THE ART OF QUEERING BOUNDARIES IN LDS COMMUNITIES

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I am the mother of a queer son. I am also an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as a professor at Brigham Youg University, where I teach courses in literacy education, educational research methods, and multicultural education. I was raised in a biracial home and converted to the LDS faith when I was nineteen. I think it is important to understand that I was raised neither Mormon nor homophobic. It is also important to understand that my queer son was not born to me, but rather sought out our home after coming out and needing a safe place to live and be loved. My goal today is to disrupt the notion of boundary maintenance, given who I am as an LDS woman and mother of a queer son. I would like to suggest, instead, queering the boundaries that we make and maintain.

Allow me to begin by sharing some of the challenges faced by mothers of LGBTQ individuals. (I assume this is the case for other people who love and support LGBTQ folks, but I will speak from the experience of being a mother.) When my son came out to me, he was not out to the world. I promised him that the only person I would tell was my husband and I left it up to my son to tell my other sons and the rest of the world. Therefore, while I was completely supportive of my son, I felt isolated by his coming out.

Where could I turn to for help without compromising his confidence?

Who could help me process this information in a way that would respect my love of the gospel, my goals as a mother, and my love for my son?

What were other mothers doing to help their children in the context of their LDS faith?

How could I maintain my faith and confidence in the Church, given the reality of my son's life (which at the time of his coming out included severe depression and anxiety accompanied by suicide ideation)?

I could not find answers immediately within my faith community, as discussions of LGBTQ lives seemed forbidden in Church settings. I hit a boundary. I also did not know where to meet LDS LGBTQ individuals, a community that I assumed existed but I didn't know how to access it (or even if it was proper for me to do so). I didn't know anything about the boundaries of this community.

Thus, I initially looked for online resources and found very little that seemed to speak to me as a mother. I buried myself in the literature about LGBTQ individuals, depression, helping a loved one with suicide ideation, and what The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints taught about being gay and Mormon. As an academic, I took profound interest in queer theory (and as an educator I gravitated toward queer pedagogy). I worked within my own boundaries as a person with access to the internet, as an LDS woman, and as an academic.

I found some answers. I also found ways to insert myself into the LDS LGBTQ community and conversation. I have also participated to some degree within the larger LGBTQ conversation as an academic. And thus I find myself testing boundaries of various communities, relying on the good will of others to accept me as a member of those communities.

In August of last year, I wrote in my journal:

I recognize at once that I am not queer. And when I am in the queer community I am wholly aware that I am an interloper and a guest. I recognize also that my views [on LGBTQ matters] mark me as someone to be feared or at least handled with care among some members of the ward or even my colleagues [at the university]—communities to which I have belonged without fear in the past. And so I move within those communities with a degree of caution in order to protect my own soul.

I feel my place in both communities is tenuous and conditional. And that is a bit hard on my heart. I have considered getting out of the fight. *This is not my fight* is a thing I say to myself as justification to walk away to the

comforts of my community, to my established scholarship, and my settled soul. *This fight came to you* is a thing I am reminded of as I stay. I realize that there is no comfort in my community until this fight is won. I realize that I can use my scholarship in this fight. I realize that this is my soul work.

And so I find myself somewhat uncomfortably occupying this space between: between peace and complete disarray, between faith and utter disbelief, between hope and crushing despair, between my desire to fight and my desire to surrender in defeat.

I have found queer theory useful in helping me make sense of these binaries, and boundaries, and the points in between. Challenging my own identity, for instance, as an insider or outsider has been a disruptive project. Queer theory invites me to ask questions of identity and how "normal" is produced and reproduced within communities. Moreover, rather than focusing on "identities in need of repair or as the problem,"[1] queer theory shifts my focus of inquiry toward the larger society's need to define, produce, and protect "normal" by rejecting anything that appears to be deviant.

For me as a straight, cisgender person, queer theory offers a way to consider my shifting identity as an LDS woman away from a more mainstream point within Mormonism (an identity that I would have rejected even prior to my son's arrival in our family) and toward an identity as an LDS woman who finds herself outside of what would be considered "mainstream." Queer theory allows me to move away from viewing queer identities, including my own emerging queer identity, as problematic. (I realize the trouble with identifying myself as queer given that I identify as a straight, cisgender person; however, my work interrogating and seeking to transgress gender and sexuality norms invites a queer identity, even while I reject a desire to pass as queer in queer spaces.)[2] Rather, queer theory allows me to examine the problems in

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1. William G. Tierney and Patrick Dilley, "Constructing Knowledge: Educational Research and Gay and Lesbian Studies" in *Queer Theory in Education*, ed. William F. Pinar (New York: Routledge, 1998), 54.

2. See Annette Schlichter, "Queer at Last?: Straight Intellectuals and the Desire for Transgression," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 4 (2004): 543–64.

the various communities I occupy and that have located queer bodies, desires, and lives as "other" or outside the boundary that encompasses normal. As such, my own sense of normalization itself has become the subject of my analysis and I have begun to see my inclusion and exclusion from various communities as a problem of culture and thought.

This allows me the freedom to see myself, not as a person who is broken or in need of some special treatment—indeed I needn't be pitied or celebrated or perhaps, even understood—but as a person who is part of a larger community of humans who have unquestioningly accepted normal, and conversely, as a person who has also rejected people who might find themselves outside the confines of normal. Indeed, I can't help but understand my own complicity in nominalizing those around me by creating a community that both produces and rejects some individuals. Like all of us, I am a boundary maker and maintainer.

All the while I understand that (as I have pointed out before) taking up a straight, cisgender identity as part of a queer community also challenges the limits and boundaries of queerness—something that I cannot do on my own. Indeed, to take up a non-mainstream LDS position (a position that isn't unique to mothers of LGBTQ kids, I understand) within an LDS community or to take up a straight, cisgender position within a queer community does not simply necessitate my own desire to do so. It also requires the permission of the community to expand its borders to include someone like me. Thus, I must work both as an individual and as a member of the community to offer an alternative to normal and to create a community in which my particular variety of normal is included.

Intellectually, I knew that I could not be the only LDS mother of a queer kid. But finding those other mothers proved to be very difficult. About a year after my son came out, I found the Mama Dragons group (which had about twenty members at the time). The group has now grown to over 800 members. Last year I interviewed forty-five of them. I was interested in their stories, both out of curiosity and out of a desire to know if my journey as an LDS mother (of another woman's child) was "normal" (perhaps a selfish act as an academic).

What I found were stories of mothers who were both fierce and humble, loving and angered, determined and scared, and faithful and doubtful. I could relate so well to the paradoxes they held comfortably, albeit loosely. They told stories of shifting their gospel focus away from the doctrine of strict obedience and toward an understanding of agency from an eternal perspective. They told stories of caring less about eternal consequences and who might accompany them to the celestial kingdom and caring more about the current temporal and spiritual needs of their LGBTQ children. They told stories of how they worried less about following the words of prophets with exactness and, instead, took comfort in the working of the Spirit within themselves that stirred them to action for both their own children and for other people's children. Their stories filled me with hope and courage as a mother, as a member of the LDS community, and as a worker to make the world a better place.

With the Mama Dragons, I have found community. With them I experience a sense of belonging. With them, I am completely normal. With them, I needn't exist on some boundary at the risk of being rejected or expelled. My feelings are valued. My goals are valued. The ways in which I work to keep my family safe and whole are valued. And the ways I affirm my son and his life are valued. I am safe to feel joy for his relationship with his boyfriend. I am safe to feel anger with a new policy. I am safe to help a Mama accept a new name for her trans kid. I am safe to share ideas for how to make the world safer and more welcoming for LGBTQ individuals.

With that said, the Mama Dragons is not completely an inclusive group. Men, for instance, are not welcome to join (there is another group for them). I also know that not all LDS women of LGBTQ kids have felt safe with the Mama Dragons. Members of the group can be, at times, crass and their anger toward the Church often comes out in biting commentary. And so some women leave. The Mama Dragons certainly create and maintain their own boundaries.

Meanwhile, the Mama Dragons community lives on the boundaries of the LDS community and is often viewed with suspicion and fear. Similarly, the Mama Dragons live on the boundaries of the LDS LGBTQ

community and again is often viewed with suspicion and fear. But the community exists, nevertheless, and is a place of refuge for many mothers who suddenly find themselves on a path that they had not prepared for themselves. For many LDS mothers who find themselves working to make sense of what they could not bear to know[3]—about their child, about their relationships, and about their Church—the Mama Dragons represents a community whose boundaries are just right.

I suppose the point I would like to make is that individuals take up difficult work as boundary makers, maintainers, and crossers (something that I am somewhat comfortable with as a biracial, female academic, LDS convert, working mother—I have always found myself crossing many borders).

Thus, each of us must do careful work to understand our efforts as makers of boundaries—why do we make the boundaries we do? How do those boundaries serve to protect us? How do those boundaries harm us or cut us off from people who would contribute to our well-being? We must examine our work in maintaining boundaries—why do we feel threatened when our boundaries are challenged? How much effort do we put into protecting the boundaries that we have created? Are those efforts worth it when we consider the consequences? And we must take up the work of queering boundaries—what might we gain by stretching our boundaries? What does the community stand to gain by including those outside the boundary? What are our limits with regard to inclusivity?

Ultimately, communities must take up the important work of questioning the boundaries they make, the efforts they place in protecting and maintaining those boundaries, and how those boundaries serve to exclude goodness and stunt the growth of the community.

This work begins with imagination, a topic for another day.

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3. Deborah P. Britzman, "Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (1995): 151–65.