a divine model of human gender relations and female subjectivity.

Mormon notions of a divine mother date back to Joseph Smith's earliest followers, and became an increasingly prominent and authoritative teaching in the nineteenth century. Eliza R. Snow, the most influential early Mormon female leader, first publicly discussed the doctrine in a poem in 1845, later turned into

[24] Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, 105–18.

[25] Joy notes that Irigaray shifts in this transition to an ideal divine woman. She suggests, "It will provide the foundations for her promotion of 'sexual difference' which is of a different order from the plurality of the 'two lips'" (Joy, *Divine Love*, 29).

[26] Armour, "Divining Differences," 30.

[27] Irigaray's transition from multiplicity in *Speculum* and *The Sex Which is Not One* to the singular idealization of "woman" in *Sexes and Genealogies* has complicated her discussion of corporeality and embodiment (Poxon, "Corporeality and Divinity," 43).

[28] Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 37–52.

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a hymn in the Utah-based church.[29] In the traditional understanding, Heavenly Mother gave birth to the spirits of humanity and watched over them while they were in mortal bodies. In the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, LDS women represented Heavenly Mother as a site of their own agency within the theological and institutional boundaries of the church. These women used Snow's poem depicting Heavenly Mother sending off her children and welcoming them as they return as a template for their own experiences.[30] Church leaders and laity have championed the doctrine in official church periodicals, proclamations, hymns, poems, and sermons, frequently in praise of motherhood.[31]

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Mormon feminist discussion of a Heavenly Mother participated in a broader feminist rearticulation of religion, including experiments with divine women in traditional and non-traditional religious communities. In the 1970s, Mormon men and women began to seek Heavenly Mother in prayer and expressed new theologies in a variety of grass-roots venues.[32] Drawing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditional Mormon teachings, Mormon feminists developed theologies of Heavenly Mother to articulate emerging egalitarian and complementarian ideals. In the 1980s and 1990s, Mormon feminist writings not only engaged with Irigaray's thought, but also frequently placed their own work in discussion with Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elaine Pagels, Mary Daly, Phyllis Trible, and other feminist theologians.

Rather than locating Heavenly Mother as a site of agency, other Mormon feminists began to reconsider domestic versions of this deity. Melodie Moench Charles critiqued Mormon notions of heaven as damaging to unmarried people and women: "Heavenly Mother is not an equal partner with Heavenly Father in any sense. She is second to her husband in everything, to her son in many things, and even to the Holy Ghost. Since she has no sphere of operations, she has no power."[33] She continues, "Mother in heaven can be nothing other than the faceless, nameless, unavailable-for-theological-purposes blank that she currently is. Our theology has allowed her no authority nor power; she gets no acknowledgment for her distinctive contributions, whatever they are. She has no self apart from her husband.[34] Here,

[29] Jill Mulvay Derr, "The Significance of 'O My Father' in The Personal Journey of Eliza R. Snow," *BYU Studies* 36 (1996) 98. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1992) 57–58.

[30] Susanna Morrill, "Mormon Women's Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven" in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (ed. Kate Holbrook and Matt Bowman; Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2016) 121–35.

[31] David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings About Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50 (2011) 71–97.

[32] Linda P. Wilcox, "The Mormon Concept of a Mother in Heaven," in *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* (ed. Maxine Hanks; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992) 3–17. This often-republished essay first appeared in *Sunstone* 5 (1980) 9–15.

[33] Melodie Moench Charles, "The Need for a New Mormon Heaven," *Dialogue* 21 (1988) 84.

[34] Charles, "A New Mormon Heaven," 84–85.

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Charles suggests that Mormons have used "projection" to articulate Mother in Heaven's identity and roles in order to represent their own needs and desires of the ideal woman and their calls for reforming the theology.

Criticisms like these drove a split among Mormon feminists that came to a head in the 1990s. Some Mormon feminists were excommunicated from the Church because of their teachings about Heavenly Mother, and LDS leadership officially prohibited addressing Heavenly Mother in prayer.[35] As a result, Mormon feminists fell into two roughly-defined camps: oppositional Mormon feminists who critiqued the official church for oppressing and silencing theology about Heavenly Mother and apologetic Mormon feminists who worked within the church and believed that, despite shortcomings, the church largely envisioned the equality of Heavenly Mother correctly. These are not monolithic groups, but roughly articulated clusters of Mormon feminists. Margaret and Paul Toscano, Janice Allred, Linda Wilcox and others—some of whom have been excommunicated from the LDS Church—exemplify oppositional Mormon feminist theorization about Heavenly Mother.[36] Apologetic Mormon feminist thinking about Heavenly Mother is advanced in various articles by David Paulsen, Kevin Barney, and especially by Valerie Hudson [Cassler] and other contributors to her online journal *SquareTwo*.[37] Hudson goes so far as to argue that church teachings make "Mormonism the most feminist of all the Christianities" and "the most progressive force for women in the world today."[38]

It is worth mentioning that both oppositional and apologetic Mormon feminist scholars are made up of a mixture of professional academics and informed independent scholars. The place of "theology" in the LDS tradition is contested, but takes place entirely outside of official LDS sources. LDS leadership is drawn from the general membership, with the result that LDS leaders receive no formal theological training. Theology, especially related to gender, has flourished in certain corners of Mormon life, and it is sufficiently robust to sustain multiple camps, each with their own publication venues.

[35] Gordon B. Hinckley, "Daughters of God," *Ensign* (November, 1991) 97.

[36] The Church does not comment publicly on the reasons for excommunication. The accounts of these scholars who were excommunicated report that they were excommunicated for "apostasy."

[37] Paulsen and Pulido, "'A Mother There;'" Kevin Barney, "How to Worship Our Mother in Heaven (Without Getting Excommunicated)," *Dialogue* 41 (2008) 121–46. Some Mormon feminists at the online journal *SquareTwo* have taken to feminist philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, a structuralist in the tradition of Claude Lévi-Strauss and his successor Françoise Hértier. Agacinski vigorously opposes feminist ideas that seek to make women more like men, a view she associates with Simone de Beauvoir, and cautiously admires feminist separatism like that she associates with Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Sylviane Agacinski, *Parity of the Sexes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). *SquareTwo* has established itself as a feminist voice in Mormonism under the leadership of political science scholar Valerie M. Hudson, also known as V. H. Cassler or Valerie Hudson Cassler. Every issue of the journal features at least one essay on women and gender, and the issues regularly oppose homosexual relationships.

[38] Valerie Hudson Cassler, "I am a Mormon Because I am a Feminist," *Mormon Scholars Testify*, http://mormonscholarstestify.org/1718/valerie-hudson-cassler.

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This internal division of Mormon feminist politics mimes the broader theoretical concerns of American feminism, having foundered on the problem of how to think about sameness and difference between women and men and between women. On the one hand, some argue that there is a universal human being, which comes in male and female varieties with the relative differences between them being much less important than their similarities. On the other hand, some thinkers emphasize the differences between male and female, whether essential, experiential, or structural. These differences between apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminists, however, are rather insignificant when one compares the fundamental metaphysical assumptions they share.

Rather than focusing on sameness or difference between men and women in Mormon feminist theology, I intend to analyze the ways that such discourses produce particular representations of "woman." Apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminists focus on the question of whether Heavenly Mother lacks power, occluding the types of power deployed in her representation of certain women. The parochial aspects of the internal debate among Mormon feminists have shielded Mormon theologies of Heavenly Mother from broader ideological critique and engagement. In particular, I want to explore the ways in which the category of "woman" and the notion of complementarian heterosexuality have been key features of both apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminisms. The theology of a divine couple shifts the metaphysical "one" and the erasing emphasis on "sameness" from a male ideal to heterosexuality.

A. Gender Essentialism and the Divine Wom(b)an

Both kinds of Mormon feminism have asserted the naturalness of sexual difference as the most fundamental aspect one's identity. In order to maintain this boundary of difference, both have adopted essentialist views of males and females and rely on a universal category of "woman." This single female character then bears the burden of representing the category of female itself, the divine archetype of "woman" in a fetishization of "the body" of the Mother.

Mormon feminists invoke Heavenly Mother as a theological argument to validate women's voices and experiences. Toscano explains, "[Heavenly Mother] is a goddess of power and might who can speak for herself, who in fact speaks to her children, and who insists on the right of her daughters to speak for themselves too. Without these voices, the female perspective is missing in the Church and women are diminished."[39] There is a singular mother who represents the plurality of her daughters, whose unified voices collectively represent a singular "female perspective." The doctrine of Heavenly Mother stands for a universal woman and reinforces the category of women as a stable, unreconstructed subject position. Allred insists that a single male God devalues the feminine and that a female God is necessary "if feminine attributes and roles are to be valued equally with

[39] Toscano, "Heavenly Motherhood," 73.

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masculine ones."[40] In this approach, the divine image is itself split into male and female types where male and female, and masculine and feminine, exist side by side. For Margaret and Paul Toscano, "in the beginning woman was made in the image of her heavenly parent—the divine Mother. And in the spiritual re-creation, women are spiritually transformed in her image."[41] The connection between women and Heavenly Mother is the theological basis for promoting Heavenly Mother as the foundation for women's subjectivity.

Though oppositional Mormon feminists are wary of essentialism, the Toscanos and Allred unsuccessfully address it by reinforcing the irreconcilable differences between male and female. A lingering essentialism runs through their work. The Toscanos argue that male and female sexes are "necessary opposites of equal dignity and value."[42] Allred's argument accepts the existence of binary pairs: male/female, masculine/feminine, and active/passive, noting that one has typically been valued over the other. Rather than seeing this binary in terms of a hierarchy, she argues, "opposites depend on each other for their very existence; they cannot be separated in reality, which means that they should be equally valued."[43] Equality is founded in equal respect for these opposites, reinforcing the difference in the search for equality. Other aspects of Allred's work undermine her emphasis on an essentially oppositional nature of sexual difference, as discussed below; however, the force of difference—as the basis for equality—governs how she speaks of males and females.

Mormon feminist approaches acknowledge the problem of framing Heavenly Mother exclusively in terms of women's perspectives. The Toscanos warn against projection as the way men and women should relate to deity.[44] This "self-worship" closes off believers from a genuine encounter of the other, and the Toscanos emphasize that both women and men must worship male and female deities. Allred also articulates this problem: "Having a female God for women to pattern themselves after and a male God for men to emulate encourages rigid gender distinctions and perpetuates gender stereotypes."[45] Such admissions suggest that, rather than solving the problem of women's subordination, a division may further separate men and women within social, economic, and ecclesiastical spheres. This view can reinforce the idea that men are worthy of worship, saviors, kings and rulers, and belong in the public sphere, while women are worthy of praise, but their voice and leadership are reserved for certain special "women's" issues only.

The existence of the binary depends on essential differences. Allred insists that the symbolic male-female opposition is fundamental. She seeks to avoid

[40] Janice Allred, *God the Mother: And Other Theological Essays* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1997) 29.

[41] Margaret Toscano and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1990) 56.

[42] Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 7.

[43] Allred, *God the Mother*, 25.

[44] Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 56.

[45] Allred, *God the Mother*, 29.

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essentialist claims by arguing that the "essence of gender difference" is "difference itself."[46] Like Allred, the Toscanos want to avoid essentialist definitions of sexual difference, resisting the superficial stereotypes of masculine and feminine. Yet, they are unwilling to give up on difference, retreating to the language of mystery: "The paradox is that we can know the sexes are different, but we cannot know precisely or completely the metaphysical nature of this difference."[47] Without explaining the content of what a man or a woman is, these approaches reify sexual difference as the essential difference of humanity and divinity. It is not clear how one can recognize alterity without some defining features of that difference; nor is it clear why this difference itself must be manifest in only two options.

It is not the case, however, that these approaches leave the difference entirely undefined, but they actually take great care to specify the nature of the difference between males and females. Mormon feminists tend to naturalize the site of difference in the maternal, appealing to the body. Indeed, these theologians universalize women's experiences in birth as a foundation for identification with Heavenly Mother. Almost all Mormon feminists have accepted the positive evaluation of birth and child rearing as features that universally define "woman." Allred explains:

> Although the meaning of gender and the masculine-feminine opposition goes far beyond the physical, it is surely grounded in the difference between male and female bodies.... It is the reproductive capacity of the female body, its ability to give birth, that furnishes the symbol for the feminine principle of union or relatedness and the most fundamental symbol for feminine selfhood is the mother.[48]

In spite of this framing of the centrality of motherhood as the symbol for the feminine, oppositional feminists resist the essentialization of women's lives to motherhood.[49] Toscano explains the tension as it relates to Heavenly Mother:

> On the one hand, to accept motherhood, even heavenly motherhood, as an idea is to acquiesce to a reduced sense of self, as though all we women are made for is motherhood, forever and ever. . . . On the other hand, to reject motherhood as a role for women, or to see it as insignificant, is to turn against the cycles of our own bodies and against what is a life-altering experience for the majority of women who have lived.[50]

[46] Ibid., 24, 27.

[47] Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 240.

[48] Allred, *God the Mother*, 30.

[49] Caroline Kline, "From Here to Eternity: Women's Bodies, Women's Destinies in Janice Allred's Theology," *Element: The Journal for the Society of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 5 (2009) 1–15. Oppositional Mormon feminists have long been critical of the priesthood-motherhood equivalency (Sonja Farnsworth, "Mormonism's Odd Couple: The Priesthood-Motherhood Connection," in *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism* [ed. Maxine Hanks; Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992] 299–314).

[50] Toscano, "Heavenly Motherhood," 71.

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Oppositional Mormon feminists have sought to balance this tension by holding on to birth as an essential feature of women's divine experience located in "bodies," while not reducing women's existence to this function.

Apologetic Mormon feminists have been more explicit about gender essentialism as the basis of their philosophy. They have been especially eager to insist upon reproduction as a defining feature of women. For Hudson, "the Restored Gospel also teaches me that I will be married forever, and that I will have children forever, and that the life of being a woman married to my sweetheart and having children forever is the life that will bring me the fullest joy in the eternities—as it has here on earth."[51] Hudson roots the "necessity" of divine female figures in their wombs, even though she seeks to guard against an instrumentalist view of women. She explains, "There are no human children without mothers, and this stubborn fact testifies to the stubborn placement of women as indispensable in the Plan of Happiness."[52] Hudson takes for granted men's indispensability, while women's indispensability must be rooted in a function of their bodies.

Hudson anticipates the charge of exalting motherhood as the essence of women: "expressing a woman's highest potential in terms of eternal marriage and exalted motherhood does not reduce her to her bodily functions, but rather enlarges and enhances our understanding of what those bodily functions really mean."[53] In other words, prioritizing reproduction does not reduce a woman to her body, but rather enlarges a woman's understanding of the importance of her maternal body. Emphasizing and identifying women with the womb is not a point to be challenged, but celebrated, because it allows one to value women and the maternal body together.

In these frameworks, women are treated as a unified subject in opposition to a singular male, whose difference lies in the reproductive capacities some women possess during certain periods of life. Rather than challenge the existence of the binary or show the ways in which the binary is itself artificial, sexual difference becomes a universal and absolute difference, rooted in the uniqueness of a mother's body. The existence of a difference, however, does not offer any explanation of the significance of a difference, which is always a second order interpretation. The exclusive focus on sexual difference as the only difference in the divine—and thus the focus on masculine and feminine characters in theology—runs the risk of re-inscribing dualistic, structuralist hierarchies rather than challenging the gender politics of culture. Mormon feminists' idealization of woman and absolutization of sexual difference have yet to confront in theoretical terms the question of an exclusionary logic within the ideal.

[51] Valerie Hudson Cassler, "I Am a Mormon Because I Am a Feminist."

[52] Valerie Hudson Cassler, "Plato's Son, Augustine's Heir: 'A Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology'?" *SquareTwo* 5 (2012), http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerPlatosSon.html.

[53] Alma Don Sorenson and Valerie Hudson Cassler, *Women in Eternity, Women of Zion* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2004) 155.

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B. Complementarianism and Heterosexuality

Following twentieth century Mormon thought, both apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminisms hypostasize the Father and Mother in a monogamous heterosexual relationship. Non-heterosexual women are excluded from the symbolic universal of a Heavenly Mother. Such a definition of women builds heterosexuality into the definition of what a woman is. It defines as not-women those whose lives are not normatively structured in terms of heterosexual pairs, including single women, lesbians, intersex, and transsexual persons. These persons undo the simplistic binary norms of sexual difference, and should not be dismissed and dehumanized by the rhetoric which renders them "exceptions" to a normative framework.

Apologetic Mormon feminists have been particularly willing to use Heavenly Mother as a weapon against homosexual relationships. Hudson affirms, "We believe divinity is sexed, and that there are both gods and goddesses in the heavens, and that they live together in an absolute equal partnership that we call the new and everlasting covenant of marriage."[54] This complementarian equality depends on binary sexual difference and affirms the existence of a pair of equals. This equality exists in heterosexual relationships in the home and in parenting responsibilities. Hudson's opposition to same-sex marriage relies on fear about homosexuals: "gender apart-ness systems must be named as such, and the real harm they are capable of perpetrating through inhumane sex acts, inhumane conception, and the degradation of motherhood, fatherhood, and parenting."[55] Further, "gender apart-ness systems will enshrine male dominance and malignant patriarchy across the globe and ensure they will never be assailable again." Her argument posits that same-sex marriages will result in a loss of freedom, increased violence toward women, and that "there may even be a physical cessation of new generations."[56]

Apologetic Mormon feminism emphasizes that sexual difference and even some sexually differentiated roles are part of God's order. Hudson suggests that "it is Satanic to insist that equality can only exist in the context of 'sameness,'" by which she means the sameness between men and women, not the sameness of universal heterosexuality, for which she advocates.[57] Instead, she emphasizes equality of men and women in difference.[58] The boundary between men and women is unique and paramount, in Hudson's view, yet here she is at odds with how she speaks about

[54] Valerie Hudson Cassler, "Review of Paulsen and Pulido's, 'A Mother There,' *BYU Studies* 2011," *SquareTwo* 4 (2011), http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerPaulsenPulido.html.

[55] The first online version of this essay repeatedly called homosexual relationships "gender apartheid," which was later edited to "gender apart-ness" throughout the document. Valerie Hudson Cassler, "'Some Things That Should Not Have Been Forgotten Were Lost': The Pro-Feminist, Pro-Democracy, Pro-Peace Case for State Privileging of Companionate Heterosexual Monogamous Marriage," *SquareTwo* 2 (2009), http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerMarriage.html.

[56] Cassler, "Some Things That Should Not Have Been Forgotten."

[57] Sorenson and Cassler, *Women in Eternity*, xiv.

[58] Valerie Hudson Cassler, "The Two Trees." *FAIRMormon Conference* (2010), http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2010-fair-conference/2010-the-two-trees.

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equality in other contexts.[59] She draws upon a narrative in the Book of Mormon (4 Nephi) to argue that "there cannot be any lineage- or race-based distinctions that would undermine the unity and equality of Zion."[60] When it comes to race, unity and equality are found in the undifferentiated individual. When it comes to sexual difference, Hudson takes the opposite view. With respect to sex, difference is necessary for equality; with respect to race, difference is an enemy to equality and unity.

Complementarian theories often work by assigning gender roles. Hudson describes a "division of labor" that allows for the visibility of men in certain spheres, such as the scriptures and church, while women are less visible there.[61] In this theology, males and females operate in two separate spheres. Men provide salvation while women provide life. Both are necessary, but neither is sufficient on its own. In lieu of ecclesiastical responsibility afforded to men, Hudson posits a greater visibility for women in the premortal and postmortal spheres. Hudson argues that there is equality in sequencing responsibilities. Women produce young children that men can then teach and save. She explains, "the work and duty of being with children may be primarily the mother's before the age of accountability [age 8 in LDS belief], but it becomes equally the father's work and duty after the age of accountability has been reached."[62] The apparently variable roles for Heavenly Mother and Father explain the variable roles for human parents, with one parent taking on more responsibility at different phases of a child's life.[63]

[59] Hudson sometimes offers visions of equality that are in tension with one another. At times, she explains that the difference between men and women is no more absolute than the difference between men is absolute. She explains, "there are no two men who are identical, and yet they stand as equals before each other and before the Lord. Can we imagine an understanding of equality that means that a man and woman, though different, can be equals before the Lord and before each other? That is the vision of equality that the Restored Gospel teaches" (Valerie M. Hudson, "The Curious Appeal of Roman Catholicism for Certain Latter-Day Saint Intellectuals," *SquareTwo* 4 [2011], http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleHudsonAppeal.html).

[60] Valerie M. Hudson and Alma Don Sorenson, "Response to Professor Thomas," in *Mormonism in Dialogue With Contemporary Christian Theologies* (ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007) 323–339, 326.

[61] Sorenson and Cassler, *Women in Eternity,* 146.

[62] Ibid., 158.

[63] Some of Hudson's more recent work has been more aware of the imbalance of this division, calling for a greater role for women in the church and other spheres: "Men should not hold a privileged position in shaping the world in which women and their children and loved ones must live. This principle of equal voice must extend beyond the family: women should be equally represented in the leadership of towns, cities, nations, and the world." What Hudson is suggesting here, obliquely, is that women should have equal voice in all church councils, but that this does not entail that they be ordained to the priesthood. She notes that changes are being made already and optimistically anticipates more changes: "The co-presidency of men and women in the human family, reflecting the co-presidency of our Heavenly Parents, is becoming better recognized." Valerie Hudson Cassler, "Ruby Slippers on Her Feet: Reflections on the OrdainWomen Website," *SquareTwo* 6 (2013), http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleCasslerRubySlippers.html.

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Oppositional Mormon feminists also offer a complementarian, heterosexual depiction of Heavenly Mother. The merging of the masculine and the feminine, the male and the female, is the heterosexual basis for their view of God. For the Toscanos, "God is not a single male person but a duality: God the Female and God the Male. . . . the essential equality and mutual interdependence of male and female in the priesthood is a revelation of the true image of God as the union of the divine female and male."[64] Rather than roles as the basis of difference, these thinkers appeal to more mystical forms of complementary functions, often in heterosexual intercourse. The Toscanos continue, "the image of the divine couple in an erotic embrace" symbolizes the understanding of the heavens and the eschatological image of the bride and bridegroom.[65] Allred's gender complementarity self-consciously lays a heterosexual-reproductive foundation. She explains, "sexual union should symbolize the bringing together of opposites, recognized to be different and separate but of equal value. The opposites that are joined are individuality and connectedness, the masculine principle and the feminine principle."[66] Here, heterosexual complementarity is the basis for the vision of equality.

The Toscanos offer a new myth, rooted in speculative Mormon thought, to explain sexual difference based on heterosexual union and procreation. In this myth the archangel Michael, who plays a role in LDS creation dramas as Adam, is hermaphroditic. In order to populate the earth "the head God blessed Michael and divided Michael the male from Michael the female by parting them as it were at the rib. In this way they were no longer mystically one. Then the head God, male and female, condescended to be divided themselves in this same way." In this divine division, the female half of Michael becomes Heavenly Mother, marrying the male half of God. The female half of God becomes Eve, marrying the male half of Michael, who is then known as Adam. "This is the pattern of sacred marriage," they explain.[67] In this mythology, heterosexuality is the "perfect unity" in primordial time, and the division of the hermaphroditic gods is necessary in order to "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth." One might expect the myth of the androgynous God and Michael might serve as a way of undermining binary sexual difference. However, in this view the notion that God and Michael are divisible along the lines of male and female intensifies the separateness of these categories.

The notion of mutual interdependence in Allred and the Toscanos blends masculine and feminine in the final analysis of complementarianism. Allred offers a "paradox" in which there is both unity and difference between men and women.[68] She explains, "the principle of polarity tells us that men must possess feminine as well as masculine characteristics and women must possess masculine

[64] Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 9.
[65] Ibid., *Strangers in Paradox*, 90.
[66] Allred, *God the Mother*, 39.
[67] Toscano and Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox*, 69.
[68] Allred, *God the Mother*, 24.

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qualities along with feminine ones."[69] Both male and female, and masculine and feminine, represent incomplete halves of a complementarian whole that is produced when they both appear together: "If human beings need to possess both masculine and feminine characteristics, it should be clear that God, both male and female, is a complete and perfect being, possessing both feminine and masculine attributes in their perfection."[70] Here she blurs "masculine and feminine" with "male and female," even though she has informed her readers that such attributes are representations of socially constructed "gender," separable from biologically natural "sex." What is taken for granted is that male is the original source of the masculine and that female is the original source of the feminine, which can only blend in a male and female union.

Mormon feminists writing about Heavenly Mother have been complicit in heteronormative narratives that universalize a subset of women as the hypostasis of "woman." The problem with affirming both male and female as divine beings through the prism of heterosexuality is that it no longer allows man and woman to have any worth as man or woman, but only in a dependent relationship. This heterocentrism reaffirms woman's dependence on man for meaning. One might counter that this dependence is a mutual interdependence, applying equally to men and women. Yet, this model is not based on the interdependence of persons in their widely manifest differences, but is a specific type of interdependence based on pre-assigned, arbitrary, reductionistic masculine and feminine characteristics believed to be essential to sexual difference. This interdependent model smuggles in essentialism and heterocentrism to make the case for specific kinds of relationships. This model does not describe all heterosexual relationships, nor does it deal with the range of ways people may achieve mutual interdependence and improvement that cannot be reduced to gender-specific differences.

Beyond Binaries

Critics of the singularity of Irigaray's idealized female point to alternatives that are rooted in bodies and differences that challenge the ideals. Moira Gatens calls for multiplicity in the feminine in her account of imaginary bodies:

> To consider the multiplicity of body types and their specific pleasures and powers would assist in freeing up the normative dualism of two bodies, two sexes into genders. Indeed, this multiplicity already exists: the homosexual body, the heterosexual body, the celibate body, the narcissistic body, the perverse body, the maternal body, the athletic body.[71]

[69] Ibid., 28–29.

[70] Ibid., 29.

[71] Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 43.

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While Gatens reifies her own singularities in this passage, for instance "the homosexual body," her critique is well taken. Rather than a singular ideal, her approach builds from multiplicity. Can such a multiplicity be established theologically either through a multiplication of divine figures, or a multiplication of positionalities of existing divine figures? Or some combination of both?

In contradistinction to both apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminisms, which are influenced by the frameworks and questions of structuralist metaphysics, the critical theological task of a new Mormon feminism is rethinking the oppositional binary categories of male/female, masculine/feminine, and gay/straight. Such an approach to gender, typified by Judith Butler, begins from multiplicity rather than duality.[72] The acceptance of universal signifiers, such as "man" and "woman," and the utilization of a nature/culture distinction and a sex/gender binary, hamper a Mormon feminist theological project in the wake of post-structuralist critique. The sexually differentiated body is not a pre-discursive given, but produced in a variety of discourses.[73] This is perhaps especially true for theological projects, which appeal to sexual difference as a phenomenon of otherwise constituted divine bodies that are not available to analysis.

There is no question that the social, political, and economic goals of second-wave feminism and, by implication, both apologetic and oppositional Mormon feminism, remain unfulfilled. I am not calling for an end to these goals, but rather to reframe their theoretical underpinning. Ultimately, poststructuralist theories of gender also challenge the way the binary between male/female is constructed. This new reading is not then a definitive claim about Heavenly Mother, but, rather, the opportunity to open up conversation regarding the multiplicity of interpretations without a claim to completeness or supremacy.

Poststructuralist feminists target determinism and essentialism as the most problematic features of traditional theories of gender. Resistance to this poststructuralist claim in broader feminist theory has influenced Mormon feminists like Hudson. She worries, for instance, about the erasure of gender in something she calls "post-genderism." This is the specter of "the undifferentiated individual."[74] Hudson relies on the contemporary French thinker Sylvianne Agacinski, whose fear is that the elimination of sexual difference is based in the masculine idealization of the one.[75] This view misunderstands post-structuralist feminism. Troubling gender

[72] Judith Butler's numerous works on gender and sexuality are influential here. For a collection of essays on Butler's influence on religious studies, see Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

[73] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[74] Cassler, "Some Things That Should Not Have Been Forgotten."

[75] Agacinski articulates a certain feminist view that discounts race: "ethnic traits are altogether superficial and accidental compared to sexual difference" (Agacinski, *Parity of the Sexes*, 14). In contrast, she offers a dualist and essentialist view of sexual difference: "being a woman truly constitutes *one of the two essential ways of being a human*" (Agacinski, *Parity of the Sexes*, 157 [italics in original]).

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is not ultimately about the erasure of the difference between men and women, or rejecting the categories in favor of some new ideal, but about the flourishing lives of sexed and gendered performances that do not conform to heteronormative idealizations. Such movements are not about getting rid of gender assignments, nor of erasing differences. As Butler explains: "The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death."[76] One might add that theological reasoning is a crucial element in imagining such possibilities for human subjectivity.

The lack of intersectional analysis in Mormon feminist depictions of Heavenly Mother obscures the realities that human beings are not just sexed, but manifest in different ages, races, and sexualities, as well as class and nationality, all of which are mediated culturally and historically on the body. The separation of "sex" from the categories of race, sexuality, or other particular features of embodied existence asserts not only that sex is the most fundamental, but also that one's race or sexuality does not affect the ways in which one is also sexed. Mormon feminist theories of gender that rely on sexual reductionism are inadequate to the task of theological analysis as a site of subjectivity.

Rather than the construction of a wall between male and female, a more effective theological approach may be to devise passageways between these apparently separate spheres. The foundationalist, structuralist assumptions of a binary of sexual difference that constitute the heterosexual matrix may be deconstructed and resignified by pointing to the places in which they fail theologically to uphold complementarity and an absolute or essential sexual difference. This theoretical approach is not about advocating a change, but rereading what is already there. In the following examples, I point to two places of instability in Mormon feminist and non-feminist theological accounts: one about heterosexuality and the other about a gender binary. This approach reveals the textual and theological instabilities of Mormon theology, opening up new possibilities in discourses previously treated as monological. The first considers plurality in the divine realm, while the second considers plurality within the figure of Jesus. Both gestures put Mormon theological frameworks into dialogue with critiques and revisions of Irigaray that disrupt binary gender.

A. Godhead

While Mormonism's Heavenly Mother shares in the limitations of Irigaray's "divine woman," both Mormonism and Irigaray may offer some tools for reconsidering women's subjectivity in the divine realm. For Irigaray, divine love manifestes most significantly in a heterosexual sexual relationship that eliminates hierarchy and

[76] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 8.

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dualism.[77] Irigaray's assumptions about heterosexuality and the male-female binary, as we have seen, can act to exclude and confine certain kinds of men and women. Relationality becomes archetypally heterosexual, marking sexual difference as the only human difference and resolving all other differences into secondary accidents to this singularly controlling difference of sex. For Mormon feminism, the sought-after subjectivity of "woman" in Heavenly Mother rests on a fundamental exclusion of certain kinds of men and women, as well as the erasure of other differences.

Plurality and fluidity in the divine might account for multiple human subjectivities. Some Christian theologies informed by Irigaray's turn to religion grapple with this issue. Hannah Bacon asks: "Can a trinitarian understanding of God provide a theological context in which female subjectivity might be affirmed beyond the binary rhetoric of Irigaray and the multiplicity and richness of women's experiences acknowledged and embraced?"[78] In her mimetic reading of classical trinitarian theology, Bacon points to the plurality of the trinity as a locus of destabilization and subversion of a masculine, phallocentric unity. The multiplicity in the trinity means that thinking of God as not-one is an affirmation of difference beyond the reductionary logic of sexual difference.

Mormonism does not accept traditional, creedal accounts of the trinity, preferring instead to speak of a godhead of three ontologically distinct divine persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose unity is located in shared perspectives and attributes.[79] How does Heavenly Mother fit into this account of the unity of the godhead? The unity of a divine pair of Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother may be analogously located in shared values as with other members of the godhead, as well as the complementarity of the sexes. LDS thinkers describe in different terms the relationship of this heterosexual pair to the three divine figures of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but they see the significance of the divine pair as a central element of Mormon theology. Like Irigaray, in many Mormon feminist accounts, the traditional male godhead recedes or even disappears entirely as sexual difference occupies the center stage in the heavenly economy.

Some oppositional feminists adopt a modalistic theology that eliminates the male godhead altogether. Allred argues that there is only a divine couple: the Father is also the Son and the Mother is also the Spirit.[80] This has the effect of not only rendering the divine realm heterosexual by eliminating the patriarchal godhead/trinity, but it

[77] Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002) 13. Joy has criticized Irigaray's heterosexual framework for transformative love saying, "the more spiritual Irigaray becomes. . . the more conservative are her views" (Joy, *Divine Love*, 4). On the heterosexual limitations of Irigaray, see Joy, *Divine Love*, 109–12.

[78] Hannah Bacon, *What's Right With the Trinity?* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009) 173.

[79] Paul E. Dahl, "Godhead," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (ed. Daniel H. Ludlow; New York: Macmillan, 1992) 552–53.

[80] Allred, *God the Mother*, 54–59. She also argues that in Joseph Smith's visions of two divine personages, he witnesses the Father and the Mother (Allred, *God the Mother*, 67).

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also renders the binary division between the sexes as the only real difference in the godhead. All other differences of identity are only apparent differences, resolved into the neatly monogamous male-female couple.

The erasure of the male godhead in LDS feminist thought may, however, be premature and counterproductive. Just as Bacon seeks to do with the trinity, the traditional account of the male godhead in Mormonism may hold some resources for affirming difference without idealizing particular kinds of difference.

Mormon representation of the male members of the godhead in both unity and difference has not posed nearly as many problems as the idea of unity and difference among male and female divine figures. Mormon thinking about how to resolve the unity and difference in the godhead may provide some new avenues for conceptualizing unity and difference with respect to gender. Mormon theologian Blake Ostler's description of the all-male godhead, for instance, holds some resources for questioning the simplistic masculinity of its characters:

> It is the relationship of the other that inspires the divinity in the divine persons. For they are divine because they love with a self-giving love so that they are one in each other. What distinguishes the Mormon view most from the conventional tradition is that the divine nature is possessed by more than one instance of that nature and is shared with others through a freely chosen relationship of indwelling love.[81]

Ostler depicts this "indwelling love" as absolute submission and subordination to the Father.[82] This hierarchical relationship stands somewhat in tension with his description of divine love: "The divine persons exist in a unit that includes loving, interpenetrating, and intersubjective awareness of another who is also *in* one's self."[83] Ostler's language of "inness" may derive from John 17:21 or, perhaps, LDS scripture in which Jesus is depicted as saying of believers: "they may become the sons of God, even one in me as I am one in the Father, as the Father is one in me, that we may be one" (Doctrine and Covenants 35:2). The intense love shared here between three men, which makes them "one" (flesh?) "in" one another, calls into question the heteronormative logic of the divine realm in Mormon thought.

The relationship of the other that Ostler describes here provides no rationale why men alone may participate. They love each other as "other" and the love itself produces the unity between them. Their difference is located in their ontological otherness, not in biology, roles, or even attributes. There is not any reason why a shared maleness is a prerequisite to their love. Ostler's notion of the radical otherness of each of the divine beings could accommodate the otherness of femaleness as well since this divine love is produced by difference. He explains, "the difference between the gods in the council of gods and the divine persons of the Father, Son,

[81] Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods* (Exploring Mormon Thought 3; Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2008) 257.

[82] Ostler, *Of God and Gods*, 259.

[83] Ibid., 261 (italics in original).

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and Holy Ghost is that the latter have chosen to be in a relationship of indwelling love from all eternity."[84] This love between men is the basis of divinity, and their otherness rather than sameness enables their relationship, even between men. Ostler recognizes that to put limitations or qualifications on this "oneness" between the members of the Godhead drives a destructive wedge between them.

Ostler frequently uses language to describe this divine love as penetration, indwelling, inside, in, and opening. He explains, "they actually are 'one' 'in' each other. The intelligence, knowledge, power, light, truth or life that proceeds from God's presence is like a spiritual force-field that penetrates into each of the divine persons and imparts the same spiritual energy and life to each of the divine persons."[85] This phallocentric description of God's presence as a force that penetrates in order to impart life into other divine persons belongs to a specifically masculine-gendered metaphysics. A reformulation of such imagery, while preserving the notion that love accommodates otherness, is one resource for thinking about how all kinds of bodies, persons, subjectivities, and identities may be incorporated into LDS articulations of deity.

One problem, however, remains in using the male godhead as a space for identification for multiple subjectivities, including the multiplicity of the category of woman. Part of the difficulty for thinking about diversity with respect to Heavenly Mother is that in contemporary Mormonism, there exists only one female member of the highest divine realm. Irigaray points already to this problem: "But the Father is not single. He is three. The virgin is alone of her sex. Without a daughter or love between them, without a way of becoming divine except through her son."[86] In other goddess traditions one often sees the great diversity of female figures who perform and transgress gender boundaries. While LDS tradition has a plurality of male characters to resolve the problem of a singular masculinity through multiplicity, perhaps there is no corresponding plurality for female representation in the case of Heavenly Mother, since Mary does not occupy the status of the divine in Mormon thought. In part, the crisis of women's representation is undergirded by this lack of plurality for thinking about women and gender performance.

Perhaps Mormon theology may reformulate earlier accounts of multiple divine female characters to alleviate the strain of the singular universal female. The tradition does have some precedence in Mormon thought, albeit tied to the patriarchal practices of polygamy.[87] If one takes the idea of identification with the divine as a starting point for subjectivity—and, perhaps, this starting point must be interrogated more—the proliferation of divine beings may be necessary.

[84] Ibid., 274.

[85] Ibid., 276.

[86] Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 62.

[87] Some early Mormons advanced the idea of multiple divine females in a "trinity of Mothers," identified with divinized Eve, Sarah, and Zion. Mormon women took on these models for identification in marriage and motherhood. Edward W. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877) 195, 534. The notion of multiple "Heavenly Mothers" owes its origins to

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Such multiplication is not required if one posits divine love as that which both creates unity and allows for difference. Identification with every subjectivity in the heavens is not necessary because the ontological difference of every individual already provides the space for difference and divine love as the tool for bridging it. Such divine love is not, evidently, constrained to heterosexual norms in traditional LDS accounts of the godhead. While Heavenly Mother is often used to diffuse this homoerotic tension, such a tension need not be resolved. Love need not be defined by a heterosexual or homosexual framework, neither being adequate to the situation. Identification with sameness need not be the necessary aspect of subjectivity. The approach offered here represents a re-signification of existing theological discourses to reveal the instability and multiplicity within them, unsettling sedimented heterosexist interpretations by pointing out what is already there.

B. Jesus and Gender Transgression

In addition to the difference within the godhead, Jesus also functions to break down rigid gender binaries in Mormon thought. The problem of women's salvation in a rigidly gender-dualist system has been a core feminist theological concern for decades.[88] One solution is to say that a male Christ stands in for the universal human. Another is to say that Christ's gender is entirely accidental and that there is no theological significance to his maleness. In *Speculum,* Irigaray points to the suffering Christ's love as a bridge between male and female, suggesting this as another solution to this problem: "It means that love conquers everything that has already been said. And that one man, at least, has understood her so well that he died in the most awful suffering. The most female of men, the Son. . . . In his crucifixion he opens up a path of redemption to her in her fallen state."[89] Here, the incarnation provides the space for the divinity of women as women. The slit in his flesh, the flow of blood, and other aspects of Christ's feminized body ground female subjectivity. The feminine fluidity of Christ challenges the singularity of a masculine subjectivity.

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the polygamous teachings of 19th cent. Mormonism and notions of divinization that developed in tandem with this idea: "In the heaven where our spirits were born, there are many Gods, each one of whom has his own wife or wives which were given to him previous to his redemption, while yet in his mortal state" (Orson Pratt, *The Seer* 1.3 [Mar 1853] 37). In the subsequent pages 38–39, Pratt posits multiple Heavenly Mothers for this world because of the immense time it takes for the gestation of spirit children. Yet, the patriarchal implications of this idea are difficult to escape. In a later issue, Pratt continues: "But if we have a heavenly Mother as well as a heavenly Father, is it not right that we should worship the Mother of our spirits as well as the Father? No; for the Father of our spirits is at the head of His household, and His wives and children are required to yield the most perfect obedience to their great Head" (*The Seer* 1.10 [Oct 1853] 159).

[88] The classical treatment is in Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1993) 116–38.

[89] Irigaray, *Speculum,* 199–200. See discussion in Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 198–203.

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In her later work, Irigaray abandons this exaltation of Christ's suffering as inadequate for female subjectivity, instead moving toward a divine woman outside of Christian constraints.[90] In part, the reason that Irigaray moves away from Christ toward a divine female is based on her theory of sexual difference and identification—that males identify with males and females with females. There is little or no relationship between the existence of female divinities and access to various forms of power for women in different ancient and modern societies.[91] The question is, must identification with the symbolic work this way? Can women and men identify with divine figures other than their own sex? How does such a theory of identification with one's own sex foreclose the subversive appropriation of such subjects? The Feuerbachian assumption here is a limitation in this approach.[92] The possibilities of multiple, convergent, conflicting identifications always exist to contest the linearity and determinism of masculine and feminine deployments.

Within the framework of sexual difference, many Mormon thinkers, in fact, point to Christ as transgressive with respect to his gender in order to enable female salvation. Such approaches undo the edifice of the gender binary that many of these same thinkers advance. I want to point out that it is not just fluidity as such that grounds this Mormon view of Jesus. Specifically, it is fluidity with respect to his maleness—"the most female of men." Mormon feminism has sought to retain such a female Christ as a point of identification for women. Surprisingly, then, notions of Christ's transgression of his maleness are ubiquitous in Mormon feminism, which deconstructs the rigidity of gender upon which these theologies have relied.

Oppositional feminists have praised Christ's blurring of the gender binary. They often emphasize the need for men and women to adopt both masculine and feminine traits as part of their complementarian approach, but Christ stands as exceptional in the ultimate crossing of gender boundaries. Allred's presentation of gender-bending in her essay, "Jesus Our Mother," exposes the instability of the categories of male and female, and masculine and feminine, which she had earlier designated as "opposites." She explains:

[90] In marking this transition, she explains: "But for women that model [of Jesus] is inadequate, because even if, as representative of the life of Jesus, it is not in opposition to them, it does not furnish them certain needed representation of themselves, of their genealogy, and of their relation to the universe or to others. Older religions offer them better examples of mother-daughter relationships, of the divinity of woman in her own sexual body, and of her relation to nature" (Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?," 80).

[91] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Paula Richman, and Stevan Harrell; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1986) 1–20.

[92] Hollywood, "Beauvoir, Irigaray, and the Mystical," 158–85.

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> [Jesus] models the role of the Mother . . . [he] took upon himself the most fundamental role of a woman so that both genders could understand their equality and know that this equality can only be realized when women seek and find their masculine identity as well as their feminine identity and when men seek and find their feminine identity as well as their masculine identity.[93]

She notes several examples in Mormon scripture that use female imagery to refer to Jesus, including comparing Jesus to a mother hen gathering her chicks or the language of being born of Christ. She compares Jesus's death to a woman in labor. She portrays a trans Christ, complete with breasts, uterus, and vagina.[94] Allred frames Christ's gender-bending as an argument for equality for two separate gender identities. However, this Christ troubles binary gender identities altogether. The gender-bending Jesus unravels the neat symbolic differences between male and female.

Apologetic Mormon feminists too praise Christ's gender transgression. While Hudson eschews the idea of women becoming like men, she praises Christ for becoming like a woman. In order to bridge the radical alterity she constructs between men and women, Hudson supplies a mediator. That mediator is Christ, who transcends sexual difference through his gender-bending. She explains:

> Christ suffered the pain of billions of childbirths; Christ suffered agonizing death in childbirth; Christ suffered the pain and horror of brutal rape; Christ suffered as a sex slave; Christ suffered acid attacks and honor killings; Christ suffered the pain of feet that were bound so that they were no longer than 4 inches long; Christ suffered the deaths of mothers' hearts as they witness the deaths of their children or as they undergo forced abortion. Christ our Savior is the great Mediator not only between men and God, effecting an at-one-ment in that relationship; Christ is also the great Mediator between men and women, effecting an at-onement in that relationship as well, for only Christ has borne in his very own male body what was done to his sisters. Woe be it unto the man who approaches the bar of Christ having purposefully harmed women, for Christ is not just another man—he is also one with the sisters.[95]

Rather than sexual difference, Christ achieves "oneness" with women especially through suffering. Yet, it is not as a sufferer that Christ becomes a woman, nor is it in abstract solidarity with suffering, but rather that Christ experiences women's suffering "in his very own male body." This set of transgressive acts that Christ performs, subverting sexual difference in favor of oneness, is rendered necessary in Hudson's theological system precisely because of her insistence on absolute difference between men and women.

[93] Allred, *God the Mother*, 30.

[94] Ibid., 34.

[95] Cassler, "Ruby Slippers."

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Beyond Mormon feminists, such images of Jesus are part of mainstream Mormon discourse. The first non-white woman to serve in a global leadership position in the Church's international women's organization, Cheiko Okazaki offered a similar model about Jesus transgressing gender norms.

> We know that Jesus experienced the totality of mortal existence in Gethsemane. It's our faith that he experienced everything- absolutely everything. . . . That means he knows what it felt like when your mother died of cancer- how it was for your mother, how it still is for you. . . . Let me go further. There is nothing you have experienced as a woman that he does not also know and recognize. On a profound level, he understands the hunger to hold your baby that sustains you through pregnancy. He understands both the physical pain of giving birth and the immense joy. He knows about PMS and cramps and menopause. He understands about rape and infertility and abortion. . . . He understands your mother-pain when your five-year-old leaves for kindergarten, when a bully picks on your fifth-grader, when your daughter calls to say that the new baby has Down Syndrome. He knows your mother-rage when a trusted babysitter sexually abuses your two-year-old, when someone gives your thirteen-year-old drugs, when someone seduces your seventeen-year-old.[96]

In this speech by an official leader in the LDS women's organization, Jesus knows fully not only the suffering of rape, infertility and abortion, but what it feels like to be pregnant.

In order to hold that there are two opposite genders of male and female and also that Christ is both male and female, these theories make Christ a metaphysical exception. This Christ is not the exemplar of traditional Mormon theology, but rather the metaphysical other of traditional Christian metaphysics. These accounts of Christ deem noetic and somatic gender transgression necessary, but also contain and protect it from normal human activity. Rather than seeing the deep empathy that Christ develops for all gendered suffering as the obligation of his followers, this view of the atonement seeks to preserve essentialist sexual difference through its singular transgression. Alternatively, this view of the atoning Christ undoing gender may model non-binary forms of sexual difference, just as the love within the economy of the godhead models relationships beyond heterosexuality.

One question that remains is whether identifying Jesus as the site of transgression also privileges his maleness as the quality that makes such a transgression possible. Does female gender transgression for Heavenly Mother or others remain impossible? The premise of this problem, however, accepts the very terms that the solution undoes. Thinking in terms of "male" and "female" gender transgression only reinstates what is being troubled to begin with. The transgression that Jesus models fractures into multiple possibilities rather than constraining gendered performances—and transgressions—in pre-given ways. Transgression itself challenges the particularity of a male body.

[96] Cheiko Okazaki, *Lighten Up!* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1993) 174–75.

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Conclusion

The solution to the problem of androcentrism in LDS theology cannot rest solely on the introduction of female characters, because such characters serve to both highlight and solidify particular forms of sexual difference as normative and natural. Mormon feminist liberation and empowerment of Heavenly Mother has often shackled her with a new set of discursive constraints. Rather, new Mormon feminist critiques should query the basis of sexual difference and the heterosexual imperative bound up in the binary of male and female.

In part, this essay has focused on the ways that the Heavenly Mother, as a female deity, has been used to confine the categories of women, as if one woman could signify them all. Alternatively, I have suggested that a Heavenly Mother breaks down the homogeneity of the male godhead. Such a female might instead come to signify plurality, fluidity, and multiplicity, rather than any single identity. Butler offers an alternative to the static accounts of sexual difference: "the category of women does not become useless through deconstruction, but becomes one whose uses are no longer reified as 'referents,' and which stand a chance of being opened up, indeed, of coming to signify in ways that none of us can predict in advance."[97] The opening up of the categories of women and men, through the opening up of Mormon theology, is a basis for unpredictable forms of subjectivity or, at the very least, a basis for those forms of subjectivity that already exist.

Instead of a single hegemony of a divine individual or even divine pair, Latter-day Saints may cite multiple scriptural and ritual narratives with a polymorphous set of creative and kinship relationships.[98] The failure of any singular representation to serve as an adequate universal with respect to such categories as male and female highlights the benefits of a pluralistic heaven such as what Mormonism can offer. There is the Heavenly Father, Heavenly Mother pair; the Heavenly Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit combination in traditional accounts of godhead; the Jesus and Michael pair in LDS ritual; the unnamed council of anonymous Gods in the Book of Abraham; and not to mention obsolete doctrines about Adam-God and polygamy. The existing resources of polymorphous combinations among the Mormon deities fail to uphold a heteronormative account of divine relationships, making space for a plurality of gendered performances. Within Mormon thought the difference between male and female is neither absolute, as the case of Jesus shows, nor is heterosexual pairing required for the love that constitutes divinity, as the case of the godhead shows. In both instances love breaks down the barriers of sexual difference within existing theological frameworks. Current teachings already

[97] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 29.

[98] Taylor G. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," *Dialogue* 44 (2011) 106–141.

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reveal the fluid and plural nature of sexual difference that exists within Mormon thought. Though this preceding analysis has focused on sexual difference, such a pluralistic heaven might also be useful in the analysis of race, ability, and other morphological, social, and historical categories.

The point of this essay is to foster and facilitate continued Mormon feminist theorization, to engage with generous critique of the way that "woman" has been put into discourse, and to invite non-Mormon feminists into these conversations as participants and partners. Such resources destabilize monolithic representations of Mormonism, both from within and without the faith, with respect to gender. Mormonism too is heterogeneous and thus open to deconstruction and re-signification.

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