"Provident Living": Ethnography, Material Culture, and the Performance of Mormonism in Everyday Life

Danille Elise Christensen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr2/vol3/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mormon Studies Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
“Provident Living”: Ethnography, Material Culture, and the Performance of Mormonism in Everyday Life

Danille Elise Christensen

I am a folklorist, trained at Indiana University in the ethnographic and comparative study of verbal art, material culture, and customary behavior. Folklorists explore the vernacular practices and cultural forms that establish, maintain, and transform collectivities; that is, we’re curious about the patterned things people make, say, and do in everyday life to communicate who they are, what they value, and where they belong. In the 1960s, folklorists began to shift away from cataloging narrative variants and tracing the origins of antiquities and toward the observation of what is termed “folklore in use.” Scholars with backgrounds in rhetoric, sociolinguistics, and anthropology championed more precise attention to the social, temporal, geographic, ideological, and aesthetic contexts relevant to any particular instantiation of “lore.” We hold that expressive culture—distinctively shaped play, talk, worship, and labor—is socially constitutive, rather than merely decorative or utilitarian. In other words, as a folklorist, if you study religion, you study lived religion.

I am also a Mormon—granddaughter of nineteenth-century stalwarts who migrated at great personal cost to Utah’s Wasatch Front—and this fact has some bearing on my chosen discipline. Mormons “get” the
social and symbolic importance of expressive practice.¹ In fact, a number of my folklore colleagues come from strong religious backgrounds, whether or not they continue to practice all prescribed forms of religiosity in their personal lives.² This convergence is hardly surprising, since religious boundaries are marked by high-context rituals and reinforced through individual and family practice: performative displays of adherence and devotion are key rhetorical tools of religion.³

Still, I’ve resisted turning an academic eye on Mormon culture. In part, my reluctance stems from the fact that the folkloristic study of Mormonism—which has centered on cultural exceptionalism in the Intermountain West—has not been the study of people I recognize from my own life as a practicing Latter-day Saint.⁴ As a child growing up in the Midwest, I felt little kinship with those we called “Utah Mormons”—my

---

¹ Tom Mould and Eric Eliason have noted that folklore study has received unusually strong institutional support in Utah’s public and private educational institutions, especially by scholars with some personal connection to the LDS Church. See their essay “The State of Mormon Folklore Studies,” Mormon Studies Review 1 (2014): 29–51.

² I remember laughing with fellow IU folklore graduate students about how many Jewish, Catholic, Mormon, and Muslim-identified students were gathered around a seminar table one day.


⁴ Personal familiarity with lived religion means that scholars bring a certain amount of cultural baggage to the field site: cultural insiders have an immediate interpretive advantage but may be unable to tease out contextual threads or connect them to broader histories and practices; outsiders may be able to identify a “big picture” but be too quick to interpret what they see in terms of their own personal experience elsewhere.

⁵ Nearly all the articles collected in Eric Eliason and Tom Mould’s recent Latter-day Lore are written by academically trained folklorists, anthropologists, or cultural geographers who themselves live and teach in the West, primarily in Utah (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013); see also Jill Terry Rudy, “Mormon Folklore Studies,” in Folklore in Utah: A History and Guide to Resources, ed. David Stanley (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004), 142–52.
siblings and I gently mocked the speech cadences that young missionaries picked up during their training in Provo, rolled our eyes at hymns that included phrases like “firm as the mountains around us,” wondered at the elaborate prom proposals cooked up by relatives out West. Later, I came to love the environmental diversity of the region and appreciate local idiosyncrasies, learned in my late twenties to prune fruit trees at my in-laws’ orchards near American Fork Canyon. But Utah—indeed, the whole contiguous Mormon Corridor—has always felt foreign to me. Not just the dry cool of summer nights and the absurdity of dusty corrals abutting outsized French Provincial or Italianate homes, but also the sense of assumption and assuredness that comes with cultural dominance. As something of an anomaly in my central Ohio high school, I chose to concentrate more on finding common ground than on emphasizing difference. And in more recent years I have also felt keenly my own intersectionality as a (divorced, childless) woman, a Midwesterner, a university professor, a person whose politics are left of center: being LDS is an important part of my identity, but not the only one. Even though my dissertation centered on the rhetorical framings made possible by the scrapbook as a material and social form—and thus included some fieldwork in Utah Valley, a mecca for the modern scrapbook industry—the majority of my graduate work was not Mormon-centric.

Latter-day Saints keep cropping up in my work, though. Sometimes it’s because an LDS example can illustrate the benefits of deeply engaged fieldwork. Evaluated against more charismatic performance styles, for instance, Mormon testimony meetings (especially in the United States) may come off as dull, impotent, boring—or even as the enactment of disempowerment. Yet expressive forms similar in style, structure, or even name may stem from divergent belief systems or be mobilized to different ends; thus similar forms may mean differently depending

on context of use. Though not always artistically arresting, simple or unrehearsed speech has been valued historically among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—especially those with New England roots—as a marker both of humility and of authentic spiritual experience; comparative work on genre and language ideologies (including norms of interpretation and “ground rules for performing”) can thus shed light on the political efficacy of even “plain” language.

Just as biologists cannot assume that all things called “daisies” or “red-fish” are morphologically identical, so too students of culture should be on the lookout for emic distinctions in interpretation and use, especially when investigating everyday practices that seem familiar enough in terms of their own etic categories.

As I’ve worked to understand the ways and reasons that people shape words, actions, and things in the course of daily life, I’ve also been drawn to moments when apparently commonplace activities within LDS practice and discourse—sharing personal narratives, making scrapbooks, praising the homegrown and the handcrafted—bubble up in American popular culture more generally. If I have engaged with Mormon studies, then, it has been to consider “Mormonism [as a way to] comprehend things non-Mormon.” In what follows, I ask


how students of Mormon folklore might productively build on existing historical and folkloristic data from the Intermountain West in order to connect practices among Latter-day Saints to broader social, political, and cultural discussions. I encourage increased attention to those practices that seem transparently religious but are in fact more complicated mixes of cultures, places, choices, and histories. At the same time, I hope for more research investigating the nuances of LDS theology that give vernacular practice a Mormon twist, especially with regard to beliefs concerning materiality and materialism.

Beyond ritual: work and worship

Though ritual is perhaps the most obvious aspect of religion in action, I hope that attention to lived religion within Mormonisms encompasses more than ritual—or even materialization of ideology via iconology. What’s interesting to me about Mormon expressive practice is that much of the ideological, metaphysical, or “religious” work gets done in ways that might seem simply practical, their sacred meanings not


transparent to insiders or outsiders because they are so deeply embedded in workaday life.

Following Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s thoughts on what she referred to as “the significance of trivia,” and acknowledging a disciplinary predilection to seek out the apparently outmoded or inconsequential, I believe that folklorists can add to Mormon studies by offering thoughts on the aesthetics and values that shape routine behaviors among Latter-day Saints, including housework, kinwork (e.g., family reunions and other forms of network management), care work, agricultural work, and other kinds of manual labor. Such a focus could begin to tease out how much of LDS talk about the value of (unpaid) labor is distinctively Mormon in terms of doctrinal underpinnings and how much of rhetoric and practice reflects the adoption or adaptation of other discourses.

The need for this kind of research hit home in late July 2013 as journalist Emily Matchar sat warily across the table from comedian-pundit Stephen Colbert while he quizzed her before a live studio audience. The show was *The Colbert Report*, the book in question *Homeward Bound*. Matchar described her work as an exploration of “the new domesticity,”

---


a broad social trend in which women and men were “re-embracing lost
domestic arts and practices”—knitting, canning, home poultry pro-
duction, and other DIY (do-it-yourself) efforts. Her book explains this
movement as a response to a variety of contemporary ills, including
exploitive workplaces, stressed pocketbooks, fears about food safety and
environmental collapse, and the disconnect between mass production
and aesthetic pleasure. But when Colbert asks about the politics of these
practices (“is this a hippy-dippy, like crunchy-granola commune, love-
baby [thing]?”), Matchar responds by sketching a contrast. Certainly
there are the “typical lefty liberal Portlandia caricatures who are pickling
everything,” she says; but some participants are “very conservative—
you have, you know, very religious, you know, Mormon housewives, in
Provo, Utah, who are selling scarves on Etsy, so it really crosses a lot of
these lines.”

As I read Matchar’s book, I realized that this example, thrown out in
the course of an on-air conversation, was not randomly chosen: Mormons
generally occupy a singular space on the “extreme right” when they’re
mentioned in the volume, a convenient way to illustrate various divides.
Her chapter “Strange Bedfellows,” for instance, clusters connotations about
belief, gender, aesthetics, and class when it references the apparently odd
circumstance of “Mormon stay-at-home-mom bloggers sharing recipes
with atheist hipster foodies.” Positioning Mormonism as a conservative
monolith, Matchar slips easily among dogma, culture, place, and history.
“Mormons and New Domesticity go together like (homemade) bread
and butter,” she observes. In “cultures where mothers are expected to stay
at home no matter what” (and assuming that such women are “already
knitting and making soap”), she concludes that online sales through sites
like Etsy must be both natural and nontthreatening. Briefly explaining why
DIY production might appeal to Mormons, she notes that motherhood
is a calling and that “baking bread and sewing curtains was a simple
matter of necessity” for western forebears, then suggests that a “major

/the-colbert-report-emily-matchar; and Emily Matchar, Homeward Bound: Why Women
culture of gardening, home canning, and from-scratch cooking” has been fostered by LDS Church recommendations regarding emergency food storage. (In fact, meals produced by American Latter-day Saints from stored emergency food—unless they use wheat—are likely to include quite a lot of freeze-dried or otherwise processed foodstuffs, such as commercially canned soup.)

Like Matchar, I am fascinated by the broad range of political positions that people hold within the world of DIY, and, indeed, with regard to the handmade and the handcrafted in particular. But she errs in painting Mormon women with a broad stroke and in not teasing out what relationship religion actually has to lived experience. For instance, a broader emphasis on entrepreneurship within the state of Utah stems from a historical, rather than strictly doctrinal, emphasis on home production; efforts to keep Territorial- and Depression-era Utah economically self-sufficient surely contribute to the fact that today’s Utah is also the land of multilevel marketing, cottage industry, and alternative economies. Furthermore, Mormon women have been leveraging income from home for a long time: in 1936, a year before the church-sponsored Mormon Handicraft consignment shop opened, author Sylvia R. Grant wrote to the Relief Society Magazine about “work done by women who live within a two mile radius of my door.” She remarked on the satisfactions of generating a cash income, noting that “there are dozens of different ways to earn money for either necessities or extras and it is considered smart to be able to do so.” The projects of her Utah neighbors included producing cakes, chicken pies and rolls, canapés, Thanksgiving dinners, and pressure-canned vegetables (using children to distribute these goods locally); starting in-home tea rooms or gift shops; crafting artificial flowers for department stores; knitting dresses; hemstitching; advertising by telephone for coal, facials, or magazine subscriptions; advertising by telephone for coal, facials, or magazine subscriptions;

14. One short vignette of an LDS blogger in Homeward Bound is a bit more nuanced; “Amy” is described both as a “hipster” concerned with the aesthetics and social impact of food and craft and as a “faithful Mormon stay-at-home mom”—however, Matchar uses words like but and remarkably to register surprise at such a convergence. Matchar, Homeward Bound, 213–14, 222–24.
addressing envelopes; “kodak finishing” in basement darkrooms; refinishing or remaking furniture; beginning “nursery school” or tutoring programs; and finally, if all else failed, convalescent or child care.¹⁵

Historical documents, and the historians who locate and explicate them, have thus contributed much to our understandings of what people wore, ate, sang, made, and wrote in Utah’s past, and indeed how those everyday practices helped to forge “community and commitment” among new Mormon settlers in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ But ethnographic inquiry—long-term observation, qualitative engagement with participants—can help to make subtle patterns and theological influences clearer by attending to the ways people talk about these practices in the present and by reading the structure and style of behaviors themselves as a way to identify insights that go beyond verbalized discourse. How have shifts in official pronouncements about wage work for women, for instance, corresponded to the actual production and exchange practices of Latter-day Saints?¹⁷ What does “stay-at-home mom” mean in the context of powerful community volunteering and successful entrepreneurhip? How might an emphasis on artistic production mask the economic salience of the homemade and the handcrafted? In addition, I welcome more ethnographic work that focuses on the actual modes and rhythms of labor—paid and unpaid—among Latter-day Saints around the world, studies that illuminate work and worship in relation to gender, class, national origin, and other factors.


Provident living: material displays

Then, too, I hope for increased examination of the faith’s orientation toward the material world more generally. In an 1854 essay based on coverage in the *Edinburgh Review*, one commentator in a Maine newspaper noted (with disgust) the “materialism” of Mormonism, a problem that he saw as going beyond even the heresy of a corporeal God.\(^{18}\) Indeed, founder Joseph Smith taught that “all spirit is [refined] matter,” a formulation that challenges traditional Western divisions and that has been repeated more recently by LDS apostle Dieter Uchtdorf, who in October 2011 characterized “the temporal and the spiritual” as inseparable sides of a coin.\(^{19}\) How and when has the idea that matter matters influenced daily life choices among adherents to Smith’s teachings? Why, for instance, has a supposed reverence for God’s creations—an ethic “prevalent virtually in every corner of Latter-day Saint revelations and scriptures”—not translated into more active environmental stewardship discourse and practice, even within institutions like Young Women Camp, websites devoted to “provident living,” and the long-standing tradition of family gardening?\(^{20}\)

In a related vein, how and when does a materialist perspective shift into materialism in the contemporary sense and into conspicuous consumption and display? I suspect that proselytizing efforts and caricaturization in the popular press during the nineteenth century fomented a

---

18. The writer contended that Mormon emphasis on “political or business harangues,” “marches and waltzes,” the corporeality and “indefinite development” of God, and the expansion of Mormon families (in number and space) left no room for “prayer, self-examination, or repentance,” no “aspirations after communion with God, spirituality of mind, or purification of the affections.” See Edward L. Elwell, ed., “Tenets of Mormonism,” in *Portland [ME] Transcript*, 3 June 1854.


persistent double consciousness (“how am I being perceived?”) that has lasted beyond the Americanization period of the LDS Church’s history. For instance, in 1946 the sense of being observed with (potentially hostile) curiosity spurred *Salt Lake Tribune* garden editor Hazel Moyle to advocate widespread (and semiotically loaded) flower gardening. A year before the Pioneer Centennial, she noted that because “the light of the world” would be upon Utah during the celebratory Covered Wagon Days in 1947, Utahns should spiff up “shabby or unadorned” homes and yards with hollyhocks, daisies, phlox, and iris, giving special attention to flowers that would bloom midsummer, during the height of the touristic gaze. Such efforts would stand as proof of industry and conciliation: they would serenely “prove that we have truly made the desert blossom as the rose” and offer a “friendly message of peace and beauty” to “the stranger within our gates.” Surely the elaborate gardens at Temple Square, the demonstrations of self-sufficiency at Welfare Square, the outpouring of volunteer labor during the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, and the growth of visually impressive gated communities reflect some of these same motivations, concerns, and aesthetics. I also wonder at the prevalence of plastic surgery, cosmetic enhancement, and diet supplements along the Mormon Corridor compared to other regions of the world in which Mormon identity is not necessarily expected to be on display.

---

21. See Lawrence Foster’s thoughts on the late but thorough adoption of Victorian domestic ideals among Mormons at the end of the nineteenth century (“From Frontier Activism to Neo-Victorian Domesticity: Mormon Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Journal of Mormon History* 6 [January 1, 1979]: 3–21) and Ethan R. Yorgason’s examination of the Americanization of the Mormon West between 1880 and 1920 (*Transformation of the Mormon Culture Region* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003]).


Finally, in the context of Joseph Smith’s stance that “all spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure” (D&C 131:7), what does *secularization* mean? Secular and sacred could be considered in terms of the same fractal relationship that linguist Susan Gal has applied to notions of public/private—as a relative rather than absolute dichotomy. How are distinctions among sacred and secular calibrated in LDS discourse, and how does this compare to the actual marking of sacred and secular space in practice? One might think, for instance, of the ways homes, meetinghouses, boweries, chapels, and temples are designed and treated differently (or not) and why, in terms of form, decoration, maintenance, and use.

Looking outward: Mormon practice as illustrative

Though my own work has necessarily engaged existing scholarship that’s grounded in LDS population centers, my primary interest continues to be the ways that Latter-day Saint religious discourse and action articulate with broader cultural ideas or approaches to the world. For instance, though my current book project—a cultural history of home canning in the United States—grew out of my own family’s experience, it is not a book about Mormon canning; instead, I explore the ways that ideas about deception, science, manual labor, scarcity, nation, beauty, gender, and change are filtered through the rhetoric surrounding this one lived practice shared by many communities, past and present.

LDS topics and examples add more than local color or variety to the manuscript, however. They stimulate new questions about, for instance, the relationship of canning to socioeconomic class in the twentieth century. Cookbooks, magazines, records of fairs and bazaars, and even marketing research that was conducted in the late 1910s demonstrate how fancy cooked preserves have been linked to social status throughout the United States: homemade jams and (especially) jellies were

---

markers of skill, artistry, and hospitality, even as urban populations and the rising middle class took readily to commercially canned staples at the turn of the nineteenth century. Home canning in quantity, however, became associated with rural spaces and material necessity, a perception that persists to this day. But the diaries of Isabella “Belle” Wilson Hales (1889–1963)—written in central urban Utah between 1941 and 1962—and the letters of Lillie Liston Baker (1884–1960)—penned from southern rural Utah in the 1950s—document instances in which high-volume canning is positively linked to high social status, in part because of the regional and religious contexts in which Hales and Baker lived. Hales was a leader of numerous women’s organizations in Provo, Utah, and the wife of Brigham Young University dean Wayne B. Hales; she canned extensively, keeping an especially thorough record of her home production in the 1940s. Baker, a mother to seven and manager of several hired hands, hosted nearly every sacred and secular visitor that came to Boulder, Utah, at mid-century, where her husband Claude was a leading figure in the LDS Church and, among other duties, distributed grazing permits, hauled the mail from Escalante by mule, and established irrigation and road projects. Literally until the end of Lillie Baker’s life, food production and preservation organized both her attention and her social life; her letters are filled with references to growing, putting up, and distributing garden produce.

It’s fascinating to tease out the many cultural strands that are foregrounded as these women and those around them talk about strategies

27. MSS 11, Women’s Manuscript Collections, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. In his own published documents, Wayne Hales highlights the food preservation prowess of both Belle and his second wife, Vivian Parkinson, a domestic science teacher whom he married in 1965 after Belle’s death from cancer; Parkinson was known even in advanced age to forage for chokecherries in order to make jelly. Wayne B. Hales, My Life Story, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
for home provisioning. I am left to wonder: what role does scripture and doctrine play in this everyday talk about self-reliance and home production, and in what sense is LDS home food production simply a sustained engagement with a broader American agrarianism or a capitalist ethic founded on the husbandoing of excess resources?

Going forward: community, change, and the relevance of folklore studies

As they draw on the range of theories and methods that have emerged from dynamic disciplinary engagements with philology, literary studies, anthropology, and art history—e.g., comparative textual analysis, ethnographic attention to contexts, rhetorical attention to form—folklorists have much to contribute to the field of Mormon studies, and to the study of lived religion more generally. Indeed, folklore studies is an area in which scholars and laypeople across political continuums can find their own common ground. The study of vernacular culture appeals to models of community advanced by both the political left and the political right: people of divergent political persuasions can often agree that small groups are the ideal social form, and face-to-face interaction the ideal means, for achieving positive social goals.

More conservative assessments tend to ground authentic community in relationships based on birth and place, where small means “homogeneous” and society is modeled after a biological family responsible for socializing its children, transmitting consistent social norms, and minimizing difference. This model of community as family (or neighborhood) values face-to-face contact that allows for “commutative justice”: one-on-one equity effected through the regulation of contractual obligations. Close contact allows for teaching, evaluation of just deserts, and reinforcement of desired behaviors by means of everyday cultural forms. For example, James Wind writes that churches and synagogues are able to “fill and then tap into deep imaginative reservoirs”
(which inspire future social engagement) by means of “practices, habits, attitudes, [and] rituals.”

Calls for community from further left see smallness less as a method for social regulation than as a means for cultural enrichment. Relationships in this version of community cross boundaries of physical proximity—they may be based on ethnicity, occupation, or religion, for example—and smallness is considered a way of consolidating influence in the context of a pluralistic society. Here the focus is on intensifying a group’s sense of difference—with the ultimate aim of encouraging understanding and interdependence, but not necessarily uniformity. This model is key in the applied work of folklorists who attempt to promote “populist approaches to social difference and an anti-elitist concern with the lives and the well-being of ordinary individuals”; it is also a model germane to the LDS Church as a diasporic, proselytizing, and globalizing lay institution. Face-to-face contact in these circumstances can be envisioned as a way to foster “imaginative justice”—the ability to espouse the interests of the Other as one works to understand the circumstances and envision the claims of that other. Susan Yohn notes that nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries often began their work with the intention of assimilating “‘foreign’ or ‘exceptional’ populations” but concluded it as “vocal advocates” of those with whom they worked and lived.


Both models of community have their critics; what is important here is that they suggest why folklorists have successfully wooed supporters from all points on the political spectrum—and perhaps why the study (and celebration) of vernacular expressive culture has been so popular among Mormons as well. Folklorists’ public initiatives often promote unity in diversity; they combine a more conservative model of community as cohesive and mutually understandable with a more radical view of communities as multiple and potentially linked sites of social power. Mormons on the left can embrace folklore as populist, pluralist, and applied; those on the political right appreciate the recognition of local needs, interests, expertise, and particular histories.

As the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to negotiate the efficacy of centralized management structures and to recognize the diversity of its members both within and without the United States—and to honor the complexity of individual members’ identities, as in the “I’m a Mormon” campaign—folklorists and other scholars of living cultures can do much to (1) highlight the consequences and contradictions of everyday religious practice and community boundary marking; (2) work to address essentialisms in the discourse of insiders and outsiders; and (3) demonstrate how Mormon lives, in all their varieties, aid in thoughtful examination of the broader issues of the day.

**Danille Elise Christensen** is assistant professor of public humanities in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on the intersections of ideology, vernacular traditional practice, and popular culture in the United States, with specific attention to domestic material culture, craft, environmental humanities, and the ethnography of communication. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore, Journal of Folklore Research, Southern Cultures*, and *Museum Anthropology Review*; her monograph *Freedom from Want: Home Canning in the American Imagination* will be published by the University of North Carolina Press.