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Julia Unger

University of Rhode Island, julia_unger@uri.edu

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IS IT FREEDOM YOU WANT?: FEMINIST MORMON
HOUSEWIVES “DEAR FMH” COLUMN
AS A PARTICIPANT IN THE ETHICS OF CARE
IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S ADVICE COLUMNS
BY
JULIA UNGER

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2023

MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

JULIA UNGER

APPROVED:

Thesis committee:

Major Professor Stephanie West-Puckett

Lehua Ledbetter

Scott Kushner

Jeremiah Dyehouse

Brenton DeBoef
DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand how the Feminist Mormon Housewives advice column, “Dear fMh,” which ran from 2006-2016, works in alignment with the ethics of care that has existed in American women’s advice columns for generations, as well as how this care specifically functions in the offline-online space. Using feminist rhetorical analysis that focuses on exploring, explaining, and empathizing rather than persuasion, I analyze the writing produced in the most active years of this forum—2006-2007—to understand how this space is created and its relation to the offline space. I base my chapters in Cheryl Glenn’s theory that coalition, reconciliation, and reflection are the concepts that separate feminist rhetorical analysis from traditional rhetoric and that these concepts are vital to democracy and to our survival. My chapters are titled “Reconciliation,” “Coalition,” and “Reflection” respectively, and I analyze how these concepts exist in the forum and that they are intended to continue outside of it. I am approaching this as both a rhetorical project and a tool for survival for those involved.

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DEDICATION

To my first and greatest teacher. Thank you, mom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
DEDICATION	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
CHAPTER 1	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2	8
LITERATURE AND ARCHIVE REVIEW.....	8
CHAPTER 3	14
METHODOLOGY.....	14
CHAPTER 4	22
FINDINGS.....	22
CHAPTER 5	67
CONCLUSION.....	67
CHAPTER 8	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In UK writer James Parker's tribute to what he refers to as the "Agony Aunts," from which the title of this thesis is taken, he argues that in writing to advice columnists we are all expressing a childlike innocence in waiting for "the consummately wise person that can take us in hand. Who has all the answers. Who will know what to do when the weight of our situation exceeds the load-bearing capacity of our psychological frame."

(1) This experience of writing to an advice column is one of complete trust, in which personal information is handed to an all-knowing figure who we believe will understand our lives. Writing to an advice column implies a process before and after the actual writing itself; where the writer has assessed a situation they cannot solve themselves, and the answer implies the writer will listen and take action.

Through Parker's perspective, we can understand that the relationship between the one who writes in and the one who answers is a form of care. Although occasionally snarky or controversial, the voice(s) behind an advice column exist to help other people. My definition of this kind of "care" comes from Maria Novotny and Dawn S. Opel, who define the ethics of care as it exists in the healthcare sphere with the components of "takes a contextual approach"; "begins with an assumption of human connectedness"; "emphasizes communal relationships"; "works best in the private realm"; "stresses the role of emotions (or sentiments) in constituting good character"; and is "female/feminine/feminist" (131-32). Advice columns exist in the context of the moment, allow for interactions that ignore the fact that the one who questions and the one who

answers are strangers, deal with private matters and personal lives, and are often managed and run by women.

This thesis seeks to explore the place of the ethics of care in Feminist Mormon Housewives “Dear fMh” forum, including the issues raised and the individuals who participate in this discussion, through the participants’ potential usage of feminist rhetoric in order to perform this caretaking.

Labor deemed as feminine, including caretaking, is often devalued by many, including many who identify as feminist. Feminist writer Betty Friedan, in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, described women working in the home as trapped, stating that “Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands.” (18). The usage of “only” implies that this way of life is inherently unfeminist. Therefore, the idea of the ethics of care is easy to consider unnecessary. However, from a framework of feminist rhetoric, which is defined by Liz Lane as “any written or spoken act about feminisms,” this caretaking becomes a vital, even revolutionary act as those involved can act from their own intent (2). These new regulation spheres can be ignored by the hegemonic structures who do not see them as contributing members.

As a symptom of the devaluation of feminine labor, public caretaking like that in a forum like Dear fMh can easily be considered as submitting to patriarchal controls. In the late 20th and early 21st century, feminist caretaking work has been enacted and adapted in and for electronic communities on the World Wide Web. Digital feminisms occur when these written or spoken acts about feminism become translated into the

online space as well as use the specifics of digital writing, including hashtags or algorithms, to further their cause. In regards to giving and receiving advice, specific internet communities have become places of discourse for those intimately involved as well as those who can, with well or ill intent, read these personal and intimate stories. An internet community is one formed with the intent of creation or care, rather than pure voyeurism.

“Dear fMh,” or “Dear Feminist Mormon Housewives,” is one example of the thousands of internet forums that exist to facilitate communication that otherwise might not exist. Although part of a larger container website, it serves as a place where the audience, which includes those both inside and outside the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) church, to ask questions about faith and theology as well as personal advice on topics including family, friendships, marriage, and sex. It is a version of both an online forum and of an advice column. The “Dear fMh” column was officially introduced on October 12, 2006 with the post “Dear fMh: An Anonymous Request” by a guest who stated that “I think maybe we should start a series of advice-seeking posts. I mean, where else is a person to go for Dear-Abby-of-liberal(ish)-Mormondom type advice, plus our commenters are so dang smart, I learn stuff every day.” The forum itself, despite being an internet forum that allows the contribution of hundreds of writers, was specifically inspired by traditional advice columns of the past and the caretaking and learning they promote.

It is important to acknowledge that the authority in this project is in the women creating it. According to Liz Lane, feminist rhetoricians online are creating “emergent

rhetoric subversions online that are advancing feminisms, a tactic that hearkens back to representations of concealed or erased feminist histories” (3). In order to acknowledge these advancements, it is necessary to focus on the fact that the agency is coming from fMh and those involved in it. In “A Moderate Manifesto: Mormon Feminism, Agency, and Internet Blogging,” Gavin Feller discusses that part of the presence of internet writing in general is one’s own sense of internal responsibility and agency. As the internet is very self-directed, things like writing a blog, posting on social media, or contributing to a forum all involve one’s own sense of internal agency.

In understanding the way that agency and spirituality interact on this forum and the way that this creates a sort of rhetorical feminism, I am relying on Cheryl Glenn’s writings, specifically “The language of rhetorical feminism, anchored in hope” and the understanding of a feminist approach to rhetoric that Glenn lays out. She states that “Conventional rhetorical operations don’t readily accommodate coalition, reconciliation, or calm reflection—capacities that are crucial to any democracy, of course, but also to our survival as a species” (335). Based on this identification of difference between traditional rhetoric and feminist rhetoric, as well as the recognition that we need these concepts to survive as a species, I base the chapters of this thesis on “coalition, reconciliation, and (calm) reflection” and what they mean in this larger structure.

Thus, this thesis will explore how the interaction on this forum overlaps with feminist rhetoric and the ethics of caretaking. These questions will seek to explore the way this community works with the ethics of care while it participates in feminist rhetoric.

In addition to the interactions between spirituality and feminism, my focus in digital rhetoric and working with a digital text also separates this study from others. The “classic” image of an advice column is one or a magazine or newspaper, updated weekly or monthly. This forum is online and was an unpaid and voluntary effort, which affected its frequency as well as the way it was written. In both English and Rhetoric studies, I have found there is a lack of studies analyzing digital texts as texts and not simply as examples of communication. This important effort to understand how public or rhetoric is evolving sometimes led to the erasure of these texts from literary studies. I am seeking to understand this impact as well as the intent behind this work.

In regards to my own interest in this project, the website and the group itself are something I found while simultaneously reading *Mormon Feminism*, an archival collection curated by LDS women over several decades. Having grown up in a multi-faith family, I respect and understand the divide that religion can create as well as the public spaces often needed to branch it. My appreciation of fMh stems from their ability to do so, as well as the space they have built along the way. I recognize that my interest stems from an outsider position, as I am not a member of the LDS church. The bias in which the women involved are dismissed as not being “real feminist,” are also present in myself and are important to take into account. Part of my ethics in this piece is based around reading the reflections of those directly involved in the site in the years since, as well as varying perspectives on the LDS church.

My primary objective is to explore how the women participating in this community exemplify feminist rhetorical practices, specifically those laid out by Cheryl

Glenn. In terms of my chapter organization, I am seeking to understand the position of reconciliation, coalition, and reflection in this forum and the ways that this communication evolves.

In my “methodology” section, I explain the difference between feminist rhetoric and other, more traditional types of rhetoric as well as the impact that a feminist perspective has when writing or analyzing rhetoric. It is necessary that we understand the ways that feminist rhetorical practices do not seek to convince, or assume that convincing or persuading is the main purpose. I connect this to the work being done in Dear fMh and how it functions.

In my “Description of the Archive” chapter, I attempt to communicate what this archive looks like and its layout, as well as its relative timeline of action. Websites, especially those that are set up by independent groups that are not funded or do not have a hierarchical structure, do not have a specific set format. They are arranged in complex ways, not necessarily with intent or meant to derive “clicks.” There are also many references to the LDS church or LDS culture within the structure of the website, and I want to explain them or the references.

My three main description and analysis chapters are “Reconciliation,” “Coalition,” and “Reflection.” “Reconciliation” explores the existence of concepts that are often considered incompatible with each other in the lives of the people participating in the forum, as well as the way that the forum begins this work and intends for it to continue outside. “Coalition” uses Moira Burke’s “Introductions and Requests” to understand the way that these women, in the context of larger digital communities, work

to form relationships intentionally. It also speaks to the type of coalitions present in other parts of these women's lives and the way they attempt to understand the dissonance between an online relationship and that of others. Finally, in "Reflection," these women bring their emotions into activism through the similarities they have with each other and the way that their identities shape this experience.

This thesis seeks to explore the place of the ethics of care in Feminist Mormon Housewives "Dear fMh" forum, including the issues raised and the individuals who participate in this discussion, as well as the participants' potential usage of feminist rhetoric in order to perform this caretaking.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the first pieces I found was *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, an anthology of Mormon women's writing from the 1940's-now compiled by Dr. Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright. This book provides both historical context and the ability to understand how these ideas have existed through several decades, allowing me to understand the significance of this column and where the concepts come from. Dr. Joanna Brook's work in the LDS church and its women's spaces, as well as outside of it, have allowed for greater understanding of "Mormon Feminism" as a concept and how women in this church negotiate different aspects of their family life.

Feminist groups including Dear fMh have taken to the internet to perform care work in an open information sphere. The exposure of an audience is amplified as an increased population can participate. Rather than introducing one's problem to a potentially mysterious figurehead, one is introducing one's problem to an audience. I define "forum" as an internet interaction where the intention is not simply for the writer to receive advice from a figurehead, but to allow answers from a larger audience. Tamara Witschge speaks to this dynamic on internet forums by stating "On these sites, interaction is not only possible but generates the main existence of the web space" (80). When an internet space like Dear fMh is formed, it is done so in order to open up lines of communication that would not exist otherwise. It is for creation, rather than simply

collapsing something. A Q&A forum is based on this kind of interaction, as the act of posing questions to an online group implies that one wants interaction to happen.

An important part of the internet as a feminist vehicle is an increase in opinions. Liz Lane describes this part of the internet as a “promise,” stating that much promotion and interest in the internet was in it as a “forum in which one can interact freely, without worry of restrictions based on one’s gender, race, class, or other identifiers” (1). Despite the fact that the article goes on to describe and analyze how digital spaces can reproduce other systems of oppression, part of the draw to digital spaces by minoritized communities is this freedom to discuss and debate with each other without being accountable to an oppressive system. Women in the LDS community, in forming their own communities online, interact without being held accountable to the LDS structure.

A specific internet community like fMh becomes a place of discourse for those intimately involved as well as those who can, with well or ill intent, read these personal and intimate stories. In Crystal Abidin’s article “Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness,” she clarifies that online influencers use similar techniques as other media personalities to create parasocial relationships. According to Abidin, parasocial relations are “one-sided interpersonal connections” based on an “illusion of intimacy” (9). Those who use the internet to advance their careers or themselves can easily slip into this promotion, in which an audience feels as if they personally know those who are solely using the internet for fame’s sake. However, rather than coming from one media personality, this forum comes from dozens, allowing for a larger web of interaction.

The concept of “simultaneous agency,” defined by Amy Holt and quoted by Gavin Teller, is also important in understanding how these women can both critique and support the Mormon church, and their place in the religious and secular world. Simultaneous agency goes further than simple resistance or opposition, but takes into consideration the way Mormon women negotiate their “individual, martial, and ecclesiastical desires” (Teller 157). The place of these women in their church, their other communities, and within themselves, is more complicated than a choice they make entirely or all at once. Women in this church, including those in this forum, constantly negotiate.

Chapter 2.2: Description of the archive

This archive, as it was a project not associated with a hierarchical structure or “head,” was managed by the people who felt its creation was necessary. It was community created and community controlled. The forum had a schedule, but one that depended on the additional responsibilities of those involved.

It was also a non-compensated project. Although I do not want to describe a project born out of necessity for the space itself as “voluntary,” nobody involved was paid for their writing, editing, or moderating. Therefore there was less management in terms of the production when a person is not working for payment or for survival, but for their own passion. The frequency and quality of posts depended on the community behind this forum, rather than the other way around.

The forum exists under a list on the website called “Features,” existing on a bar that includes “Home,” “Introduction,” “FMH Bloggers,” “Podcast,” “Comment Policy,” and “Contact.” The description for these features specifically says “with irregular regularity,” implying that this platform will be irregular in its posting.

The forum had its most active existence in its first starting, being at its highest frequency during the years of 2006 and 2007, having first come into official existence in 2006. Although the first post present in the archive comes from 2005, the official naming of the archive is from October 2006. During the remainder of 2006 as well as the entirety of 2007, the forum was at its most active consistently. With the exception of June 2007, every month during this time period has at least one post. Due to the possible fact that these months composed the beginning of this forum, and therefore represent the time

when the participants may have been the most interested in the forum and it was a novelty itself, particularly within the larger container website.

During these first two years in which the forum was the most active, other internet forums had either (a) not been invented yet or (b) existed in their earliest phases. Myspace launched in 2003, and Facebook—first known as “The Facebook” in 2004, making them the more relevant references by the time this forum began within its larger website (Wikipedia). Although these platforms allowed users to post images, they were not image-based as much as later websites like Instagram or TikTok, where algorithms are built more around appealing images that catch users’ attention. Instead, they were often used for keeping in touch with family and friends, and had systems in place for keeping track of them.

This experience was aligned with *social media*, and is what this forum is coming out of. In his book *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Jose van Dijck describes this year with “The year 2006 turned out to be the apex of user euphoria with *Time* magazine selected ‘You’ as the Person of the Year, trumpeting the world-changing power of connected users” (11). The internet was simultaneously encouraging individualism and emphasizing a united “You” that could change the world with this new form of media. This time period represents the beginning of the most successful social media platforms, where traditional “blogging” remained extremely relevant.

The website had already existed since 2005 and had worked within its own existence for this specific situation, but specifically, was a website based in

blogging-specific writers, all women and all having relationships with the LDS church ranging from current membership to completely having left the church. The Dear fMh forum was specifically created as an opportunity for readers to ask for advice as well as inquiring into the women's lives in general.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The trust required in sharing writing becomes more intimate as the writer's life is implicated in this process. Maria Novotny and Dawn S. Opel define giving care as a "process," one that involves "linguaging, listening, laboring, and transforming." The advice column's format is of "linguaging, listening, laboring, and transforming," as the writer and advice columnist attempt to articulate their positions, listen to each other with grace, and allow their lives to be transformed in the process. However, this experience also involves trusting someone who may or may not be using their real name, and whose job means our story will be released to the public. In his tribute to Agony Aunts, Parker describes his own excitement in reading the decimation of the writer, the "advice seeker whose own flaws, glaringly revealed in their letter, are somehow obscured to them" (1). To write into an advice column involves an awareness of this exposure, but enough hope in the columnist themselves and the audience they may be publishing to describe one's life anyways.

I will be applying rhetorical analysis, specifically feminist rhetorical analysis, to the main archive as well as other pieces of writing. My choice of this particular method is rooted in the way it allows me as a researcher to take both my own lived experience and opinions as well as those of the women involved into context. My perspective of this method involves taking into consideration what I know about these writers' lives as well as imagining them in a complex way beyond the confines of a text and the occasionally essentialist way that rhetorical analysis is traditionally created.

Traditional rhetorical analysis provides structure for analysis rooted in acknowledgement of what is referred to as a piece's "rhetorical situation." The writer's workshop of Illinois outlines this "rhetorical situation" as a piece's background information that one must have to fully understand the context of a piece. This communicative context includes the "audience," the "author/speaker/writer," the "purpose," the "exigence," the "message," and the "medium and genre" (Writer's Workshop). Understanding the importance of these aspects means understanding that a text cannot be separated from its context. All are acknowledged as a part of the experience of the text both for the creators and the audience. In order to perform an effective rhetorical analysis, one must process how the writer uses these elements to accomplish their message as well as how the writer has an understanding of logos/ethos/pathos.

Where feminist rhetorical analysis expands on this understanding of rhetoric is in its recognition of the power in traditional rhetorical discourse and the importance of paying attention to the writers that have not traditionally received validation of their work due to said work existing outside of a specific hegemonic structure. It is a type of analysis that respects the intentionality of creation. Texts are not produced "regardless of" their environment but are attached to these environments, as are the people that create them. These environments include but are not limited to the literal, the cultural, and the historical. From this perspective, the writer is not only not "dead," but they are alive as their full and unencumbered self in creating the text.

In regards to the rhetors that feminist rhetorical analysis focuses on, they often exist alongside the people who they are writing for, rather than placing themselves above them. Part of understanding these rhetors is understanding the influence of rhetoric being thought of as the art of persuasion and its association with politics. In “The Language of Rhetorical Feminism, Anchored in Hope,” Cheryl Glenn provides an analysis of how hegemonic political spheres silence those who exist outside of it, even when women or other marginalized people are present, and the place of rhetoric in this tension. Although she acknowledges the power that rhetoric creates and allows to exist, stating that “rhetoric can *do* something that works towards the democratic process,” Glenn’s perspective includes an analysis of the fact that hegemonic systems of rhetoric do not necessarily produce positive interaction. She states that “Equality under the law does not trip the mechanism that releases voice and power” (335). One cannot equate the participation of historically marginalized or underserved people in structures that give them power to the acknowledgement that those people’s voices deserve respect for virtue alone.

This prioritization leads to neglecting of feminist rhetors or women who choose to create writing and meaning outside of the hegemonic sphere of what is considered rhetorical. Glenn states that the “traditional rhetorical practices” have generally failed to deliver anything besides “powerful, political men” (335). Regardless of who may be participating in these practices, they do not necessarily lead to a power shift. In her article “The Womanization of Rhetoric” Sally Miller Gearhart described this power as “Since the middle ages scholars have been fond of classifying rhetoric into three brands: that

which flows from the pulpit, that which is found at the bar of justice, and that which rings out on the senate floor (197).” Rhetoric that is considered rhetoric at all, and therefore worthy of analysis, is rhetoric that is quite literally held above the public—a pulpit, a judge’s bench, and a desk on the senate floor exists as raised services, placing the speaker in an elevated and superior position.

My definition of Dear fMh as a “forum” acknowledges that its participants are writing for other reasons than to persuade. Gearhart’s conclusion expresses her desire for rhetoric to be a “field of communication,” in which those studying it acknowledge rhetoric as an ongoing process (199).

With the acknowledgement that rhetoric involves more than domination and enforcing one’s beliefs at someone with no recognition of their own agency and experience, there comes ideas of creating that are not about existing on a hierarchy, which form perceptions of hope in regards to building and idea of newness that cannot yet be imagined or thought into existence. This hope creates the basis for an idea that feminist rhetorical analysis is about a type of creation rather than a type of deconstruction that traditional rhetorical analysis promotes.

The existence of Dear fMh as a public domain where women can share their private experiences and relations has a particular amount of credibility when applied to the idea that public experiences are impacted by private ones. Rather than separating the two and believing that what women do exists in a private sphere only and that these things are dependent on one’s private experience, this forum takes into consideration that public rhetoric is affected by the private.

In regards to the position of those involved in this sort of rhetorical work, Glenn's analysis also takes into account the fact that being able to create rhetoric and know that one's work will be appreciated is a vital part of agency. In Glenn's words, "true equality manifests itself only when a person can assume the role of a rhetor, knowing that their civic rhetorical words or actions will be listened to and acted on (positively or negatively) by an engaged audience" (335). Power comes from being considered a rhetor, specifically one that has an understanding of their own position and understands that they have power. It requires a certain amount of understanding that one will be taken seriously or respected as a person in the context of their own work and the way that others see them.

The importance of having a feminist rhetorical analysis is the way it allows this to be taken into consideration and for these perspectives to not only be processed, but expressed in a framework that aligns with what they are trying to accomplish. The purpose of rhetorical feminism and the way it may be promoted in terms of feminist rhetorical analysis involve the recognition of these aspects as well as the understanding that rhetors such as the ones present on Dear fMh are not writing to persuade. Rather, they are writing in order to work through their experiences and potentially make connections.

In regards to my actual structure, I have organized Glenn's original statement of the importance of "coalition, reconciliation, and calm reflection" as "reconciliation, coalition, and reflection" as my three chapters. In reviewing the archive itself, I found that those participating had aspects of their lives inherently in tension and needed this tension eased to a point that they felt comfortable—i.e, needed things reconciled. As this is

the basis of much of this forum, exploring this aspect first allowed me to understand the lives of those involved in a clearer way.

After this was laid out as a practice, I could then understand how the community goes forward in its work. “Coalition” is a concept both exemplified in the forum itself and its interactions, and in the online-offline dichotomy, as those involved try to form a community that works towards something specific. “Reflection” is part of this process in general, as the work done on this forum often includes thinking about one’s own beliefs. In this organization, one is able to see how this forum legitimately works towards something while adhering to Glenn’s original intent.

Methodology 2.2: Important Terms

In terms of what is actively happening on this forum, it is important to understand the history of “Mormon Feminism” and what this term is referring to. Wikipedia defines this term as “a feminist religious social movement concerned with the role of women within Mormonism. Mormon feminisms commonly advocate for a more significant recognition of Heavenly Mother, the ordination of women, gender equality, and social justice grounded in Mormon theology and history.” This feminism is a movement that seeks to both advance the status of women in Mormon institutions and theology, and to explore the compatibility of these two groups of people or identities in general.

Part of Mormon Feminism’s importance is its acknowledgement that the public reputation and marketing of the church is patriarchal. The introduction to *Mormon Feminism* outlines this in three issues, the “gendered identity of God,” which references to prioritization of “Heavenly Father” over “Heavenly Mother”; the spiritual value assigned to “traditional” gender roles; and the “issue of polygamy” and its history in the Mormon church (Brooks 4). These problems can create a tension between Mormonism and womanhood that LDS women process in a variety of ways. Rather than embracing their “assigned” role or leaving, they choose to stay and create a new sect of both Mormonism and Feminism.

This form of feminism has part of its basis in intersectionality, in its recognition of the way identities compound. Intersectionality was popularized as a basis for understanding by Kimberle Crenshaw, who in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women,” states “My focus on

the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (1245).” This concept, which Crenshaw originally discussed in the context of Black women’s experience, can be applied to both oppression and power. Identities can unite as well as divide, and intersectionality acknowledges the beauty in this. Mormon feminism is the intersection of Mormonism and feminism, and allows these women to understand themselves.

In the introduction of *Mormon Feminism*, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is quoted as saying “A feminist is a person who believes in equality between the sexes, who recognizes discrimination against women and is willing to work to overcome it. A Mormon feminist believes that these principles are compatible not only with the gospel of Jesus Christ but with the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Brooks 3). The presence of Mormon Feminism allows women in the church to have other options, and to understand progressive politics from a theological perspective. Similarly to how religion is used as a moral compass for family, community, and lifestyle, Mormon Feminism uses religion as a compass for activism.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Chapter 4:1: Reconciliation

As mentioned in my methods chapter, I am basing the analysis of this thesis on Cheryl Glenn's essay "The Language of Rhetorical Feminism, Anchored in Hope," where she explains that feminist rhetorical practices do not focus on persuasion, but on "coalition, reconciliation, and (calm) reflection" (Glenn 335). Reconciliation is the experience of working with two elements or parties that have previously been in discord in a way that satisfies both. These "elements or parties" can be groups, individuals, institutions, ideas, etc. Within the framework of *Feminist Mormon Housewives*, the authors of many posts have appreciation for (a) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and (b) progressive political beliefs, two things that are considered to conflict. I define reconciliation in this context as the resolving of a disagreement that involves people, but is driven by belief, morals or history.

This process is therefore an experience that takes time, and needs to be analyzed on its own, rather than as a empty space between "disagreement" and "agreement". Through three examples, we can see how through introducing aspects of their individual lives that are in tension, the forum participants are attempting to work with elements that are held in opposition. The writing is often an attempt to begin resolving these things.

Reconciliation begins on the forum through participants writing about things they need to reconcile and the advice they receive, particularly regarding how to reconcile the situation itself in their "offline" life. Reconciliation itself is intended to be a process,

something that is ongoing. In her article “Critical Blogging: Constructing Femmescapes Online,” Andi Schwartz analyzes the spaces that [queer] femmes create for themselves on the website Tumblr.com. In this article, she states “I argue that these DIY productions provide two important functions: they create space for femmes to exist and they push back against the normative discourses that create hierarchies and marginalization” (5). In understanding these Tumblr blogs and their impact, we can understand their impact in the spaces they create online and the effect they have on their participants’ lives. They are both a space for [queer] femmes to build community in a way they cannot in the outside world and a beginning of the work to change this outside world.

The community of Dear fMh exists in a similar space, in which they build community amongst themselves while recognizing the communities that they all exist in outside of the forum itself. In a description of an interaction on Tumblr.com that concerned participant’s gender presentation and identity, Schwartz stated that “It provided a connection that will have an impact beyond Tumblr and beyond the relationship between the two bloggers, highlighting the role femme blogs play in building community” (9). This work to reconcile involves relationships in the digital community itself, but hopes to impact relationships in the writer’s offline life.

The November 17, 2006 post, entitled “My Son’s Father is Catholic,” the July 25, 2007 post entitled “Temple Marriage and the In-Laws” and the December 18, 2007 post entitled “My Husband Left the Church and Now my Children Hate to Go” are all examples of attempts to begin reconciliation. These people are not going to fix everything or assume that writing in will do so, but rather, are attempting the beginning of something

that is different or better than what came before it. The titles themselves, all of which are related to family or family relations, signal a level of relationship or relations that people are interacting with.

The post “My Son’s Father is Catholic” is about a child from a previous relationship and the way that religion has changed this family dynamic. The title implies in its calling someone “My Son’s Father,” that that is the primary relationship between the person writing in and the subject. Rather than discussing the relationship as one between the two of them as adults, the child is the one being prioritized, implying that that is the more important connection between them or that another relationship no longer exists or is less important overall. The first sentence is “Hello. I’m a new convert” (Guest). This writer is communicating her own place within the forum and within the larger LDS church. She is a new convert to the church and the religion, and a new participant of the forum. There is context for the community that already exists.

The situation the writer describes is one where her 7 year old, who she states is from a “previous relationship,” tells his father that he is Mormon and that his father responds with “No, you’re Catholic.” She is asking for “Any suggestions on how to encourage Wyatt when faced with this adversity?” It ends with “Please help” (Guest). Her request is specifically how to help her son. She does not want to change this relationship with her son’s father, or have a confrontation with him. What she is trying to help reconcile are the feelings that may exist within her son. She states that “Of course being 7 years old, he thinks his father is the greatest man on earth” (Guest). Wyatt’s experience is being clarified, as his father is the most important person to him.

Therefore, much of the responses to this post are related to this person's son. Many have an investment in the son being able to relate to both faiths, or not being forced into one. User "jks" states that:

Out of respect for the love/admiration your son has for his father, explain that you are Mormon and his father is Catholic and when he is older he will need to decide what church to join. Talk about the similarities (belief in God, belief in Jesus Christ) and then talk about what makes the Mormon church different. Bear your testimony and teach basic doctrine in your home. Most of which you will be teaching to your child at young ages are the basic tenets of Christianity with the BoM & prophets added. (jks)

"Bearing testimony" is a practice in which members state in front of their congregation and/or those in their personal lives. It is defined by the LDS church officially as "knowledge or assurance of a truth that a person declares by the convincing power of the Holy Ghost" (Jensen). There is an emphasis on providing information, both theological and personal. This user is reminding the writer of the similarities that are already going to exist, as well as the way that the person she is writing about is going to experience these things internally.

In recommending that this writer bear her testimony in front of her child, there is the recommendation that she can state her story out loud, and how this may influence him. Regardless, the understanding of this is the understanding that your beliefs must only be yours. Many also mention the way that these beliefs are going to function within her son as a person, as user "Anna A" states "Let the son decide when he's a bit older—much older, when he's really starting to make his own decisions about his life.

Because it IS one of the most important decisions a person can make, it shouldn't be made lightly, and it shouldn't be made under pressure to plead anyone but yourself and Heavenly Father." This user uses her own experience in discussing why she feels this is the right decision, as she states that "Having been in the situation myself, it's confusing and stressful for a little kid to be in the middle of his parents trying to decide if he should be one religion or another...At least, that is what I wish my parents had done for me" (Anna A). Those in this community are able to use their personal stories to encourage reconciliation, with the understanding that the situation is occurring in the personal life of another. The work may begin here, but has to continue in the life of the writer and specifically the life of her son.

There is recognition here that a forcing of reconciliation will cause problems, as this subject needs to be an internal and ongoing reconciliation within the child in question. The undercutting topic of divorce and co-parenting is a part of the discussion of forcing people to reconcile. The readers respect her own experience and what she is able to do, but also understand the position of this within her son primarily. User "Nutty" reiterates what others have stated, in saying that "I agree about talking about the similarities, Christianity, everyone having a choice, and loving him no matter what." They then go on to say that "The more you can help him feel and recognize the spirit (not in a forceful way, but in a natural way) the better equipped he will be to to make good choices and to handle adversity from his father yet still love, accept, and respect him as here realizes they may be going down different paths" (Nutty). They are responding to

this writer in a way that recognizes her role, but prioritizes the person she is writing about.

In writing about people's families and the work they may have responsibility for the post "My Husband Left the Church and Now My Children Hate to Go" is also relevant. This writer's husband has recently left the church, and his reactions and the reactions of their children cause her to feel disrespected. The post begins with "I have been LDS for 30 years, my entire life. Ten years ago I met a man who had converted to the church 2 years prior when he met me. He continued to live Mormon principles and participate in the church until 3 years after we were married 7 or so years ago" (Guest). In this introduction, she is also relying on the community and their previous discussion of marriages and religion. The community to discuss these things is automatically present, as the LDS church prioritizes marriage as a central focus of life. Marriage is spiritual as well as personal. Simultaneously, it is describing her personal marriage and situation.

This writer describes the way that her husband's recent attitude towards the LDS church has affected her and her family. She states that "At the time (of leaving) he had his name removed and will have nothing to do with the LDS church, in fact, he is anti...He will not support the LDS teachings and when I try to teach my children about religion or they are give religious literature, he makes sure it does not contain Mormon undertones" (Guest). In this description, the readers are able to understand that this husband's disdain is not for religion generally, but specifically for Mormonism. Despite the writer's efforts, this behavior has caused her children to adapt some of these attitudes. She states that:

The children are now aware that their father does not believe in Jesus and gets to sleep in every Sunday and they wonder why they have to go to church. I am unable to control my children in church. I cannot even take them into the chapel b/c they talk really loud and will run around...At night when I try to say prayers with my daughter, she sarcastically says them, until I say we don't talk to Heavenly Father that way and I send her to bed w/o finishing or I say them for her (Guest). As a mother, this writer's attempt is to act as the authority. She decides to not bring her children into the chapel, to send her daughter to bed. She is, rather than speaking to her children about their feelings, attempting to make these choices. This author is reconciling in her internal circle. She is not speaking to her children's father about this yet, but attempting to work at it herself.

Where she is, however, trying to reconcile is with another religion. She states that her family has become friends with a Baptist Youth Minister, who has been guiding her husband through his own thoughts and experience, as well as convincing him to see a Baptist speaker. What she is considering as a solution is to attend a Baptist church, rather than remain afraid that her children will be atheists, who she states she feels have "no morals." She states that:

Today I told my bishop and he is less than thrilled with the idea. He tells me that he can't tell me what to do, but that he doesn't think it is a good decision. He wants me to pry about it and tell me what I decide...I don't think he realizes what grave consequences my current situation can have on my children and he says I need to think about my own salvation. Isn't my own children's spirituality important too, I am thinking to myself.

(Guest) She is attempting to reconcile herself, doing so with religious officials and the role they play in her family life.

Both the Baptist minister and her personal bishop are the ones providing advice or guidance in this situation. She understands that her bishop has never been in her situation, but is relying on them and her own faith to help her. This distance is also implied in her request. The post ends with “Please give me your opinions on my current dilemma. I would appreciate objectivity and trying to place yourself in my shoes. My children are really shallow and spiritually empty” (Guest). This request is an emotional one, as it communicates that this person feels harmed or hurt by her children’s behavior and is concerned for them. Simultaneously, it asks for objective opinions and for people to understand the situation from her perspective, rather than letting their own emotions about marriage, raising children, or religion cloud her judgment.

The responses to this post attempt to recommend that she work to reconcile numerous aspects of her situation, including her children’s behavior, problems in her marriage, and issues of faith. User “fMhLisa” outlines this by stating:

As I see it, there are several different issues to address here: First constructive ideas for getting children to behave (in and about) church under difficult circumstances. (with perhaps parenting book suggestions?) Second, the more abstract question of faith, if attending church as a family is better than no church or separate churches. And Third suggestions (perhaps best from people who’ve “been there”) for helping this couple learn to respect each other’s very different opinions. (fMhLisa)

This response mentions the different elements that need to be reconciled as well as the people that need to reconcile with each other.

Many responses discuss that they feel this person's marriage is the issue. User "fMhLisa" states that "I hate to do any psychobabble crap, not knowing you or what it's like in your house, but if the children see you and your husband acting in disrespectful way towards each other's belief systems, maybe this acting out is their way of testing that, or something." User "Justin" states that:

What concerns me here is that he is making choices regardless of your feelings. As a husband, your situation sounds to me like it's less likely an issue of religion as it is marital communication problems...Having said that, I think the core of this entire issue rests with your husband. Go to counseling and figure out why he is disrespectful to you. I have a hard time believing he is a supportive, loving husband outside of this religion issue. (Justin) These readers are more focused on the family as a force separate from the religion. This is what they feel needs to be reconciled, rather than beginning with religion as a framing principle. Suggesting a marriage counselor rather than a bishop or other religious leader, and stating that this person's husband's choices are the main problem implies that there is a problem separate from this experience entirely. User "Julie M. Smith" states that "I just want to reiterate the comments about respect—it sounds like husband, wife, children do not respect each other in this house." The thing most people feel needs to be reconciled are the family relationships as they exist separately from the difference of religion. Although this community is connected through their religion, this response focuses on the issue itself.

In addition, many take issue with the fact that the writer feels that her children will become, as she considers it, “atheists with no morals.” User “squid” states specifically that “Religion and morals are two distinct things. If your children are raised as atheists or are given the choice to believe in whatever they want does not mean they will be without morals. You can teach them right from wrong without religion. It’s your job as a parent to do that either way.” Here, the focus of reconciliation is on the writer herself to reconcile these parts of her beliefs, which will hopefully lead to her reconciling her family life. Others echo this sentiment, some sounding frustrated or taken aback by her perspective. User “C.L. Hanson” states that “Please. Atheism does not equal ‘no morals’...If your husband wants to stay atheist and needs some encouragement and instruction on how to be respectful and loving towards his family’s beliefs, then send him to my blog.” In this statement, the writer is also communicating that it is possibly not the writer’s responsibility to reconcile this part of her family, but rather her husband’s responsibility to work through this on his own. This response, in beginning with “please,” interrupts the line of thinking that equates religion with morals and no religion with no morals. The idea of “sending” this man to “her” blog is a moment of implications that she will be able to understand this husband and his perspective better, and has possibly been through something similar. The understanding of this digital community includes the promotion of another, or the idea that different ones can contribute different things.

Other users try to get the writer to understand her husband’s perspective. User “minnie mouse” asks “Sounds like your contempt for atheism is similar to his contempt for the church. So can you really blame him? Maybe you can both agree to mellow out

and have better mutual respect for your partner's genuine beliefs. Atheists are not amoral anymore than Mormons are cultish or Mountain Meadow Massacre Murderers." This is a reference to the Mountain Meadow Massacre of 1857, when conflict between Methodist migrants and Mormon settlers led to the slaughter of Methodist men, women, and children. (Gordon, Shipps). These ideas rely on the writer being able to reconcile differences in opinions within herself. Mentioning the idea that Mormons are considered "cultish" or the murders associated with the religion serves as an opportunity for the writer to consider herself from their perspective, and recognize the validity and invalidity of these stereotypes. This response is encouraging the writer to understand how they appear to others. The reference to Mormons being referred to as "cultish" and the association with crimes within their community acknowledges the negative impact that this stereotyping has and the fact that this is also an unacceptable way to treat others. What is being reconciled here may need to be within the writer herself as well as her family before any real progress can be made.

The July 25, 2007 post titled "Temple Marriage and the In-Laws" outlines a different situation, in which reconciliation may be needed before a family relationship can even begin. This post, which is specifically related to this person's boyfriend and marriage, explains that they are marrying into a family that is not Mormon and that their partner only joined the church two months ago. The post is introduced with this person's status, that they are a "student at BYU currently in the best relationship of (my) life with my boyfriend of two years. He's the man I've always wanted: sensitive, kind, open-minded, and devastatingly attractive" (Guest).

In mentioning Brigham Young University (BYU), they are relying on the fact that this group knows what BYU is, as it is an LDS university as well as a place where many individuals meet their spouses. In describing their own personal situation and the fact that this boyfriend is the “man (they)’ve always wanted,” they are allowing the readers to comprehend what they have experienced and the way they feel about this person. It is their relationship, and they are using the ideas of someone who is “sensitive, kind, open-minded, and devastatingly attractive” to help the other participants understand where they may be coming from.

The problem, as explained by the writer, is that although her boyfriend’s parents are in favor of their marriage and their relationship in general, they are not allowed to physically be present at the wedding. Since Mormon wedding ceremonies take place inside the LDS temple, any one that is not LDS is not allowed to be present. As the writer explains this, the real problem lies with her own parents. She states that “They are in favor of the two of us getting married someday, but have often expressed their disapproval of having two ceremonies. My mother seems to think it would take away from the temple ordinance. She claims support from GA’s, but I have not found such statements anywhere.” Here, the problem is laid out as what is needing to be reconciled—the writer’s disagreement with her mother, as well as her mother claiming support from religious officials she does not feel is there.

The writer gives credit to her boyfriend’s family for their respect and help for both of them. She states:

I have wanted to be sealed in the temple for as long as I can remember. It is vitally important to me and I will not settle for anything less. But I love my boyfriend's family, and it's important to me that they know that I want them to be close to us...having them sit in a waiting room, no matter how beautiful my mother says it is, doesn't seem like enough. (Guest) The writer is attempting to reconcile her own feelings on this issue through the post, while also communicating the way that she feels this will create a situation that she cannot reconcile personally or spiritually. Regardless of her mother's perspective speaking from her own experience of being sealed in the temple, she does not consider this adequate information to reconcile this for herself or for her boyfriend's parents. The pain she is experiencing is centered around the fact that for her, the love for her boyfriend, his family, and her faith are not separate but do not automatically coexist. The rules of the system she is participating in keeps these people apart from each other, something that is not automatic to her.

Her request ends with "Have any of you heard any statements from GA's regarding this issue? What are your personal thoughts regarding this matter?" Her request is simultaneously about the official religious doctrine that may have been released relating to this issue, and the personal stories of those on the forum.

The responses to this query in particular are different from other responses, specifically because the writer is younger than the website's assumed audience. In the organization's name itself, this is a place that prioritizes housewives—those who are married; whose complications relate to being wives and mothers. This is someone whose life in this sense has not started. The responses are coming from people who have

experienced this part of life, and now have the ability to reflect on it. Both user “Jo in Utah” and user “sarah k” reflect on their own decisions regarding their past weddings with both LDS and non-LDS family members. “Jo in Utah” states that “Do the two ceremonies. Coming from a non member family, my biggest regret almost 27 years after my temple wedding is not doing some sort of ceremony to make my mom happy...even after almost 3 decades, my mom still feels the pain of feeling unloved, and that Mormons are judgemental and exclusive.” This user is using her own experience, one that is far beyond this writer’s stage in life, to recommend specific action. Her use of the phrase “Do the two ceremonies” feels particularly parental, as it is short and clipped, similarly to instruction. Explanations that are this short assume that the person involved do not require explanation or should not ask for them. They function in some ways as a command. There is a sense of authority in how she explains this. She praises the writer for her sense of understanding, with “Your heart is filled with love and caring, compassion and service, you will be able to do it” (Jo in Utah). This praise and respect is one where the woman is encouraging this person based on the ability she feels she has and is assigning to her. There is an assumption of authority in this response, that this person has experienced family complications before.

User “sarah k” also uses her own earlier experience and the feelings she now has about her wedding. She states:

In my personal experience, I got married in the temple while my mom and all my brothers, aunts and uncles and cousins, waited outside. I was sad that my mom couldn’t be there, but I had decided young that I would not settle for less. It was a show of my

faith. Since then, I have come to regret that decision. I absolutely do not think it takes away from the sacredness of the temple sealing if you are already married...I am so sad that my mom could not be at my wedding. She didn't get to help me put my dress on, or hold my hand before I left her for someone else. This reflection, compared to the one written by "Jo in Utah," relates more of the writer's personal feelings.

"Jo in Utah" describes the way her mother feels about Mormons having experienced this, and "sarah k" describes the way she personally feels about this experience. "Jo in Utah" continues to have specific issues with her family, and "sarah k"'s issues appear more internal—she is sad, personally. For her, reconciliation or having the ability to reconcile something feels much more internal. This community is recommending work in one's personal life, but also within one. For this digital community, reconciliation has to be understood as taking many forms outside of it. The complications of people's personal lives are recognized.

Similarly to Jo in Utah, this person writes with the experience of someone who has moved past this time in her life, and understands the place this original writer may be writing from. She describes her mindset at the time as not being able to settle, that she was young when she made this choice, and that it was a show of her faith. The original writer, in clarifying how important it is for her to have a temple sealing, is also somebody who has a strong faith and needs to feel connected to it. There is a connection between the two, and in describing this, the original writer is able to clarify the way that she felt similarly at the time, but has come to feel differently in years since.

In addition to personal experience regarding marriage, many of the responders describe the potential religious reconciliation that needs to take place. In addition to the rules of temple marriages excluding those who are not LDS, new converts to the church must wait a year after they are baptized to get married in an LDS temple. Many of the comments discuss the complexities and perspectives on these rules, and the way to include different family members while respecting them. User “sarah k” describes her friend’s experience, stating:

I don’t know what any GAs have said, but when a good friend of mine married a new convert, the counsel she received from the bishop and stake president was to get married sooner, rather than wait the full year required for her fiance to be eligible for a recommend. Where Mormons have the whole abstinence before marriage thing, year-long engagements are not always a good idea.

This response is recalling another’s experience, while reminding the user that Mormons have numerous rules or cultural expectations around marriage beyond her personal situation. This writer mentions another experience to connect with the original writer while reminding her of rules that may prevent the best possible experience. The personal and the spiritual need to be reconciled, and the other writers are attempting this.

User “Merkat” states that “Another option is to have the temple sealing, and then do a ring ceremony for everyone. That worked out well for me. I’ve heard that it is discouraged to have the whole ceremony with vows and pronouncements after the temple sealing by the Church, but I’m not sure if that has ever been verified.” In this recommendation, this user is describing their own experience without blatantly stating

that that is the case initially. This helps people understand that they are speaking about religious rules, which they are not seeing as personal or something to be taken personally. There is simply a discussion of the rules that may or may not affect the situation.

Other suggestions involve a more outright disdain or wish to twist the rules involved. User “patti” states:

If you two are serious about getting married, why not do it in the next ten months? You could have a civil ceremony because, as a new convert, he doesn't have the opportunity to go to the temple yet. Then, get sealed later...President Kimball said that the ordinances of the temple are for the living and for the dead who didn't have the opportunity in life. But since you two don't have the opportunity to go to the temple now, getting married outside the temple won't be a mockery of god.

This user is specifically quoting from a former church president in order to prove the point she wants to make. This is a usage of specifically the church leaders and the beliefs of a religion to reconcile, and possibly a suggestion of how to reconcile within oneself. User “Katie” continues some of this advice, stating “I just want to second all the great advice here. I, too, am a strong supporter of ring ceremonies. And I want to repeat what has been said that the gospel is all about families and love. So having a ring ceremony doesn't diminish the temple and the gospel, it actually EMBODIES it.” This user is giving credit to those who have already given advice, while also responding to the idea that the gospel can be applied to situations that are more complex or nuanced. She is applying logic to those involved by relating the fact that if the gospel primarily connects to family and love as a primary tactic, then it should be particularly important in this case.

Mentioning the work of others continues a specific conversation while acknowledging that this is a type of work. The point is not only whether this advice is taken, but the conversation that it creates.

Throughout the forum, particularly questions that involve arguments or contention between family members, reconciliation is often encouraged depending on whether it is external or internal. Many members make recommendations for reconciliation based on what people may be suggesting based on who they feel may be to blame or who has to reconcile. There is a presence of trying to move through a certain process without having that process currently exist necessarily. Those involved are recognizing the continuity of these relationships.

Throughout this, we can see how reconciliation is something that is ongoing, and that has a process of continuation between offline and online communities. Through the anonymity of the online as well as the feminist ethics of care, we can understand that reconciliation exists as its own process. When a community is prioritizing itself rather than the results of others or the specific ending that needs to happen, these things that are considered necessary before the actual results can happen become results on their own.

Chapter 4:2: Coalition

A coalition, in its basic definition, is a bond between two that is different from either of them separately. This usually refers to groups rather than individuals. In broader activist circles, coalitions and coalition building exists through groups working with and for each other to accomplish things that they could not separately. The idea is that a coalition is moving towards a goal or final place.

This is present in many activist circles or organizations. The Rhode Island Coalition for The Homeless (RICH) and The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) are both examples of this work. Specifically, RICH based much of its work after RICADV, stating that its intent was to be a “values-driven collective actor establishing well-defined strategic organizing and communication practices.” Defining something as a coalition in this context is recognizing how those involved need to focus on their common goals and understanding rather than identity differences. RICH practices include:

- written cultural agreements that establish a shared vision and core values;
- conflict resolution practices;
- orientation materials and workshops to share cultural agreements and conflict resolution mechanisms; and
- regular opportunities to reflect on experience and distill shared understandings (Jeffreys & Ryan 41).

This can be applied to other communities through understanding the way that they intentionally work together to accomplish something as well as the fact that conversation

is needed to understand these things. Often, there are differences they may need to be talked through or resolved before effective political work is possible. The idea of reconciliation is particularly important before coalition in this case, as differences may need to be reconciled to the point where they no longer impede political progress. Reconciliation can lead to more effective community-building, in which differences have been discussed or are being worked through, and coalition is the next step in this experience, in which these communities are able to work towards common goals. The type of coalition in this forum is based around the openness of their conversation as well as their shared identity. They have certain things in common or already central to their interactions, and the goals they may be working towards are therefore centered in these identities.

Due to the fact that this forum was not commissioned, its existence is not guaranteed. The people themselves have to be a committee—the work has to be done through their own will. In her essay “Introductions and Requests: Rhetorical Strategies That Elicit Response in Online Communities,” Moira Burke analyzes the strategies writers online use to get responses. Using the Usenet platform as an example, Burke states that “Forty percent of potential thread-starting messages in Usenet groups receive no response. When this happens, those who are trying to get information, support, or discussion from a group receive no benefit from their efforts” (Burke et. al 1). Through this perspective, we can see that without specific efforts that prompt recognition and response, well-intended people end up shouting into the void. In order to reconcile, a conversation has to begin. The factors that influence the ability to start this conversation,

according to Burke, are “Introduction” and “Requests.” Burke states that introduction is to “prove you deserve community effort.” These are either “group introductions,” where previous activity in the group is mentioned, or “topic introductions,” where the writer reveals a personal connection to the topic of discussion. (Burke et. al 3) On this particular forum, most of the posts are “topic introductions,” as people writing in are doing so about their own life. They introduce themselves as a topic, therefore bringing new information that users are interested in.

“Requests” are how these posts end. Burke describes these requests as “Call to action; they make clear what the poster hopes to get from the group” (Burke et. al 4). The “chaos and ambiguity” of the internet is reduced with this kind of work, as people can be specific in the help they are looking for. As this forum is an advice column and the posts are moderated before they are posted, this exists in a different format. The website’s administrators read every post before it is published and sometimes provide their own requests for the audience, like including information about the author to take into consideration.

In this chapter, through two posts titled “Helping My Ward” and “Balancing Rationality and Faith in Conversation,” posted on March 24, 2007 and April 13, 2007, respectively, I explore how these writers seek to build coalition among their communities and families and how they are able to do so in the forum, while analyzing its potential existence in their own lives. These posts specifically concern issues with the coalitions in their external lives, and through the coalition that already exists, they are able to discuss

how these situations can be improved. The common identity allows those involved to understand these situations.

The first post, titled, “Helping my Ward,” is primarily connected to the idea of creating a coalition where there is none through a better group dynamic. The post, originally by a user called “Sarah,” states “I’m new, and a bit of a lurker. I would like to see postings on anyone that has advise about how to help unite a ward that struggles with gossip, and hate for each other...our ward is awful to say the least right now... gossip and hurtful feelings are rampant, any suggestions or ideas, from anyone...or experiences that might help? The introduction here is a topic introduction according to Burke’s framework. This person is new to the site, and in introducing her specific ward’s issues, is introducing her specific situation as well as the wider topic. A ward is a smaller congregation or branch of the Mormon church, and in using this word, she is relying on the understanding the community may have regarding this idea. She states she would “like to see postings,” which is referencing not only the responses to her own piece but wanting postings on this topic generally in the future.

She is also being introduced as a participant on the site, as she states that she is new, and a bit of a lurker. A lurker, in terms of digital studies, is someone who spends time on a website without posting anything or participating. They may be trying to understand if they want to continue or participate further in the site’s activity, or trying to understand the general website’s experience. In using this terminology she is introducing herself and her perspective to the forum as much as she is describing her personal

situation. She is stepping out of the non-presence of lurking, and into the presence of this forum.

Her request, at the end of the post, is more related to her personal experience as well as the way that she is introducing these things to the larger community. She wants “suggestions” and “ideas” as well as “personal experience” that can help her. In asking for these things in this format, she is suggesting that this is a topic that the forum can explore in future.

In terms of the content of the post, she is asking for help with a ward, a community that is supposed to be supportive and respectful of each other, but is dealing with gossip and hurt feelings amongst its members. In an environment where everyone is supposed to be devoted to God, people are paying more attention to their own egos. What she is asking for is advice to create a coalition where she feels there is none. When a coalition is supposed to automatically exist, people find it particularly difficult to work with when there is none. This is not an unexpected coalition, but rather an unexpected situation, as there needs to be some sort of supportive environment. What she is looking for is the type of ward that she expects. The “community” itself may be present, but not necessarily the action needed for those to bring them together as a coalition.

The responses to this question are centered around both the present situation and the way that the writer is connected to this behavior. Through these responses, we can understand the perspectives of the coalition in this environment and how people within it are encouraged to work with each other. Several responses suggest things that can help the ward work better with each other or help the general relationship improve. User

“Proud Daughter of Eve” suggests “Maybe organizing a book club (or any kind of club) will give people the opportunity to interact in a more positive way? Do group-building activities perhaps?” User “Laura M” writes from her personal experience, stating that:

We tried hosting dinner parties at our house once a month with couples that would likely not otherwise get to know each other at church. Maybe couples from different age groups, different areas in the ward, serving in different auxiliaries in the ward. We were invited to such a dinner party in the past and it really helped in breaking down the invisible walls in my mind of who I should be friends with in our ward. It’s been a lot of fun and hopefully helped bring more unity.

User “Rich” says:

I can think of a few things. 1. Get the bishopric involved and set aside a sacrament meeting (or three!) and P/RS lessons where the talks focus on building each other up. 2. As has already been suggested, socialize more as a Ward—things like progressive dinners, informal dinner invitations, block parties, etc. 3. Mix up the home and visit teaching routes. To know others is to love them. I remember taking a huge dislike to a guy in an old ward; wasn’t until I spent a little time with him that I understood him better, and my dislike for him vanished.

These responses focus on suggestions for fixing the problem, and imply that this problem is something that can be fixed or otherwise improved by the group interacting in a different way. From this perspective, a coalition is something that can be formed outside of the church environment, and something that takes specific effort to do so. The activities suggested do not necessarily have anything to do with faith or religion, but are

more aligned with ideas of community and intentionally working with each other. What is suggested is a book club, a diner party, a block party—all of which do not automatically involve religious beliefs or religious practices, but do involve work and commitment. Book clubs involve everyone’s perspective and views, dinner invitations involve making a meal and possibly bringing supplies, block parties involve an experience with food, music, and community interaction. The effort here needs to come from everyone, and these suggestions imply that this effort will allow for a coalition.

The perspective from other participants in terms of this situation are related to ideas of gossip and bitterness as they exist within this particular ward, as well as how they may exist in a religious environment in general. These perspectives take into consideration how gossiping harms a community. Several of them also describe the writer’s own role. User “RE” describes the complications of this problem:

There’s certainly no easy way to ‘fix’ this kind of situation, definitely not as just one person. That said, there are things you can do to not further these problems. Like Seth R said, try not to participate in it by neither listening nor passing things on (be careful with this one, though—you don’t want to make a self-righteous gesture by flouncing off in a huff when people start gossiping, or you’ll just make yourself a target, or risk further polarizing things. There’s nothing wrong with disengaging from an unsavory conversation by just making a quiet excuse and keeping things friendly.

This response is suggesting that the person in question is allowed to remove herself from certain scenarios, removing the group as a whole from potential coalition.

Unlike the previous suggestions, there is no encouragement of how to create a better community through activities, but rather a suggestion of ignoring certain behavior. Other commenters also react along these lines, with user “Janet” describing her own personal experience, and stating that:

One of our old wards had this problem briefly (a year maybe, rather than longer). I was friends with everyone on both sides of a large rift, and both sides, frankly, needed to vent. There were some serious underlying problems rather than just surface pettiness. If such is the case in your ward, I’d suggest actually listening to the vent and then gently helping people see the other side of things. Sometimes I just listened to a ward member delineate all of “Sister SoandSo’s” bad qualities and then said, “Yeah, I can see how that would bug you, but you have to admit [insert many good qualities here].” Occasionally it worked. Often people brushed me off with “Janet, you like everyone!”

This comment in particular suggests a response to the scenario, besides simply ignoring it. There is an understanding here that a coalition is something that requires intentional responses and decisions. Although a process, it is something that has to be cultivated.

Due to the fact that this forum was created out of need, there is an occasional wondering if other forums like it or other places similar exist. The fact that there is this particular coalition means, in some ways, that others are necessary. There is building community, while recognizing that community needs to happen in other places.

Throughout the forum, other posts and the situations they describe relate to these ideas of coalition through their being related to how relationships function. Identities,

including one's religious identity, can function as the unspoken element in difficult social situations, or something that drives people apart. The post from April 13, 2007, titled "Balancing Rationality and Faith in Conversation" by "Tom" is an example of how people's faith, as well as their interpretation of it, can be a source of bringing people together as well as a source of driving them apart. The writer describes that during a conversation over a dinner party, there began to be issues relating to their faith. He states:

However, once she mentioned that she was studying bioethics—euthanasia in particular—in Manhattan, the conversation immediately turned to philosophy and theology. The rest of the conversation was very deep, thought-provoking, and honest because of how the different beliefs presented themselves in discussion (she is Jewish, everyone else is Mormon). I must admit that I had a LOT of fun, though my friend appeared slightly frustrated throughout, but after they left I found myself feeling extremely disturbed by something that I couldn't put my finger on until I realized what it was: **I had spent the entire night discussing the truths of the gospel in the language of philosophy (maxims, spirit/mind/body, free will, determinism, foreknowledge) but almost never in the language of the faith I believe in.** My friend was a little upset by this, I surmised, which is why he continued to subtly bear testimony of how he believed (he never said anything in a strong fashion, but also never resorted to "well, this is only what I think," but would often state "Well, we lived before this life and we live after, so some questions about death and free will are, to me, somewhat moot.").

This post includes aspects of both a topic and a group introduction, as "Tom" is speaking about his own personal experience with his wife and friends, but is relying on

the group's understanding of Mormon beliefs and practices. His stating that his friend said "Well, we lived before this life and we lived after" and his calling this "subtly bearing testimony" are recognitions of the impact of bearing testimony, as well the details of Mormon beliefs. The LDS community is already part of this dinner conversation.

Within this particular post, there are issues of how we build relationships, including those surrounding ideas of coalition, that are related to how this writer is attempting to bond with people or have a conversation with them. In this particular instance, he feels he did not interact properly as he did not speak from the basis of his faith. The lack of consideration for his own faith makes him feel he did not put enough effort into the conversation. How conversations begin, as well as the details included in how people talk, are important, and affect the results of the conversation as well as the feelings of the people involved. While this person is in conversation, he is not using what is considered to be the most effective thing to talk about or discuss. His friend therefore felt the need to "make up" for him, talking more about his faith and using it as an example. The request, at the end of this post, is "Have you ever been in a similar situation, and if so, how do you balance your personal relationship between faith and reason in conversation with others?" He is asking for others' experiences, as well as their potential advice for dealing with this as a whole.

This conversation, which is based around something that exists in all people's lives in some form, involves this friend speaking about the way that his faith feels about this, and he is using this as a basis of understanding. The way to come into this discussion is through using what is important to him personally. This connects to coalition as an

outside factor. He can only speak about his own experience so much when not using his faith. There is a divide between this original writer and his friend, as the overall experience feels slightly confusing.

He states that he is particularly upset with his lack of communication regarding this situation. He states that:

However, the largest problem, and what disturbed me most, was when they were leaving I offered to let her borrow a very non-spiritual book about Mormon beliefs (technically, McMurrin's "Theological Foundations" to my chagrin, rather than 'By the Hand of Mormon' or something that might be more appropriate for simple sociological study). After they had left, I can see myself, in my mind, saying "Rather than give you this one man's philosophical ideas about what Mormons believe, perhaps it would be best, if you want to know more, to read where many of our beliefs can be found, and handing her a Book of Mormon as the awesome missionary-minded member I wish I could be. (Tom)

He describes the way he spoke as coming from a place of "rational theology" rather than "Standard Works." He finishes this description in general with a question, asking "Have you ever been in a similar situation, and if so, how do you balance your personal relationship between faith and reason in conversation with others?" (Tom). It is implied in this question that he feels he did not interact correctly in this conversation, specifically that he was not the kind of Mormon he wants to be. He is disappointed in his own ability to not create coalition amongst people based in his own faith. The kind of work he should be doing feels separate from him.

Many of the responses to this comment specifically focus on the ethics of using one's faith in this kind of conversation in the first place. User "Rachel" and user "Lupita" come from the perspective that the original writer did nothing wrong, and should not be too upset. User "Rachel" states "Actually, I think it sounds like the evening went pretty well. I prefer people to think of me as a nice young woman who happens to be Mormon. For example, most of the people I work with don't know I'm Mormon...But I feel like it works out better if people get to know me, see that I'm cool and then find out." This comment implies that these things can impact the effectiveness of this experience overall, and that if you go into a certain conversation wanting to convince people or affect their mindset, you are setting yourself up to be labeled using this. There are implications about the stereotypes associated with Mormonism, as she wants to be "someone who happens to be Mormon," rather than something mostly rooted in stereotyping or other issues. She feels that if she comes to this relationship with only her religious identity, she will not be able to do other things well. She then applies this to another's life, stating that she believes it will not affect him badly.

User "Lupita" agrees with the idea that this evening sounds like a good experience for all in the first place, stating that "Guess I don't see the problem...a night of discussing theology and philosophy with friends sounds lovely." The aspect of the problem where Tom feels he has not expressed himself properly or communicated enough about his religion does not strike this person to be a problem in the first place, as they instead focus on the conversation at hand. Her own description of what she might do if she found herself in a similar situation includes "I frequently find myself in similar

situations and try to follow the Spirit. If I feel like testifying, I do. Sometimes it's more appropriate than others" (Lupita). There are implications that she wants to work with both the religion as it affects her and the conversation that is actually taking place, and she may feel that these are two different things. There is an understanding that building a coalition is affected by the people involved.

Others, however, sympathize more with the writer and his belief that he did not put forth enough of his specific faith. User "Tom," who defines himself specifically as "not the author of this post," states that:

Sadly, most of my conversations with the science types I work with go this way. I rarely 'witness' or even speak in personal terms. I think there are two main reasons for this: 1) my faith is often weak and 2) I'm afraid that they don't want to hear it. It becomes even harder when I hear comments that I'm a "cool" Mormon because I'm not pushy. I'm not a cool Mormon. I'm a weak, fearful Mormon.

This commenter sympathizes with the original writer. They are not speaking about how they feel while interacting with these other people, only that they consider themselves lesser in their own lives because they cannot work with this properly. This person is specifically stating that this part of life impacts their ability to connect—there is something preventing them from doing so properly and with enough dignity. They feel that their identity is personally stopping them from this part of their life.

Creating a coalition needs to involve a certain amount of honesty, and those in this conversation do not feel that they currently have it or the ability to be honest with

each other. There is a difference between what it is to be in this environment and what it means to be in the communities they exist in outside of digital spaces.

Coalition in the digital space exists in a way that relates strongly to how people work with the digital space and the rest of their lives. They have to specifically explain how people are interacting with each other in order to communicate the situation and to get advice. Interaction between these spaces means building a coalition, as well as allowing oneself to improve coalitions outside of this forum.

Chapter 4:3: Reflection

Reflecting implies solitude in a way that the other concepts explored in these chapters do not. Where reconciliation is a process of creating some sort of harmony or agreement that previously had not existed, and coalition is a process of creating interactions and interpersonal relationships that previously had not existed, reflection is considered an internal process.

However, due to this forum being created out of a need, as well as common religious identity, there is a commonality that means the people involved need to reflect as part of this process. Their emotions are often shared, their experiences similar. Reflection is important, a necessary part of a process rather than unnecessary or irritating. Through three examples, titled “WWJD and What Should I?,” “Religion and Sex,” and “Supporting a friend who had an abortion,” from March 10, 2007; September 3, 2007; and December 11, 2007, respectively, we can see that reflection is a necessary part of these womens’ activism. It is a rhetorical process, that people work through together as they do with these other concepts.

The first post, “WWJD and What Should I?” implies a particular kind of reflection in its title. The phrase WWJD, or What Would Jesus Do, is a question and a movement intended to move people towards a more Christ-like way of life, particularly regarding how you treat or speak to others. It gained popularity after the publication of Charles Sheldon’s 1896 novel *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do*, which told the story of a congregation challenged to ask themselves “What Would Jesus Do?” before making a decision over the course of a year (Sheldon). The book’s popularity and the subsequent

movement encouraged Christians to pay attention to Jesus's behavior before making a decision or while interacting with others. The Mormon Church's official website includes a section called "Becoming like Jesus," where his principles are outlined as well as the way that Mormons can apply these principles to their lives (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints).

This post therefore begins with a kind of reflection already. This saying and how it encourages people to reflect is in conflict with the second part of this question— "and what should I?" This original writer is looking to become more Christlike in her life, but is wondering about how it may apply to the logic of the situation. This original writer, who is called "mb," describes a situation where someone who she calls "V" and her son, who she called "W," need a place to stay, and she is not sure if she can provide one for a long period of time. She introduces the topic and the person she is writing about with "V is a 21 yr old African American woman who grew up in the inner city and comes from a broken home. V asked if she could stay at my apartment (although she is not active at church, a few of her younger siblings are, and I know them well.) I said she could and her and her son are currently staying at our apartment" (mb). The original writer states that:

I just want to make sure to do the right thing and help her in the right way. I am not prepared nor do I think I want to support her and her son. She is capable of working and I just don't want her to become dependent and feel no incentive whatsoever to get a job or an apartment or an education. At the same time, I really feel for her. She has not had the parental support and love that many of us take for granted and made pretty

foolish decisions (getting pregnant, dropping out of school) that have really limited her choices in life. She just does not have and has not been taught the tools to succeed and overcome (mb).

This writer also describes that they and their spouse have had a talk and that they feel confused about what they should do, and what the best way to proceed is. The real question here is “But, what is the Christ-like thing to do? Take her in as long as she needs help, or just tell her she can stay until she finds a shelter to go to (mb).” The writer defines themselves as being willing to help, but not able to do so forever, and wondering about their own resources. She states that “I know I sound a little mean, but I am not. My home and food and wallet have always been open to people in need, but in this situation, I wonder if I will truly be helping her if I let her stay indefinitely (mb)” This original writer is speaking about both themselves and the way they personally want to be defined. They clarify that they do not want to sound mean, but understand that this person may need something beyond constant help. There are two reflections happening here: the reflection of being Christ-like and what that means, and the real effect that this person’s actions may have on the future of another individual and her life.

The aspect of this that includes “and what should I?” implies that this phrase may not always be applicable, or always make sense, when speaking about people’s real needs. This woman is trying to help another whose life is entirely different from hers and who does not attend church anymore, having effectively cut herself off from the religious community, complicating the question of what Jesus would do in a church focused on converting. The issue of reflection and its place in this community is complicated by the

subject of the question being defined as “African American.” The original writer is naming her potential difference. “Mb” is trying to help another by doing what they need, but is struggling to work within her own beliefs and identity, as well as her own financial and emotional limits.

The responses to this question are generally oriented into two categories: what she can materially do, and how she can think about the situation in order to improve it overall. User “Olivia” asks “Have you talked with V at all about plans/ideas to get some education and/or work? Or even some community resources about parenting? If she were making progress towards being able to support herself and her children, would you feel okay about her continuing to stay with you?” The questions here are intended to prompt the writer to think about actual action she can take rather than have to think more about the situation. These actions include both how she can be helpful to “V” and a boundary she can set for herself. This person needs to think specifically about the decision she can make in her family life and how it can help people.

Other responses also move forward with this idea of the original writer having to think more about their family life and choices, and the importance of being concerned with your own behavior. User “Blain” states that “I think you need to look at the situation from the perspective of ‘What can we do to best help W and V (in that order)?’ and forget the question of ‘What Should V Do?’ The former is entirely your business, while the latter is not. You have no right to receive revelation for her, and you have no responsibility or authority over her.” This person is describing how “mb” can reflect on her potential impact while understanding the things she cannot control. She is stating that

her place is not to tell someone what to do, and that she does not have specific authority. This is an example of the way this forum continuously focuses on emphasizing that the advice given needs to be applied and needs to exist outside of this space itself. “Blaine” cannot know what will happen outside of the forum, and cannot see this entire situation, and therefore encourages “mb” to make these decisions on her own as much as is possible, as well as encouraging her to take action rather than judge.

“Blain” also encourages a particular family responsibility and the degrees of vulnerability needed to take into consideration when working on this. Her stating that the appropriate work is to help “W and V (in that order)” speaks to the idea that responsibility in this case is considering who may be the most impacted by a given decision. She states that “There are so many people in need that what little we can provide compared to the size of that need must go to those who are contributing to their own support to the degree they can.” She is encouraging “mb” to consider what she physically can do in this situation, as well as the fact that she needs to consider the agency of others as well. “V” needs to be supporting herself as best as possible, and “W” needs to be considered in this conversation as he is the one without the ability to do so. The reflection being encouraged is how her actions will affect a multiplicity of people in her life.

Other suggestions and comments encourage a more religious approach, or one rooted in the church. User “m&m” states “PRAY PRAY PRAY before doing anything. These situations can be so tough, and each one is so definitely unique. I wouldn’t do anything without sincerely praying and fasting and feeling out what God thinks about

this.” This person considers the appropriate response to be praying. Before considering the material of the situation, they are working with what may be happening on another plane. They feel that the only way to reach a Christ-like understanding is to pray, before doing anything at all. These are different understandings of what it is to be a spiritual person, or to be a good Mormon. This environment’s bridge between the digital and the “real world” can also be applied to the bridges between the spiritual and the material, as this shared religion and religious beliefs do not always work within this

User “Janet” specifically mentions the fact that religion and material life may be in conflict in this situation, and that this needs to be taken into consideration. She states “I agree that there’s no platonic ideal in a situation like this –you probably have to use both copious quantities of logic and inspiration. The GA in our SC last week actually told us to stop expecting God to answer what our own minds could do on their own, but I’d say this situation requires lots of help from both the secular and divine perspective.” Her opinion is less concerned with the experience itself, and more related to how “mb” should respond. There is the hope that she will reflect, and this is emphasized by including something that made her reflect within her own life, specifically from a religious perspective. The idea here is that you cannot ask God for everything, or expect Him to answer questions that your mind knows. There is power in both surrendering to these things and knowing that you have agency outside of them, which is part of what this forum encourages.

The September 3, 2007 post “Religion and Sex” continues with this involvement with another person and self-reflection. This original writer describes her new marriage:

I’ve been married for 10 months and we have only had sex three times. Everything I’ve ever known, read and believed tells me this is wrong, however my DH was ‘trained’ otherwise. His background is Catholicism, raised with “sex is for procreation only.” I was raised with parents who refused to discuss anything sexual (excepting a few rare moments which terrorized me more than anything), yet had intercourse at least twice a week... Talking about a sex counselor at two weeks of marriage has made me feel like a failure. “The World” says that generally men have a stronger sex urge and women just deal with it. I feel alone and at a loss as to where to turn. (Guest)

This person is able to reflect on her own upbringing in comparison to that of her significant other, as well as the way that these things have impacted their lives, and particularly their relationship with sex. She also mentioned what she calls “The World,” bringing in that there are ideals of sex and sexuality that can be specific or restrictive outside of religious ideals. She understands both where she comes from and where she is now.

There is also reflection on marriage and ideas of marriage. She feels that going to a marriage counselor or sex counselor is a failure, and that this particular kind of reflection means that something is wrong with her. The religious beliefs driving this potentially are compromised by going to a therapist, especially the ideas of needing marriage counseling.

Many of the responses push back on the idea that this is a problem, or that she should feel embarrassed or bad about this part of her life or choice. User “Kiami” describes this as an emergency, stating that “Your options seem to be counseling, or divorce, or living in a sexless marriage. Talk to a counselor, ASAP. If you’d like, have your bishop refer you to an LDS Family Services counselor. Or, find one through other channels (such as referral from friends or family).” The idea is that if the original writer does not decide to reflect, she will lose the ability to change this at all. This user mentions different people to help her reflect, and that the outcome may change based on this. “Kiami” may be appealing to the part of her that is embarrassed by this or feels like a failure, mentioning the different people that can help her that may be involved in the church already.

Many other responses describe why this is important and why counseling is needed. User “jannechoby” also emphasizes that this may be an emergency, stating “Yeah, counseling, counseling, counseling. This is a serious hangup, and it sounds way beyond his abilities to conquer it on his own.” User “Lisa” tries to comfort the original writer regarding her pain, with “Don’t feel like a failure—I think it would be to get counseling in the beginning of the marriage than to let this problem continue for years and years, only to come to a head when you DO have children. If you had a physical illness, you’d treat it early, when it’s easier to cure, right?” The assessment of how urgent this is also encourages reflection, as it is bringing up that this person needs to work outside of the community and outside of this experience. We can understand through this that people in this forum rely on reflection in a secular and a religious context.

Others encourage outsourcing these conflicts from the community itself, specifically through books. User “Becky..Absent Minded Housewife” states “You may want to refer to a book titled “Sexual Anorexia” by Patrick Carnes,” woundedhart mentions her own experience, saying “Before I got married, someone gave me a copy of ‘The Act of Marriage’ by Tim and Beverly LaHaye. It’s about how God wants married couples to enjoy each other, and not just with the sole purpose of baby-making.” There are both recommendations for how this person can fix this problem, and qualifications about the books themselves. These people are emphasizing that this person needs to work outside of this community, and that there may be other experts in this context.

The reflection on not just one’s decision but one’s beliefs are a consistent theme in this forum, as many are forced to make decisions or think about their beliefs in different ways, especially as they apply to the lives of those around them. A consistent aspect of it as a whole are those who believe something, are dealing with something personal that is complicated or creates problems, and are wondering what they should do not just in the friendship, but within themselves, in order to understand how this may work with their faith. The post “Supporting a friend who had an abortion” works in this way, as it is looking for a way to display compassion regarding something that you cannot control, and one that has issues in terms of creating boundaries between friends.

This post begins with:

I have a Visiting Teaching companion. She is in-active, twice divorced, and has two young sons. She lives with her parents so they can help her take care of the kids. Recently, she stopped going to church altogether because she started dating her first

husband again, and it was not platonic. However, both she and her first husband decided not to get married again because it had not worked. (Jane)

This introduction lays out the specific situation, helping the writer understand who this person is and what the original writer is talking about. She goes on to say “Well, last month, she got pregnant. 1st husband was so excited (she claims)--her two children are from her 2nd husband. Now 1st husband is in jail, she told him she miscarried, and she had the abortion today. I am the only other person in our entire ward...that knows any of this.”

The writer then lays out the actual questions and how this person thinks the situation could be handled with “Here are my questions: How do I support and love her without dying inside because of how much I hate abortion? She was unmarried, the father was in jail, her other two sons don’t have enough stability as it is, etc. etc. but I still cannot get past this thought that what she did was wrong.” The writer says that she wants to be this person’s friend, and “cares for her a lot,” but is “struggling.” The writer encourages the comment section to not turn to debate, as she says that “she had an abortion. It’s done. But how do I handle it?” The aspect of reflection in this question and in this idea is through not only her recognition that her own beliefs may be getting in the way, but that others need to be careful in how they choose to express theirs in this situation. She is encouraging them to think about this in a way where they can understand that she is the one reflecting on her specific life and beliefs, rather than applying beliefs to the morality of the situation.

The fact that the action has already taken place is also part of this conversation, as she is now in a “reflection” phase of her life and of this part of her friendship. She knows it is no longer her responsibility to be a part of the actual decision making, but wants to be able to move forward in a way that works for her.

Many of the responses to this post encourage the writer to not reflect at all, at least not when it comes to this situation and her own experience. User “Tom” states:

If you want to be her friend, I think you should try to ignore the abortion thing and just be her friend. You don’t need to tell her that you disapprove of her decision. And neither do you have to approve of her decision or let her think that you approve in order to be her friend. If she asks your opinion, be honest. But be compassionate. If she doesn’t ask, I would just leave it alone if possible. (Tom) This advice is particularly simple, asking the writer to ignore that this has happened and to leave this person alone.

Reflection here is not necessarily being encouraged, rather it is being discussed as an unimportant part of having a friendship with this other person. The idea is that if you are reflecting like this, it is possibly unnecessary or part of a larger problem.

Other responses encourage the type of lack of reflection in this, specifically the way that this person may have to put these feelings aside in order to be the best friend in this situation. Users “John” and “Howard” have more concise versions of this idea with John saying “The deed is done. Just love her. Stay out of the messy details as best you can” and Howard saying “Hate the sin. Love the sinner.’ There are differences between these two ideas, as the idea of “Hate the sin” still involves one’s personal opinion on someone else’s beliefs, and has a complicated history within social issues and

movements. Regardless, the response is that this original writer does not have to involve herself in the details of the situation or what this other person did in order to access her sympathy. She is asking how to personally “handle” the situation, and the response deals with the idea that this interaction is not something she can “handle” going forward.

The other aspect of these responses use reflection and the idea of reflection in terms of speaking about your own life experiences. User “ME” states that:

I was in a similar situation with a dear friend and it’s complicated! I said I would support her no matter what her decision was. She wanted another child, but the father was emotionally and physically abusive to her. When she found out she was pregnant, he abandoned her. I was the only other person she told. When she decided to have an abortion, I was surprised. I had a lot of my own judgements, assumptions, and contrary feelings to work through. I had a lot of the same questions: how do I handle this? (ME) She described this as an experience where her eventual decision was to “mourn with her, listen and comfort her as best as I could. But I had to work through my own stuff to be able to do that without adding my own conflictedness to her load.” The decision to reflect before, and to do so in a way that allows her to then be fully supportive, is an aspect of this experience she is encouraging the original writer to do.

There is the understanding that this person has a respect for the situation at hand, but also understands that it is necessary to respect your own feelings before you can respect the feelings of others or work with them to improve this generally. It is part of the reflection process to understand your own emotions and how they may be impacting you before helping others.

Other responses relate primarily to the idea that emotional protection may be needed in this case or something that those involved need in order to stay to their own beliefs while helping others. User “queuno” states that “I don’t know anyone who has had an abortion, but I have known several friends who have had adulterous affairs...The one thing I’d caution against is allowing the friend to justify her action. That is more for your emotional protection than theirs” (queuno). In this response, there is sympathy for both people involved, with understanding that this person feels particularly torn about the way their friendship is going to be impacted by this, as well as its implications regarding their own values or understanding. What is necessary here is a barrier or a boundary to keep this friendship going, without the difficulty that can happen when people are forced to abandon their own beliefs or treat their friends badly. This person also knows that outside of this forum, there are interactions amongst people with varying beliefs, and that this can vary. This user states that it will “affect you more than it will benefit them.” There is a push for the user to fully stand up for themselves and be able to understand their own beliefs while moving forward in this way.

This chapter has an understanding of how reflection is a necessary part of this online community, as well as the way that these participants need to reflect in the rest of their lives. It is part of the experience they are having in order to properly have a good relationship. There is the understanding of how this community, in its homogenous experience, is able to create something that others are not able to do or create properly.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how the women in Dear Feminist Mormon Housewife participate in a public rhetoric that does not seek to exclusively persuade. This forum was created out of a need, having been expressed as something that had no other place to be— “where else is someone to go?” Therefore, it is a community, where the participants explore, explain, and encourage each other rather than exclusively attempt to convince.

In addition, the online nature of the forum and the way it is structured means that participants cannot know if their advice is actually applied, meaning that acting on this forum involves a certain amount of hope or respect for the process. Much of the theory behind the lack of “convincing” in rhetoric comes from feminist rhetorical theory, which led to my using Cheryl Glenn’s ideas of feminist rhetoric as a framework.

I used her ideas of “reconciliation, coalition, and reflection” to structure my chapters through their existence in the forum as well as the way they shape this rhetoric. My perspective is that these concepts exist through this understanding of feminist rhetoric with the intent of their continuing outside of the forum itself. This is part of advice column history, as well as the presence of feminist work.

“Reconciliation” exists in this forum and this space through the existence of the conflict in the identities of people in it. The presence of Mormonism and Feminism tend to be held in opposition with each other, as well as the decision to be a housewife or the associations with it. Those writing on this forum often have things to reconcile in their

specific life as well as within them, and are involving several aspects of their own beliefs in order to do so.

Coalition is an experience necessary for political work to continue, as well as a way to describe relationships that wouldn't exist otherwise or are unlikely. In understanding coalition in online environments, we can see that it is present in both the interactions between people on the forum and their interactions with each other, as well the way they attempt to work outside of the forum. Their lives include families, friends, and religious communities that are built into their existence and lives. The issues that occur in these communities are therefore detrimental or intense in their lives and need to work within this environment overall.

The community as it continues has a form of reflection that is particularly vital due to their similar identity. There are things they share—although participants may vary in their particular associations, the words “feminist,” “Mormon,” and “housewife” all have implications that combine in this forum. Rather than these identities providing a block between the participants, or creating feelings that they need to work on outside of the group, they allow for a commonality that makes reflection possible within the space itself.

The way that this forum impacts its participants and their personal lives is an example of how offline-online is not a dichotomy or an endless maze, but rather two spaces that this conversation provides a link between. What happens in one impacts the other, and those who participate in this allow for their experiences to continue with each other.

The topics being discussed lead to those involved thinking about their beliefs and character and how they function in their life, which causes reflection within a forum that supports it. The place of religious belief in life outside of the rest of the forum causes participants to analyze their own place, and often, to want to reflect on it. This forum allows them to work through these questions and analyze their own issues and beliefs. As this forum is available to the public, this is also reflected in the place of men in this forum, and others that specifically mentioned women or women's rights. Moderating or participating in a space labeled as "feminist" and "housewife" is impacted when men begin to participate, especially when this space was created due to the need for this community in a patriarchal church. Men come in with their own assumptions, and dynamics shift when they see discussion they have not before or understand another perspective.

Similarly to the conflict between "feminist" and "Mormon" that the participants often write about, there is conflict within the field itself, as these ideas and groups of people are often not supposed to be written about in conjunction with each other. They are understood as people to be studied for their efforts, but not as those who are making legitimate strides within a movement and who are "real feminists." The presence of this writing as entirely online also causes these potential problems, as digital work is often explored as an evolving form of communication but not as a text itself, which is what I have attempted to do in this thesis by considering this writing as legitimate literary work, worthy of analysis and attention and preservation.

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