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Fashioning and Re-Fashioning: The Community of Mormon Style Bloggers

In December of 2007, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Quorum of Twelve Apostles—a governing board of men within the church, seen as living prophets and revelators, who serve under the church president and his counselors—delivered a commencement address at Brigham Young University-Hawaii wherein he urged graduating millennial Mormons to take their witness to new places and spaces using their expertise as digital natives:

> "I can share with the world the knowledge that priesthood authority—the doctrine and ordinances of the New Testament Church—are once again on the earth. This is the most important work that we can participate in… May I ask you to join the conversation by participating on the Internet, particularly the New Media, to share the gospel and explain in simple, clear terms, the message of the Restoration? Most of you already know that if you have access to the Internet, you can start a blog in minutes and share what you know to be true… More than ever, we have a major responsibility as Latter-day Saints to define ourselves instead of letting others define us" (Ballard 2007).

Ballard's speech may have come at a pivotal moment in web history—with Facebook having recently reached 50 million active users, and the founding of Twitter just a short year before (Associated Press 2013; Carlson 2011)—but members of the LDS church had been cultivating a robust and diverse web presence for the faith long before the apostle's address was penned. One year after the creation of the first fashion blog in 2003, Mormon fashion model Jennifer Loch began publishing tips and tricks for "modest fashion without compromise" on her

website, *Jen Magazine* (Loch 2013). Loch, a self-described "pioneer in the modest fashion industry," was one of several bloggers who created digital communities around an interest in modest fashion from across religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism in the mid-2000s—a movement that saw a revival in 2009 with a second wave of women, more numerous and visible than the first (Lewis 2013: 50).

In this paper, I will offer a brief history of the LDS fashion blogosphere, before examining the textual, visual, material and embodied rhetorics of these blogs, as well as their broader claims about modesty, femininity, and the divine. I frame blogging as a digital literacy practice, according to the frameworks established by Jacqueline Jones Royster in her research on African American female essayists, and also place the digital community of LDS fashion bloggers in conversation with Cynthia and Richard Selfe's landmark essay "The Politics of the Interface." To conclude, I will offer broader implications of modest fashion blogging for the Mormon community and for world religions as a whole.

Birth of a Bloggernacle: Why do so many Mormons write about clothes?

Since the early 2000s, leaders within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have encouraged its members to blog, both to proselytize and offer new public faces for the church— and LDS women, who often either work part-time outside of the home or become full-time homemakers, rose to the challenge in droves (Matchar 2011).The Bloggernacle (as it is colloquially known by both insiders and outsiders) includes a range of websites, from small personal journals meant for close friends' and relatives' eyes only to blogs receiving thousands of visitors a day, corporate sponsorships, and global media attention.

The niche network of fashion bloggers is no exception to this: with a thriving community of Mormon style writers flourishing after Elaine Hearn of *ClothedMuch.com* began updating her site with modest "outfit of the day" (OOTD) posts in 2009. The depth and breadth of the Mormon fashion Bloggernacle is difficult to gauge, but writer Tiffany Tong has over sixty websites listed on her Mormon Fashion Blogger Network (a repository inherited from Hearn after her exit from the fashion Bloggernacle in mid-2013) alone (Tong 2013). Many other Mormon women's sites include fashion content (such as OOTD posts or do-it-yourself tutorials), but are not explicitly branded as style or fashion blogs.

Elaine Hearn's rationale for the creation of *Clothed Much*—arguably the single most influential site involved in the creation and continuation of the LDS fashion Bloggernacle (Lewis 2013: 51, 53)—mirrors that of many of the women within the Mormon style community. When asked why she began blogging, Hearn's response was simple: "I was following a bunch of fashion blogs and realized that none of them reflected my personal beliefs and values" (Hearn 2013). Mormonism provides particular constraints for dress and grooming, which will be elaborated upon in the analysis of LDS modesty in the next section of this paper.

Content Analysis

Three broad themes emerged from my textual analysis of 20 different LDS style blogs, as well as interviews with six bloggers from Elaine Hearn's Mormon Fashion Blogger Network. These themes include modesty—both literal and figurative—as well agency and expertise that are seen as unique to women within the Latter-day Saint paradigm.

Literal modesty: "more than sleeves and hemlines"

A quick survey of Latter-day Saint fashion blogs will reveal that Mormon women must balance societal fashion trends and fads against church precepts on bodily modesty. LDS modesty stems, in part, from having to cover one's temple garment. Each Mormon who has received the ordinance of temple endowment (which enables them to enter the Mormon temple) must wear a white undergarment underneath their clothing as a reminder of their covenant. According to the church's official website, "[The garment] should not be exposed to the view of those who do not understand its significance, and it should not be adjusted to accommodate different styles of clothing… Wearing the garment is an outward expression of an inward commitment to follow the Savior" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2013: "Temples").

Mormon bloggers, in turn, clothe themselves in ways that preserve the secrecy and sanctity of the temple garment. Many emphasize the importance of the sanctity of the temple garment (and, by proxy, the body) either directly or indirectly in commentary that accompanies their posts. "Modesty is how I show reverence, respect and gratitude for the most precious gift God gave me: my body," (Ricks 2011) writes blogger Erica Ricks of *northmeetsouth*. Ricks wears her garments as a reminder of her commitment to the heavenly father, and clothes herself outwardly in such a way as to showcase this commitment. In this way, the temple garment itself has taken on a double meaning in the Bloggernacle: first, that a woman who "wears her garments" quite literally keeps her temple garment on under her clothing at all times (unless she is participating in one of the "Five S's:" sleeping, sweating, showering, swimming, or sexing); and second, that a woman who "wears her garments" is a godly Mormon, pure of both body and soul.

Figurative modesty: the importance of femininity, thrift, and being a "set-apart" LDS woman

Modesty is not solely embodied through the donning of clothing that covers the temple garment, however. When I asked bloggers to define modesty, two particular responses highlighted embodied modesty that extended beyond typical clothing coverage. Reachel Bagley, of *Cardigan Empire*, spoke of the importance of dressing in a way that exudes respect for one's body and one's image. "…modesty is more than clothes to the knees and across the shoulders," she explained, "Modesty is showing respect for who you are, who you are with, and where you are. Which means pajamas at the grocery store are immodest. We are better than that" (Bagley Interview 2013).

Mormon conceptions of "self-respect" are often connected back to the scriptural construct that human beings are each uniquely created in god's image: and this image is inextricably linked with gender and gendered roles. The concept of femininity was actually invoked more frequently in fashion Bloggernacle posts than modesty was—16 out of 20 posts described some form of feminine dress, as opposed to 11 of 20 posts that explicitly invoked the value of modesty in some way. God-given femininity is vital for women within this faith tradition—for, as Erica Ricks noted in her interview, "gender is eternal—men are born men and women are born women" (Ricks 2013). This concept of eternal gender is evident in the church's response to the sexual revolution and perceived "androgynizing" of women in the 1960s and 70s (Thain 2012); women are encouraged to dress in an effeminate manner in order to set themselves apart from worldly trends. This overtly gendered material rhetoric is one of the many ways in which church adherents seek to generate and regenerate the faith tradition through cultural production (Basquiat 2001).

Another value emphasized by the church that is often incorporated under the umbrella term "modesty" is thriftiness. Because many Mormon wives either work part-time outside of the home or are full-time homemakers, they are encouraged to scrimp, save, and adopt a do-it-yourself ethic in order to support their (often large) families on a reduced or single income. Mormons also are required to give ten percent of their yearly household income back to the church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2013: "Tithing"), adding to the sense of scrutiny surrounding church member spending. "Modesty doesn't just mean clothing yourself modestly," said Sasha Tenorio of *Moiology*, "It also means the way you live: your lifestyle" (Tenorio 2013). Tenorio found that her self-professed identity as a modest Mormon style blogger came under criticism after she posted outfit photos that included a designer handbag:

> "I splurge on my shoes and my purses. My husband gave me a rather expensive purse… and a fellow LDS member called me out on the amount that was spent on it… and I asked my husband, 'am I not a good member, or a good modest blogger, because you just spent a thousand dollars and bought me this purse?' There's nothing wrong with liking the finer things in life, as long as you live within your means… But I even thought about taking off the 'Mormon modest fashion blogger' button on the sidebar [of my website]… because I thought I wasn't representing them well" (Tenorio 2013).

Tenorio's experience encapsulates the fluid, often all-encompassing definition of "modesty" within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—and the powerful ways in which the term "modest" can be used to persuade church members or galvanize them to action. Living modestly is not solely about covering one's garments, but also covering all manner of cultural sins.

Women's unique expertise: "seeking after happiness by creating things"

      Mormon style writers are creating a sphere of influence for themselves, not only within the community of the Bloggernacle, but outside of it. Blogs that garner the most readership are able to gain sponsors and host giveaways for accessories and clothing items, and often receive media attention in both print and digital magazines. The most "famous" blogs—that is, the ones with hundreds (if not thousands) of followers—frequently evince an ethos of expertise, that they have unique knowledge to share with readers.

      Six out of the twenty blog posts analyzed included a question-and-answer component, or a tutorial that described how to alter an article of clothing or style something in a particular way. Some of these tutorials were unsolicited, while others were specifically requested by readers. Posts such as "How to Wear Modest Skirts (Without Looking Frumpy)" (Biggs 2012) and Jae Curtis' "Ask Jae" series (Curtis 2013) not only detail particular wardrobe prescriptions, but they indicate a growing social and cultural power being seized by the women of the fashion Bloggernacle.

      Mormon women are cultivating influence through their fashion blogs and ultimately channeling that influence into other ventures, such as partnerships (that enable them to receive free clothing and accessories from sponsors, and to host giveaways) or small businesses. Hybrid fashion-mommy bloggers such as Abbey of *Along Abbey Road* have coined the term "momtrepreneur" to describe their DIY craft or fashion businesses run from home, often through online shops like Etsy (Abbey 2013). Reachel Bagley of *Cardigan Empire* has made a career as a fashion consultant, offering such services as virtual wardrobe clusters, color consultations, look books, and more (Bagley 2013). All of these women are utilizing their spiritual gifts of creativity

and communication not just to blog, but to create a vocation out of their blogging—a distinctly Mormon ideal.

The material labor of blogging (see Sheridan 2013) and of "momtrepreneurship," as well as the digital lore that grounds and informs them, are seen spiritual gifts within the LDS community that should be used to glorify the heavenly father and to help spread his good news. Sydney Poulton of *The Daybook* writes about this on her blog in a post titled "Why are Mormons so cool?," saying:

> "…The encouragement from LDS church leaders to engage ourselves in ways that enlarge our capacity for happiness {and seek out those things that are 'virtuous and lovely'} has I'm sure, inherently influenced my decisions when it comes to becoming involved in the world of design and style… LDS values have always encouraged a developing and sharing of personal talents" (Poulton 2011).

Sharing spiritual gifts through digital communities helps these women to commune with other Mormons, other women, and the heavenly parent himself. In this way, for Latter-day Saint women the material labor associated with blogging and personal style is the lord's work.

Implications: Examining the Bloggernacle's influence on Mormonism and a broader faith community

In her article "Reducing Patriarchy and Erasing Feminism," Jennifer Huss Basquiat describes "Mormonism's continued ability to regenerate itself through cultural production" (Basquiat 2001: 6). While Basquiat asserts that the modern Mormon woman is forced to conform to a distinctly antifeminist identity (a position that I would argue against, given the diverse perspectives I have observed within the fashion Bloggernacle at large), she does so by citing the faith tradition's perpetual adaptation and definition against the norms of the dominant culture. In this way, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is constantly adapting—fashioning and

re-fashioning itself as a countercultural entity that stands in opposition to worldly ideals. Mormon fashion blogs exist as a living embodiment of this cultural production; visual and textual artifacts that straddle the line between secular fashion and countercultural religious teachings.

The blogging practices of Mormon women create a unique sphere of influence for them within their communities that mirrors the experiences of African-American female essayists, as described by Jacqueline Jones Royster in her book *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. Royster explains that asserting rhetorical competency (Royster 2000: 58, 61) through published writings can enable women "…to claim a personal speaking/thinking presence. The writers can assume positions in their texts as interpreters and theorizers of experience, not solely as people who render experience for aesthetic purposes in multivocal ways" (Royster 2000: 22).This provides women—in Royster's case, women of a racial minority who face a double silencing across a national culture, and in mine, women whose voices often go unheard within in a patriarchal and prescriptive faith tradition—autonomy and agency.

Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe, Jr. frame further implications for the digital proliferation of this liberatory discourse in their 1994 article "The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones." They explain that "Computer interfaces… are *also* sites within which the ideological and material legacies of racism, sexism, and colonialism are continuously written and re-written along with more positive cultural legacies" (Selfe and Selfe 1994: 484). Royster corroborates this concept, writing that humans make meaning "within the boundaries of tolerance created by our communities" (Royster 2000: 51).

While LDS women are bounded by the precepts of Mormonism, they are actively pushing at the boundaries of their conservative faith tradition through the assertion of agency within a digital sphere. By publicly affirming their faith on their blogs, they are asserting religious competency in addition to rhetorical competency—actively representing their church, and inviting questions about what it means to be a Latter-day Saint woman in the 21st century. This is part of a broader religious evolution that Reina Lewis, as well as communication scholars Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess, describe as the blurring of the division between clergy and laity (Lewis 48; Cheong and Ess 17–18). The creation of religious discourse is typically limited to males exclusively within the LDS church, due to the fact that only men can hold the Melchizedek priesthood; however, women are assuming authority, most notably in their interactions with non-Mormons in their blog posts and comments—assuming their responsibility as Latter-day Saints to define their faith for themselves, as M. Russell Ballard urged.

Conclusions: Toward a re-fashioned Mormonism

I was unaware of the specific responsibilities and privileges denied to women within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints due to their inability to hold the priesthood when I embarked on this project. The distinctly separate spiritually sanctioned gender roles became more apparent to me when I requested a pair of Mormon missionaries be sent to my house to deliver a copy of the Book of Mormon to me for my research.

At the end of the visit, the two male missionaries sent to me—a pair of men in their late-teens to early-twenties, Elder Taylor and Elder Field—asked to pray over me before they left my house. Since they had opened the visit in prayer, I volunteered to pray in closing, and was met with perplexed stares. After my prayer—wherein I offered thanks to the "heavenly parent" for sending me such dedicated men, as well as a petition for guidance for all three of us as we

walked on in our individual faith journeys—the two brother missionaries continued to seem flabbergasted).

Later I learned that, in groups of mixed company, Mormon women do not frequently pray or offer benedictions. While it is not explicitly outlawed within the Book of Mormon or other ecclesiastical teachings, it is an unwritten precept of church culture. In fact, over the LDS church's 183-year history, a woman had not offered a prayer at the general session of the church's annual conference until 2013, when Jean Stevens (a counselor within the church's children's organization) was nominated to offer a benediction (Green and Goodell 2013).

The agency and ability of Mormon women to produce authoritative religious discourse, and by proxy their public visibility, is increasing dramatically. In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster asserts that the literacy practices of Black women ultimately shifted their place within American society, allowing them to enter public discourse and to ultimately effect sociopolitical change (Royster 2000: 164). So too, I argue, does the Bloggernacle afford such an arena for Mormon women here and now.

LDS parishioner Mercy Idoko encapsulated the continued importance of women— whatever their prescribed role and place in the church hierarchy—when speaking of Stevens' historic prayer at the 183rd General Conference. "There has to be a quiet and a loud side to everything," Idoko said. "While the brothers stand in front, the sisters are quietly always there, pushing along the work of the gospel. So, they've always had a very, very important role to play" (Green and Goodell 2013).

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2014 Computers & Writing Conference
Call for Proposals

2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of Cynthia and Richard Selfe's canonical work, "The Politics of the Interface," which began the "task of describing some of the political and ideological boundary lands associated with computer interfaces that we—and many other teachers of composition—now use in our classrooms" (481). This article remains one of the most cited articles in computers and writing scholarship, in large part because it continues to remind us that whatever digital revolutions we embark upon, we should always remain aware of the borders "constructed along ideological axes that represent dominant tendencies in our culture," borders that "can serve to prevent the circulation of individuals for political purposes." Yet, this article also provides us with ways of seeing and complicating the borders in productive ways. This anniversary directs our attention to the foundations of our discipline, but emphasizes the ways in which future innovation always builds on past intellectual and material history. Change is sometimes incremental, sometimes revolutionary, but always suggests the increasing complexity of evo-, convo-, and revo-lutions.

Computers & Writing 2014 celebrates this landmark publication by inviting presentations, workshops, and other events that open or enact an examination of evolutions, revolutions, and convolutions of interfaces, texts, and technologies. The concerns listed below are not exhaustive, but beginning points for participants to consider:

- What is at stake in our practices, theories and pedagogies when we choose to engage with the varied challenges of a technological past, present, and future?
- What have been, and should be, institutional responses to technological revolutions?
- How do our engagements with interfaces, texts, and technologies shape our selves, our students, and our communities?
- Conversely, how do individuals and communities work to shape interfaces, texts, and technologies?
- What happens to writers and writing in the "political and ideological boundary lands" of our interfaces, texts, and technologies when we pay attention to issues of race, class, gender, ability, accessibility, sexuality, and political economies?
- What are the evolutions, revolutions, and convolutions that result from ever-increasing interactions between Computers and Writing and the Digital Humanities?

We invite proposals for single as well as group presentations, and we welcome not only traditional talks and panels but presentation forms and formats that have evolved from tradition, act as revolutions against traditional formats, or that fold tradition back on itself in ways that help us re-examine our past, re-evaluate our present, or re-invigorate our future. We encourage you to revolutionize what happens during a 75-minute panel—you can treat it as a mini-workshop, or a roundtable, or a performance piece, or a traditional panel.

We welcome proposals in the following categories:

- Access (economic, institutional, or otherwise)
- Communities (concerns linked with specific groups)
- Convolutions (complications and connections with other disciplines)

- Difference (in terms of race, class, ability, religion, gender, economy, sexuality, ethnicity, veteran status, age, and other forms)
- Digital Humanities (intersections among algorithmic building and making practices and topics of humanistic inquiry; conference organizers will ensure that DH-themed presentations do not overlap with DHSI so that those who wish may attend both)
- Evolutions (the history and future of Computers & Writing and associated fields)
- Individuals (prominent figures and scholars influencing Computers & Writing, as well as students, faculty, and other stakeholders)
- Institutions (academic, government, corporate, presses, and others)
- Interfaces (screens, assistive technologies, human-computer interaction)
- Revolutions (significant large-scale or sudden changes in Computers & Writing and associated fields)
- Technologies (focusing on specific platforms, applications, or tools)
- Writing Studies (connections with rhetoric and composition concerns)

We also encourage you to add your own categories as tags on the proposal form.

2014 Computers & Writing Conference
Individual Presentation Proposal

Proposal Title:
Fashioning and Re-Fashioning: The Community of Mormon Style Bloggers

Presenter(s):
Allegra Smith

Abstract:
The presenter discusses the community created by modest fashion bloggers within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) tradition from the early 2000s to present day. She argues that style blogs provide a unique opportunity for Mormon women to enter the typically male-dominated discourse of LDS religious authority, through the writing and rewriting of that faith tradition's ideological, material, and embodied cultures.

Proposal:

With the expansion of social media technologies in the last decade, Mormon women have taken to the blogosphere in droves. Female bloggers within the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints are situated within a unique religious tradition, and use the Internet to profess their identities as wives, mothers, and devout churchgoers. Shortly after the creation of the first fashion blog in 2003, LDS women began embracing this new medium to share images of their daily outfits. The fashions exhibited in these blogs were marked by both their femininity and their modesty because of church restrictions on revealing clothing—namely due to the temple garment, a conservative set of underclothes given to church members that must be covered at all times. By the late 2000s, the fashion "Bloggernacle" was a thriving network of hundreds of personal style blogs, garnering significant readership both within Mormonism and across the boundaries of faith.

This study examines the material culture of Mormon fashion blogs, as well as their broader claims about modesty, femininity, and the divine. The author argues that these blogs provide a powerful forum for LDS women to not only create a new women's community within the church, but to also proselytize and provide outreach to audiences whom they could not access before the Web 2.0 revolution. The genesis of the Mormon fashion blogosphere created radical opportunities for LDS women to enter the male-dominated conversation of church leadership and representation—to tread "new discursive territory" by subverting patriarchal norms while still asserting LDS values of bodily femininity and modesty. Latter-day Saint "ideological and material legacies are both written and re-written" (Selfe & Selfe 1994) in these digital spaces, offering opportunity for dialogue not just on aesthetics and style, but on the nature of faith itself. This presentation articulates implications from the author's pilot study of over 50 different LDS fashion blogs, as well as personal interviews with eight bloggers.

Categories:
Communities
Convolutions

Difference
Digital Humanities

Tags:
feminisms
bodies
gender
religion