

PIONEER MOTHER

Tara Godwin

I come from a family of Mormons, although perhaps somewhat unorthodox ones. Somewhere in England and what is today Romania, my father's ancestors heard of a man named Joseph Smith and his vision of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They left Europe and traveled with other devout Saints to Utah, settling in Salt Lake City and Vernal. Fast forward a century or so and my father still practices Mormonism. I'm certain his relationship with the Church must be far from simple. He entered into fatherhood as a teenager and worked all his life to be worthy of the daughters who called him "Dad." He and I don't talk about religion. All I know is that when he felt lost, not unlike Joseph Smith, he prayed.

Meanwhile, my mother's ancestors lived in Pennsylvania and Italy, unaware that, after roughly two decades of prayer and quietly passing the sacrament tray without partaking, my mother would join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I'm uncertain how her Roman Catholic predecessors might feel about her conversion, but I like to think they would have, at the very least, respected her desire to follow God's will. My time with my mother was short. She died during my freshman year of college, when I was still too young to appreciate her personhood and valued only her motherhood. I wish now I could talk to her about all the questions I have. I know she loved God.

I write all of this to say that Mormonism informed, and continues to inform, many of my life's decisions. I say "Mormonism" rather than the longer, stuffier "Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" because I refer to both the faith tradition and the culture. Although my mother converted when I neared the end of primary school, I grew up attending church functions like Activity Days, used Mormon vernacular like

“CTR,” and learned family history from my grandmother. We never read scriptures at home, probably due in part to my mother’s hesitancy to accept the Book of Mormon as God’s word. As a kid, my Mormon upbringing proved far more cultural than religious.

My religious education occurred on my mission. I surprised myself by serving—I always considered missions a modern form of imperialism. I’m sure some continue to argue that missionary work is imperialist, but I felt called to the work and submitted to the call. When I returned home from my mission in Estonia, I held a deep love for the uniqueness of Mormon religious texts and their vision of the divine. Upon returning to university, I changed my major from chemistry to history. I found myself fascinated by the history of the Soviet Union and the fallout of its dissolution—something I witnessed while wearing a black name tag.

The study of history is so often filled with painful topics. To study history is to peer into the darkest parts of human nature—how and why we choose to harm others, how and why we engage in conflict, and how the oppressed suffer. Our failures as humankind inform our present, and our past cannot, and should not, be forgotten.

Somewhere in my university training, I stumbled into a Mormon studies class. The idea of an academic study of my faith tradition seemed odd—who cared?—but I signed up anyway. The course proved fascinating and challenging, placing stories I grew up with in conversation with broader historical movements like Christian primitivism and the Cold War. I attempted to confront the contradictions in Church history and the Mormon experiment, although I am certain now I did not master it. As a historian, I thought myself impervious to the pain of history, even my own. A few years later, I confronted this pain in an art museum in Cody, Wyoming.

I took a trip to Cody to see my favorite companion from my mission. I say “favorite companion” and I mean that, but I also mean my only companion. We served together for over a year of our eighteen-month service and I consider her a dear friend. She lives in Cody. Although I had visited once before, she graciously acted as my tour

guide, and we found ourselves at the art museum inside the Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

The piece is titled *Pioneer Mother*. I saw her in plaster, although the original is cast in bronze. Some may find her unremarkable—a middle-aged woman dressed in the modest clothes of those who trekked west, gazing straight ahead. She is the first time I ever saw my history and culture housed in the clinical walls of a museum—housed to be analyzed, appreciated, pondered. She peered directly at me, through time, a conduit for my ancestors. More than likely, the sculptor envisioned women who pushed westward intoxicated with the ideals of Manifest



Figure 1: "Pioneer Mother," Alexander Phimister Proctor, sculpture, 1925. Photography by Tara Godwin, 2021.

Destiny rather than Mormonism when he crafted the determination in her face. Art, however, remains open to interpretation, and, to me, her determination signifies a desire within the Pioneer Mother to practice her faith in peace and a commitment to her God so strong it compelled her to cross a continent.

Later that night, my former companion and I attended an Apsáalooke (Crow) cultural presentation. “Give the Natives their land back,” the presenter said. “This country was founded on genocide before the word even existed.”

In Mormon folklore, we envision that when Brother Brigham declared “This is the place!” the land lay empty, that early Mormons found refuge without violence or conflict. This folktale is untrue. Although convinced of Native American’s ancient Lamanite ancestry, Mormon pioneers inhabited foreign land that did not belong to them and massacred Indigenous peoples. Was the Pioneer Mother conscious of the genocide in which she participated? Did she feel guilty? Or did she feel justified under the pretense of divine ordination?

Moreover, as she sought asylum in what was then Mexican territory, did she consider herself an American? An Englishwoman? A German? Or, did she feel like something entirely new—a Mormon? Her flight to Mexico certainly indicates that she felt unable to assimilate into American life. Her American contemporaries used her sister wives and her belief in tales of gold plates and angels as evidence that she was not a decent American woman.

As her descendant, I find myself inextricably tied to my Mormon identity. The older I become, the more I gain awareness of my clumsy attempt to assimilate into American culture. The comments on a recent *New York Times* article concerning women’s usage of sacred garments that call my religious community a “cult” remind me that I am not welcomed everywhere.¹ The vitriol that accosts me on TikTok concerning

1. Ruth Graham, “Among Mormon Women, Frank Talk About Sacred Underclothes,” *New York Times*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/21/us/mormon-women-underclothes.html>.

Mormon dietary restrictions and marriage practices reminds me that I am not understood by all Americans, religious or otherwise. My mission experience reminds me that to be Mormon is to not be American, and I am not convinced I want to be American at all.

Mormonism is not simply my faith—it is my culture, my language, and my people. It may be my nationality. It is also my pain. I feel acutely the irony of the Pioneer Mother seeking solace away from a hostile government while the institutional Church today denies such peace to queer Saints—pioneers in the present. I agonize over how to celebrate my cultural heritage while acknowledging the violence and devastation this history symbolizes for Native Americans. I am embarrassed and irate that white leaders denied my Black siblings salvation, and when white hatred toward God’s children proved untenable, they arrogantly labeled the policy reversal “revelation.” This history is painful because it is mine, and because it is mine, I must not escape it.

I don’t know what it means to be Mormon, other than to grapple with Mormonism’s difficult history and cultural legacy. I find hope in Mormonism’s radical roots and sense of community. The early Saints’ willingness to defy conventional social norms and sacrifice for their religious values gives me hope that we can now theologically embrace our queer siblings. The proto-feminism evinced by early female Mormon leaders breathes life into me that the glass ceiling that suffocates Mormon women will shatter. I pray we can honor the Pioneer Mother and allow women to once again heal the sick and speak in tongues—leaders in their own right. Forgive us, Father, and forgive us, Mother, our transgressions.

The lines between myself and the Pioneer Mother blur. Mormonism is nothing if not complicated, and that is why I hold it so close.

TARA GODWIN {tara.isabelle.godwin@gmail.com} graduated from the University of Utah with an HBA in history in May 2020. She currently works as a development analyst at the University of Toledo Foundation. She volunteers with local LGBTQ+ support groups and attempts to train for a marathon in her free time.