

Claremont Graduate University's Mormon Women's Oral Histories Collection

Abstract: Claremont Graduate University's Mormon Women's Oral History Collection is a living archive that currently houses over two hundred oral histories from 20th and 21st century women from the Mormon faith. The purpose of the Collection is to bring forward the voices of the religious women associated with the Mormon tradition and situate their identity and position as Mormon women within the context of their faith. As an archival location of primary sources about women, the Mormon Women's Oral History Collection offers academics with interests in feminism and rhetoric studies ample material to examine regarding information gathering through oral history collection and to study as a paradigm for how to incorporate women's voices into the narrative of their respective communities.

Keywords: archives, oral history, information gathering, feminism, intersectionality, education, identity, gender, positionality, women's rhetoric, rhetoric

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Oral histories document a community's history by recording interviews from community members about their lives. For scholars, these types of first-person accounts serve as useful primary sources for the purpose of archiving a community through the vantage points of its members. While Brad E. Lucas and Margaret M. Stain emphasize that oral histories only reproduce "...a – not *the* – narrative..." of a community's experience, they also note that researchers who gather oral histories reveal "inconsistencies, gaps, and silences" in the narrative, making oral histories a valuable space to find voices often underrepresented in academia (Ramsey, et al., Location 3316-3319)¹. For women's rhetoric scholars, one example of understudied persons include religious women, particularly those who maintain their identity in relationship to their patriarchal structured faiths. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's famous quote denotes "well-behaved women seldom make history" because these women are not viewed as avantgarde, which often results in exclusion from a history's narrative (*Well-Behaved Women*, 2017). Thus, for feminist and rhetoric scholars, oral history gathering not only operates as a promising site of excavation of women's experiences to (un/dis/re)cover the missing voices of women in a community, but also serves as a proving ground of rhetorical ability for women's voices often left out of feminist conversations.

As potential source material of oral histories from religious women, I introduce Claremont Graduate University's Mormon Women's Oral Histories Collection, a digitally archived collection of transcribed interviews with twentieth and twenty-first century Mormon women from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its offshoots². As an ongoing project with over two hundred oral histories from Mormon women around the world, the Collection allows "scholars, amateur historians, and graduate students... to draw from these primary sources in their writings" and continue the work of making Mormon women's voices more accessible ("Mormon Women's Oral History serving in the Church's women's organization, the Relief Society, I have found that Latter-day

1 For further information on oral history gathering as a research practice see Kurkowska-Budzan and Zamorski *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*; Charlton, Myers, and Sharpless *Handbook of Oral History*.

2 For a detailed description of the Mormon Tradition and its various denominations, see Davies' *Mormon Identities in Transition*; Shields' *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*. When referencing members from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints I have chosen to use the term "Latter-day Saint" in place of "Mormon" where applicable. See the Church's Style Guide reference for further guidance on use of naming the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Style Guide – The Name of the Church: <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide>.

Saint women maintain a rhetorical practice that seeks to access authority within their faith by supporting the power structure of the Latter-day Saint Church and by associating their gendered identity within that structure¹.

Like many religious women, Latter-day Saint women often contradict the standards of feminism; rather than attempt to access authority by fighting against the prevailing power structure of their religious community, these women instead assert their identity in relationship to it. Yet, several academics have noted that feminist scholars hesitate in examining women's religiously affiliated texts, as Carol Mattingly observes that some scholars "equate religiosity with conservatism..." (103). Charlotte Hogg further notes that the field of women's rhetoric maintains a boundary that demonstrates "a continued reluctance to engage conservative women who fall outside [the] feminist framework" where "binary constructions of women as either feminist or not persist" which results in "perpetuating the practices [scholars] strive to dismantle and restricting possibilities for meaning making" (393). By continually resisting the inclusion of religious women in women's rhetorical studies, feminist scholars end up reinforcing the practice of limiting whose voices take precedent. Thus, to adjust the boundaries of conventional feminism so that religious women can find a space in women's rhetorical studies, scholars must, as Charlotte Hogg implores, embrace Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch's call to move beyond the binary of feminist or anti-feminist and look to include "women who may not seek to empower themselves or others yet hold rhetorical sway" (397). My intention, therefore, in presenting the MWOH Collection is to offer feminist scholars a potential blueprint for examining religious women's rhetoric by sharing the Mormon women voices who attempt to access power within their religious community by connecting their identity to the religious framework of their patriarch-oriented faith.

Showcasing the Histories

There are currently two hundred and twenty-two oral histories in the Collection, with different interviewers and languages represented. For my initial exploration of the archive, I chose to examine the oral histories conducted by Caroline Kline – current director of the Mormon Women's Oral History Project and the professor at CGU who introduced me to the Collection. I further reduced my selection of oral histories to the ten interviews conducted by Dr. Kline that are transcribed into English and are interviews with Mormon women affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The themes of Location, Family Relationships, Education, and the Woman Identity emerged as common threads throughout the histories, where each woman sought to explain her identity in relationship to her Mormon faith. Whether by positive or negative association with their religious community, the women of the Collection demonstrate the rhetorical ability of asserting their own identity on their own terms by connecting their identity in relationship to their religion, making Latter-day Saint women notable contributions to expanding feminist methodologies to include women who assert their right to speak in relationship to their sphere of influence or persuasion. The oral histories chosen are as follows: 007, 026, 030, 043, 156, 157, 159, 164, 166, and 178.

Location

Of the ten oral histories examined, only two originate outside the United States: 156 is from Bolivia, but currently (as of the interview in 2016), lives in Georgia, USA, and 178 is from Mexico. Interviews 007, 026, 030, 043, 157, and 164 are from either California or Utah, while 159 and 164 are from Massachusetts and Georgia, respectively. Given that Claremont Graduate University is in California and Utah's high Mormon population, the elevated percentage of interviews originating

¹ Also see Ramsey, et. al, *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition* for detailed essays regarding the role of positionality in archival work; Jones, et. al, *Seeking Glimpses: Reflections on Doing Archival Work* on how positionality influences scholarly archival work.

in these two states is not surprising, but may inadequately represent the global Mormon woman experience¹.

For interviewees from California, a few note that their family originated in Utah before moving west. 007 shares, "I was born in Los Angeles in 1935, shortly after my parents immigrated to California from Utah in 1933 to find work" (1). Similarly, 030 describes that "My father came to California when he was 18. My mother was from Ephraim, Utah, my father from Salt Lake. He worked for his cousins and then married my mom and brought her to California" (1). For these interviewees, the migration path of their parents from Utah to California was significant because many of the Mormon families that moved from Utah to California had strong ties to Mormon pioneer ancestors. This is the case for 007, 026, and 030. In detail, 030 describes her lineage to prominent Latter-day Saint leader Joseph F. Smith and a former Relief Society General President whose name is redacted in the transcript. Likewise, while 157 is of Japanese descent, she notes that her California uncle has Utah roots, calling him a "born and bred Utah man" (1). While the transcripts of the interviews are inconsistent as to what questions were asked during each interview, the sharing of filial connections to prominent Latter-day Saint figures and/or Utah indicates that these connections provide a level of authority to the interviewee's Mormon identity. The connection to both prominent Latter-day Saint leaders and the move from Utah to another location signify that these women identify that coming from a strong Mormon heritage is important, and that by moving to a new place, they have brought their religious ancestry and heritage with them, thus granting them an authoritative ethos regarding their Mormon faith.

Family Relationships

Early childhood upbringings are a common thread throughout the oral histories. Half come from stable families with both parents in the home, as found with 007, 030, 043, 026, 166 and 178. Several histories suggest that their parents played an influential part in their understanding of how to be a Mormon, with 026 stating, "My childhood was great...My parents were very hands on in terms of our participation in church activities and being what we were supposed to be as Mormons" (1). For interviewees, whose immediate family suffered a parental loss, either through death or divorce, extended family fills the familial void created. 159 reflects that both her parents' divorce and her own divorce were hard for her, but she later found support from her extended family, noting that "...my extended family on my dad's side, [is] a cohesive family. I think that we have a lot of shared values and practices that hold us together...I feel really committed to the project of my extended family" (4). While family and ancestral relationships are integral to the Latter-day Saint faith from both a spiritual and secular perspective, the relating of those teachings come through parental and familial examples as well as Church leaders and community members². Therefore, the relating of family connections and their influence in in these oral histories illustrates the strong link between the interviewee's Mormon identity and their family heritage, a link that speaks directly to how and where Mormon women establish their right to speak within their faith.

Education

The oral histories explore the connection between education and traditional gender roles within the family. At least six of the histories state that their mother played a key part in their early education. 043 describes that, "My mother taught all of us [the interviewee and her 7 siblings] to read by the age of five...." (2), while 007 offers two pages of transcript describing her mother's work as a teacher and principal of a California school that transitioned from a segregated school to an inte-

1 See World Population Review (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/mormon-population-by-state>) or the Facts and Statistics Page of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website for further details (<https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/state>).

2 See Doctrine and Covenants Sections 131 and 132, and The Family: A Proclamation to the World (1995) regarding Latter-day Saint beliefs on gender roles and family relationships

tegrated school. For the interviewees, their own success as a mother is measured against their children's religious accomplishments. While 030 and 043 go into some detail about their children, 007 explains, "All of our children have chosen to be active members of the church and have all married active members and work very hard at being the best Mormons they can be" (12). 007's sentiments indicate that Mormon women find success as a mother based upon their children's accomplishments of becoming 'the best Mormons they can be.' Her sentiments relate to Latter-day Saint beliefs of traditional gender roles, where "mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children" which indicate that Latter-day Saint women find access to power in the family unit by accomplishing their traditional family roles of educating their children in secular and spiritual matters (*The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, 1995).

Most of the interviewees also noted the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints promotion for women's education. 156 describes that as a convert to the Church in Bolivia she was surprised to see her church friends attending school. She states, "I saw a lot of people in the church who were attending university. It was a culture totally different than the one I grew up with. The Mormon church had more of a culture of education" (4). While all the interviewees express positive support regarding their education, Oral Histories 026, 043, 030, and 159 feel the Church encourages education for women, but only as something women do until they get married and become mothers; as 164 describes, an education is "Plan B" for women of the Church (10). Interestingly, of the ten histories I examined, nine hold a bachelor's degree, and eight hold advanced degrees, which indicates that these Mormon women both found support and sought access to power through higher education, despite feeling like the Church views women's education as secondary to their future roles of wife and mother. The high education levels of these women, while remarkable, is a point of discrepancy for the Mormon woman experience. According to a 2016 Pew Research Poll states only 33% of all Latter-day Saint members have completed a college degree, and therefore, the over representation of well-educated women in the Collection creates an incomplete narrative of the Mormon woman experience, indicating the need for further oral history gathering from Mormon women with lower education levels ("Where do Mormons Rank...?").

Woman Identity

Each interviewee presents parallel ideas about their woman identity within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The expanding presence of the woman voice in the work of the Latter-day Saint Church is a pressing identity issue for women in the Collection, one that dovetails with recent feminist and rhetoric scholarship on the recovery of women's voices as found in Gaillet's *Remembering Women Differently: Refiguring Rhetorical Work* (2019). Many of the women feel their identity ties directly to the Church's assertions of traditional gender roles, a notion that also correlates with academic scholarship regarding women's identity in traditional patriarchal communities, such as in Pompper's *Rhetoric of Femininity* (2017) and Yadgar's article *Gender, Religion, and Feminism* (2006). A common woman identity shared in the histories are that of the "good Mormon," with several histories either using the term explicitly - 007, 030, and 043, - or implicitly - 026, and 164, - where the idea of a 'good Mormon' implies one who actively lives the Latter-day Saint faith and participates in all Latter-day Saint activities. The oral histories also demonstrate an evolving "good Mormon" woman persona one who embraces a more "liberal" stance regarding Latter-day Saint beliefs. History 157 tweaks the 'good Mormon' girl characteristic to embody Latter-day Saint women who are "insane" and "always tired" because "they do a hundred million things, but they know themselves to be powerful women" in their faith and do not need the help of men to exercise their beliefs (8).

Several of the women also find themselves rethinking their faith and the role of women in the Church. They question doctrinal statements like *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*

where gender is described as eternal, a concept that frustrates some of the women because it limits their access to ordination to the Priesthood (where currently only men serve) and expansion into the male-led leadership of the Church (“Oral History 026,” 6). For these Latter-day Saint women, they feel like their patriarchal-based religion inhibits the progression of their gender by withholding access to activities and leadership responsibilities reserved only for men, a sentiment that resulted in women, like 157 and 159, to leave their faith for a time. Not all the histories, however, feel slighted by the Church’s doctrinal positions regarding gender roles. As History 178 states, “It does not feel like women have a lesser part when it comes to church. We have different responsibilities and that’s okay” (4). As 178 describes, she feels a connection to her Mormon identity because she feels valued for the work she performs in her roles as a Mormon woman. Even though more than half of the histories express doctrinal objections, all the women examined feel a connection their religious community. Under the heading “Best and Hardest Part of Mormonism,” 159 shares that she thinks community is the best part of the faith, adding, “I think that because Mormonism is a pretty high-cost religion – you have to give a lot in order to be a member in good standing – the payoff is that you really feel like you are part of something...” (6). So, while some Latter-day Saint women struggle with their Mormon woman identity as it relates to the Church’s doctrinal gender roles, all the women maintain that belonging to the Mormon religious community positively impacts their woman identity.

Another Mormon woman identity theme is the intersectionality of race and gender. As an Asian American, 159 describes herself as not knowing how to identify, stating, “I think race was an issue for me although I didn’t think about it very explicitly until later, but I think I always felt a little bit like I didn’t fit [in the Church]” (2). 164 expresses a similar disconnect within the Church due to her biracial heritage, saying, “As I moved through racial identity development, how I was able to conceptualize those experiences is that I was a novelty...” (2). For scholars, these sentiments reinforce the need for academic scholarship on women’s intersectional identities, as found in Carasthis’ book *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (2016) and Marchal’s article *Difficult Intersections and Messy Coalitions* (But in a Good Way) (2014), as well as continued Latter-day Saint scholarship on the intersectionality between race, gender, and identity, and the Latter-day Saint woman¹.

Future Considerations

The Mormon Women’s Oral Histories Collection provides a wealth of new materials to scholars in the fields of rhetoric, archival studies, and women’s studies that provide insight into the women of the Mormon tradition. Through further examination the Collection, scholars can find ample material to consider, such as:

Consideration 1: Addressing Archival Methodology Inconsistencies

For archivists, the Collection lends itself to analysis on how to initiate, organize, and share ground-up archives with the public, as well as provides research opportunities such as organizing a finding aid for the Collection or contributing to the Collection by conducting interviews to submit. Since the Collection lacks a finding aid and does not provide details regarding transcription practices, further work in these areas would help scholars navigate the material.

Consideration 2: Other Entry Points into the Collection

¹ Scholarship on Latter-day Saint history, cultural stances, and religious ideologies are emerging in the academic setting. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints houses a robust collection of primary sources in their Church History Library. From these materials, the Church has published multiple archival works, including *The First Fifty-Years* and *At the Pulpit*, both historical collections of Latter-day Saint women’s writings and public speaking. More recent scholarship on Latter-day Saint women includes Tiffany Kinney’s *Legitimization of Mormon Feminist Rhetors*. References to race relations in the Church are found in Matthew Bowman’s *The Mormon People*, particularly chapters 7 and 8.

There are multiple entry points into the archive, including the following suggestions:

- Examine the works by another interviewer:
 - Consider looking at different interviewers to assess the interviewers potential focus or bias as a researcher,
 - Analyze different oral histories gathered by one interviewer to discover themes or patterns, or
 - Put different interviewers into conversation with one another by comparing different themes, interviewer/interviewee focuses, or assess the evolution of the Collection as it has grown since its inception.
- Examine the histories by location of the interviewee:
 - Mormon Women originate from various parts of the world, with many coming from diverse cultural traditions that have little connection to Mormon American history. Therefore, examining the oral histories from a specific location may indicate how women who do not originate from pioneer Mormon ancestry identify with the faith.
 - Examine the histories by a random sampling:
 - A random sampling of the Collection allows scholars to look at the broad scope of the archive. Examining the oral histories from various locations, interviewers, and ages can present a larger view of how Mormon women view their identity across several spectrums, potentially allowing scholars to identify gaps in the Mormon women's narrative.
- Examine the histories by language:
 - Reading the transcription of an oral history in the native tongue of the interviewee provides insight into how non-English speaking Mormon women navigate their intersectional identity in a community whose origination roots are grounded in a white, American, English language tradition.

Consideration 3: Examples of Intersectionality

As the dominate Mormon faith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown into a worldwide faith with members around the world. Today, there are more Latter-day Saint women of different races, classes, ethnicities, and disabilities for scholars to consider. As the Collection grows in representation of Mormon women from around the world, so will scholars' opportunities to examine patterns of women's intersectional identities in relationship to their faith.

The voices of these Latter-day Saint women are critical to creating a more complete narrative for the women's rhetoric archive as their voices contribute to the work of religious women who desire autonomy over their identity, yet express their position as a relationship to their traditional faith. While research and information gathering through oral histories about religious women is growing in scholarship, further gathering is needed - a work that requires scholars to "examine the less radical, more conservative women who shape cultural beliefs" if we are to avoid potentially creating a biased perspective in the narrative of (un/dis/re)covered voices (Hogg 392). Therefore, by continuing to examine religiously affiliated women in the context of women's rhetoric, while actively identifying potential gaps or erasures found in the narratives generated, scholars can more fully answer the call to find the voice of women wherever and however they speak.

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