

ARCHIVE OF THE COVENANT: REFLECTIONS ON MORMON INTERACTIONS WITH STATE AND BODY

Kit Hermanson

The Family Tree and Nation

“And again, let all the records be had in order, that they may be put in the archives of my holy temple, to be held in remembrance from generation to generation, saith the Lord of Hosts.”

Doctrine and Covenants 127:9

Each of the following sections relates to a document that aids in the construction of the Mormon family tree: the birth certificate, the temple recommend, the marriage certificate, and the death certificate. Each of these is a document of high theological and social importance to Mormons. They are not innocent documents; they are created by institutions like the State or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and enable a variety of rituals, like the bestowing of citizenship and the priesthood. I will briefly explore how each document functions in the archive, the ramifications of those functions outside of the archive, and the inability of the archive (in theory and praxis) to encompass narratives of the human experiences it claims. Queerness may present itself in the archive as “scraps,”¹ but it also sits in the space between papers, the glitches in the data, the pew closest to the door.

1. See Robb Hernández, “Drawn from the Scraps: The Finding AIDS of Mundo Meza,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015): 70–88.

If the archive is organized to *hide* certain bodies and actions, but not necessarily exclude them, then we can find them without having to look elsewhere. Sometimes, we might even find pieces of ourselves.

The Church has modeled itself after nation-states since its inception in the nineteenth century. Early and contemporary models of LDS authority have assumed heteropatriarchal, Western, democratic structures. Despite early communitarian efforts like polygamy and the united order, the necessity to assimilate for survival has minimized much of what made Mormonism unique and hated, socially and theologically. Communal land ownership gave way to corporatism. Polygamy to the nuclear family. Speaking in tongues to silent reverence. I don't mean to imply that the Church hasn't always been patriarchal and hierarchal (it has), only that it has conformed more and more to a specific model of hierarchy that reflects the state structure of the United States. Its biopolitical and disciplinary practices have evolved in accordance. These practices are built with the power of the archive.

I was born into this latter tradition. My grandparents are Church genealogists. Their den is our family archive and they are aging and frail *archons* standing on strength of faith and heart medication alone. For my tenth birthday, they gave me three floppy disks and an early version of the family history mapping software later popularized as Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org. My parents had left the Church several years before, but to me the floppy disks were evidence of our belonging to the Mormon faith and to God himself. My grandparents gifted me with maps, stories, charts, and moral lessons, all the details of how my ancestors' actions in the 1800s resulted in my birth on the edge of the twenty-first century. I believed in the ontological truth that, despite my breaking family and my internal struggle to believe in Heavenly Father as I was taken geographically and morally further and further from my hometown in Arizona, we were Mormon by blood. Our blood was transposed into text on my computer monitor and the words there told me I belonged.

Of course, any relationship involving blood is complicated. The Victorian milieu in which the faith is rooted required theological reconciliations with new scientific reproductive logics. Mormons self-describe as the children of Ephraim, the literal descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel. Descendance not only justified adherence to parts of the Old Testament, like polygamy and communitarian economics, but also declarations of sovereignty against the United States government and Protestants who balked at their “peculiar” ways. The Mormon ability to trace one’s family tree to the Bible itself literalized the covenant, asserted Truth, and justified violent colonization of Native Americans.² But not all converts, particularly the theologically all-important Native American ones, could trace their ancestry to Ephraim within the historiographical structures of the Church. Blood had to be created and re-created in accordance with the proclaimed universal theology of the Book of Mormon.

The Mormon faith quite literally created its own blood. In their struggle to maintain whiteness, nineteenth-century Mormons developed the ability to speak the language of proto-eugenics in the dialect of faith; that is, how to maintain essential difference and substance-specific convenance with God while conforming to their own claims of universalism and democracy.³ In addition to the constant infusion of good (read: white) blood into the Mormon community through the labor of conversion, Mormon blood was *made* through ritual.

For those to whom the blood of Israel was not given by their parents, it was created through baptism. Joseph Smith stated that “the effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile, is to purge out the old blood, and make him actually the seed of Abraham. That man that has none

2. See W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

3. See John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

of the blood of Abraham (naturally) must have a new creation by the Holy Ghost.”⁴ Out with the old, in with the holy. Inter-marriage with non-Ephraimites did not endanger purity because the option of baptism made Mormon blood as universally viable as O negative. The transmutation of blood ensured that lineages went unbroken and the logic of the Book of Mormon was preserved. New branches could be continuously grafted onto the family tree.

Of course, this new plasma need only be made for those who cannot claim Ephraim through their own agency. A white person, specifically one raised in the Church, can justly *assume* a blood connection within Mormon genetic logics whereas converts of color cannot.⁵ The process of acquiring holy blood requires purging of the natal past and adopting of a new celestial pre-mortality. In this light, conversion is not only about interiorized faith, like other Protestant Christian traditions, but a new formulation of bodyhood that is inextricably connected to voluntary natal alienation and the adoption of a specific population of dead.

This is why my grandparents are genealogists. The “archive fever” experienced by Max and Maurine is a sickness of spirit, a longing for the eschaton. It is homesickness for their pre-mortal lives with Heavenly Father. As living Mormons, they have a responsibility to the dead: to provide them with the choice of exaltation only possible through baptism. The work of the family tree, in the faith, is not only to reflect on one’s righteousness as a descendent of Abraham—even if it feels like that is what they’re doing most of the time. Investigating the family tree

4. Joseph F. Smith, comp., *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1938), 150.

5. Modern “Lamanites” can also assume covenant descentance. “Lamanites” is the term used in the Book of Mormon to describe Native Americans. In short, the Lamanites and Nephites were two tribes of Native Americans, each descended from Ephraim. The Lamanites killed the Nephites and fell from God’s grace and, as such, he cursed them with dark skin.

provides the information necessary for baptisms for the dead. It is to make all aware of the possibility of their place in the family tree, if not by their own blood then by transfusion and transmutation.

The Birth Certificate and Authority

I was born in Phoenix, Arizona. My birth certificate is blue with the outline of the state faintly in the background. The floral border is interrupted in the bottom left corner for a circle containing the logo for the Arizona Department of Health Services, the keepers of the state's natal archive. The department requires that certificates list the hospitals children are born in, the time and date, their given names, the names of their parents, and their parents' birthdates. In contrast to the newer birth certificates being adopted post-June 2015, there are two slots for my parents and they are labeled "MOTHER" and "FATHER."

It seems to me that the mission of queer and transgender millennials like us is to make as much of the listed "data" on our birth certificates irrelevant as possible. It's our way of proving to ourselves that the state can't *really* know us. I, as a non-binary person, can never have my felt gendered experience reflected on paper without a change to the foundation of Arizona's stance on gender assignment. And, to be honest, I would not want the state to know, or attempt to approximate, my internal and external conceptualization of my soul and body.

The birth certificate functions as a declaration of an individual's categorical belonging with the family. This applies to both the biological family as well as the categorization of archived documents into "families." Cataloguing methods are designed to preserve lineage following heteropatriarchal logics of reproductivity, ownership, and capital.⁶ Correctly identifying biological relationship and sex is central to the identification of heirs and thus the relationship between the living and

6. Hernández, "Drawn from Scraps."

the dead. Incongruencies between one's birth certificate, license, and other documents places one at social and legal risk with the living. Each piece of identification that bears a separate name, gender marker, or photo reduces one's archived existence to "scraps": fragments of experience that are an incongruous inconvenience to the state's overarching project of population management.⁷ For example, a trans person's birth certificate, license, passport, and school ID cards might each show a moment in their process of self-development that are related only through their own retroactive narrativizing of their life and the continuity of their internal self, not through their physical bodily presentation. These documents as a collection are largely incomprehensible to a cis-heteronormative taxonomy of experience. There are obvious real-life benefits for binary trans people to change their birth certificates, even if they refuse the state's authority to define her gender or sex. Access to healthcare, licenses, adoption, and non-violent treatment by the state itself is much more easily obtained, though not guaranteed, by aligning gender presentation with archived sex. The state accommodates the transgender person in this way as a reflection of its interest in assimilation and the transgender person accommodates the state's interest in their genital/gender dynamic in the interest of self-preservation: this tension is worked out in the archive and its bureaucracy.

Of course, this job is never done. Socially constructed gender and sexual identities are phased out, continuously complicating the ability of the archive to maintain categorical continuity and cohesion and periodically demonstrating its own inherent inability to not only encompass but to even conceptualize the ephemeral queer (or genderqueer).⁸ Various states have attempted to solve this archival difficulty through

7. Hernández, "Drawn from Scraps."

8. Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83, no. 2 (Apr. 2013): 94–111.

the creation of bureaucratic processes to change the original marker (thus denying the mistake at the source) or including third-gender options.⁹ These band-aid solutions are obviously insufficient to cover the festering wound splitting the state's interest in population management and individual and communal interests in self-definition. These problems exist on their own without even beginning to broach the complex topic of genital variety and intersex conditions that largely disprove bifurcated models of sexed bodyhood.¹⁰

Regardless of these complications, the birth certificate is a key component of baptisms for the dead. Place, date, and time of birth, gender, and parents' names are necessary for everyone baptized by proxy. This information can be gathered elsewhere, but it is most conveniently located in the forms provided by, and required by, the state for each person born on its soil. This alliance with the state enables the ritual to be as prolific as it is today. However, this dependency reveals itself to be as fallible in its reliance on the information as it is coherent with Mormon conceptualizations of bodily truth. Thanks to many of the trans-normative and homonationalist projects of largely white, middle-class activists in the United States, the state archive has revealed itself to be willing to incorporate and work with certain kinds of queer and transgender people.¹¹ But while the state may be willing to accept "deviancy" in specific, otherwise conforming gendered situations, the Church is not.

In 1995, the leadership of the LDS Church published "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" in *Ensign* and *Liahona* and read it aloud on

9. Sweden is one country that has recently added a third, gender-neutral option that is assigned in case of intersex birth or upon request of the parents.

10. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

11. See Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).

the globally televised annual general conference meeting.¹² In defense of cisheteronormative logics it unequivocally states:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. *Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.*¹³

This statement theologically essentialized gender to the body as signaled by sex.¹⁴ The assumption of sex as gender, already taken for granted in discourses of the state and the Church, was sanctified. The proclamation goes on: “We further declare that God has commanded that the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, *lawfully* wedded as husband and wife.”¹⁵ And later that: “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, . . . observe the commandments of God, and be *law-abiding citizens* wherever they live.”¹⁶ The proclamation rhetorically connects religious and civic duty. If one of the responsibilities of essentially gendered souls/bodies is “lawful” marriage, then the Church relies on

12. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

13. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (emphasis mine).

14. It is important to note here that it is assumed based on the binary sexing system that intersex bodies are entirely disregarded or assumed to be “corrected” into one of the two gendered categories. In 1995, medical and popular understandings of intersexuality were limited, however this situation has changed drastically since without a reflecting statement or any guidance from the Church.

15. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” emphasis added.

16. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” emphasis added.

the state to provide mechanisms with which to manifest each person's "divine nature and destiny."

As such, the state determines which life-path each Mormon child will take at birth. The Church relies on the state to reconcile the sex/gender relationship and adheres to that decision as a matter of theological principle. Deviations from gendered predestinations are explained through individual accountabilities to God's plan rather than as a problem of the limitation of the archive's ability to encapsulate the full range of gender and sexual experience. Divinely/legally inspired marriages also require divinely/legally inspired gender role affiliation in their children. The LDS Church's self-published *A Parent's Guide* states:

Gender identity involves an understanding and accepting of one's own gender, with little reference to others; one's gender roles usually focus upon the social interaction associated with being male or female. Parents can help children to establish during these years a good foundation for later intimacy by helping them understand true principles about how a son or daughter of God should relate to others in his or her gender roles.¹⁷

Parenting children to adhere to their gender roles relies on the determination of the state as catalogued in the archive, as well. This paragraph also reveals the circumvention of the body that the essentialization of gender to the soul allows. Gender identity becomes about "understanding and accepting of one's own gender" (gender here meaning biological sex) as assigned by the state. The Church trusts in the state specialist and archives to reveal the correct gender of each child and borrows the state's archival authority to reinforce its theological claims. As Judith Butler states, "There is no reference to a pure body which is not at the

17. *A Parent's Guide* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/a-parents-guide?lang=eng>.

same time a further formation of that body.”¹⁸ This is especially true for restatements of state-sponsored biological truths. The state’s revealed gender becomes the yardstick by which each person’s moral virtue is measured as well as the justification for biopolitical discipline enacted upon children’s bodies for the sake of later heterosexual reproduction and celestial exaltation. Additionally, the Proclamation makes the state a necessary mechanism for revealing vital characteristics of a person’s soul.

The recent shifts in state policies discussed above indicate an increasing tendency to regard gender markers as symbolic rather than as literal, a view that is incompatible with the relationship the Church has developed with the authority of the archive. Symbols, as Talal Asad discusses, call for interpretations, which are multiple in nature as criteria for their interpretation is socially expanded.¹⁹ Interpretations of the gender marker as “symbol” can be equated to gender performance, e.g., my birth certificate loudly declares “FEMALE” but my baggy pants, compression bra, lack of makeup, disposition, and my fingers intertwined with those of a woman make old ladies do a double take at the “WOMEN” sign on the restroom door when I walk in. This is the cis-normative logic through which many activists and the state justify the ability to change the symbol when the interpretation of gender in performance does not meet any credible criteria for the symbol or better aligns with the opposing one.

For Mormons, however, the gender marker indicates proper forms of disciplinary practice that are not as open to interpretation. There is a specific “way” in which to properly inhabit a gendered body and to parent one’s children to become properly gendered people.

18. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.

19. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 79.

“Disciplinary practices,” Asad states, “cannot be varied so easily [as symbols], because learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same as learning to invent representations.”²⁰ Gender performance among Mormon people obviously varies, but gender variety is less accessible because of the threat of social repercussions that are directly tied to the theological connection between gender, soul, and sex. Parental and ecclesiastic disciplining in accordance with documented gender creates the very capacity for correct gender identification. The birth certificate is not up for interpretation or for revision. Rather, the Church draws on the legal authority of the state archive to indicate the ways in which one *should* exercise their God-given agency.

The Temple Recommend and Agency

The temple recommend is a formal document given by a local bishop or other male lay leader that indicates one’s worthiness to enter a temple. It is invariable proof of the piety and bodily purity that is required to take part in temple work such as celestial marriages, family sealings, and baptisms for the dead. Certain acts taken upon and by the body violate this purity permanently while others require waiting periods and proof of penance. Most permanent offenses are those that relate to gendered “violations” of the body that conflict with the requirements set forth by the birth certificate.

Handbook 1 is the official guide for local bishops on the management of their congregations.²¹ There is no formal ecclesiastic training in the Church, but it does provide a copious amount of literature on how to handle certain situations from budgeting to apostasy. *Handbook 1* specifically outlines the moral requirements for entering a temple.

20. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 79.

21. *Handbook 1: Stake Presidents and Bishops* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010).

It is in the temple recommend that the Church shifts its focus away from the state archive and toward its internal archive. Stake presidents and bishops have access to files on members that record their tithings, Church involvement and responsibilities, baptisms, marriages, sealings, etc. These are no more outstanding than those kept by other Christian denominations with centralized organization like Catholics or Episcopalians. However, the details in these files and their interpretation by the bishop control access to the rituals that determine one's validity for exaltation after death. *Handbook 1* and Church policy situate stake presidents and bishops as literal *archons* of their local archives. In addition to acting as "presiding high priest," "he oversees records, finances, and properties."²² One of the duties interwoven between the responsibilities of high priest and record-keeper is to control access to the archive as well as its ritual use.

In the foundational text *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida gives an embellished, haunting image of the *archons*:

The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law. To be guarded thus, in the jurisdiction of this *speaking the law*, they needed at once a guardian and a localization. Even in their guardianship or their hermeneutic tradition, the archives could do neither without substrate nor without residence.²³

I'll admit that even as I construct the image of a local bishop as the Mormon *archon* it is difficult for me to imagine the pudgy, middle-aged Elder Johnson as a mythic Greek angel with glorious wings and

22. *Handbook 1*, 1.3–6.

23. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

omnipotent power over treasured information. However, seeming innocuousness is one of the key ways in which hierarchical power operates. What is at stake here, as Derrida states, “is nothing less than the *future*.”²⁴

Temple work, including sealings and marriage, but most pertinently baptisms for the dead, is necessary for the exaltation of the soul to the highest realms of heaven and the achievement of godhood. In addition to the literal, physical gathering of Zion as required by the tenth article of faith,²⁵ souls are gathered through rituals that seal heteronormative family units for time and eternity. Although in Mormon cosmology souls preexist their mortal containers, the mortal world is where humans forge the bonds that God the Father desires they preserve for all time. Only in the temple can these sacraments be achieved; only the bishop can give you access to the temple.

As I said before, certain serious transgression can temporarily or permanently disallow one from entering the temple. In these situations, it is up to the discretion of the bishop/archon as to whether the person has adequately repented. Serious transgressions, defined as “deliberate or major offense[s] against morality” include murder, rape, abuse, adultery, “homosexual relations (especially sexual cohabitation),” and various forms of theft.²⁶ Additionally listed, each with their own separate paragraph for expansion, are abortion and “transsexual operations.”²⁷

On the topic of “transsexual operations,” *Handbook 1* specifically advises that “Church leaders counsel against elective transsexual operations. If a member is contemplating such an operation, a presiding

24. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 14.

25. Articles of Faith 1:10.

26. *Handbook 1*, 4.5.2.1.

27. *Handbook 1*, 4.5.2.1

officer informs him of this counsel and advises him that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline.”²⁸ Furthermore, “A member who has undergone an elective transsexual operation may not receive a temple recommend.”²⁹ Rhetorically, two interesting things happen here: 1) the hypothetical “transsexual” in question is already assumed to be a “him,” ostensibly referring to a transgender woman, and 2) like the Church’s stance on homosexuality, it is not the *thoughts* of gendered difference that make one unworthy to enter the house of God, but the physical actualization of those thoughts on the body, in this case through the specific act of surgical cutting. The controversial trans theorist Jay Prosser emphasizes this moment of cisnormative thinking in his book *Second Skins*: “More than the potentially dramatic somatic effects of the long-term hormone therapy that necessarily precedes it, sex reassignment surgery is considered the hinge upon which the transsexual’s ‘transsex’ turns: the magical moment of ‘sex change.’”³⁰ The pre-operative or non-operative binary transgender person, much less the genderqueer or gender deviant, has not seriously transgressed. They may even be worthy of temple admittance if they do not “elect” to change the genital aesthetics that inspired the state’s original sex categorization—that is, to challenge the authority of the archive, and by extension the Church and God himself.

Ironically, the system set forth by the Church could, on paper, admit me and several of my friends into the temple. Despite years of hormone therapy and even more years disregarding hegemonic standards of gendered and sexual behavior, if they have not undergone operative changes to the surface of their body, they technically don’t qualify as transgender. In a certain Mormon imagining, I have been in

28. *Handbook 1*, 4.5.2.1

29. *Handbook 1*, 4.5.2.1.

30. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 63.

a committed, heterosexual relationship with a man, even though she was a transwoman. I am sure my family found this comforting. However, when my older cousin was married, I stood outside the temple with the youngest children and the more distant friends and waited for the newly celestially sealed couple to emerge. My partner chose not to come because she would have had to conform to masculine standards for the ordeal just as I had to shave my legs and don a pink dress for the first time in a decade, *acting* through a femininity that was not my own.

After the temple ceremony, my younger cousin drove us to the reception in my grandfather's ancient Cadillac. The windows on the Cadillac didn't roll down and the air conditioning was broken. The scene was as stereotypical of Arizona as the fact that the reception took place on a local, Mormon-owned farm. The highlight of the night was a fat pink pig that ran through the middle of the outdoor dance floor. Two children and the owner of the farm chased it, apologizing loudly and making more of a scene than necessary. Soon after, I sat at the head table with the other bridesmaids who, though unrelated, knew the bride better than I ever will. My uncle gave a speech. He waxed romantically about the righteousness of a temple wedding, the strength of faith that it takes in the face of an increasingly secular society to remain celibate before marriage. Typical of his personality, the metaphor was financial: marriage is an investment you bank with God himself. "Living with your loved one before marriage," he concluded, "is like shoplifting from God." My grandmother caught my eye and sighed sadly. After dinner was served, she encouraged me to rethink my cohabitation with my then-partner and return to the Church.

Reflecting on this incredibly uncomfortable experience demonstrated to me that the theological implications of gendered Mormon worthiness go beyond identity politics. Deviation from the destiny laid out for me by the state's gender assignment is, theologically, a result of my own God-granted agency. Performance of sex/gender, body/soul

congruency is a method of becoming closer to God himself, a vital part of Mormon subject formation. Demonstrating pious gender/soul/sex/body congruency is not about simple identification, as in humanist discourses of gender. Rather, it more closely follows the model of agency discussed by Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety*; the moral disciplining of the Mormon body creates the piety, worthiness, and pleasure in conforming to the gender roles, not the other way around.³¹

In the logic of Mormon theology, an internal lack of faith is in part a result of the mismanagement of my mortal embodiment. Part of the reason that the “born this way” language of the marriage equality movement has had so little effect on the Mormon population compared to others is that it directly contradicts very recent and revered theological claims. Any deviation from assigned gender performance cannot be based on an internal sense of self because the soul, the interior of all interiors, is gendered before birth. The physical body simply forms in accordance. Therefore, gendered “maiming” of the body, through medical procedures like abortion or gender-affirming surgery, is so polluting of its purity that it directly betrays the internally and eternally gendered soul. Such pollution can only result in the denial of a temple recommend. Jasbir Puar might argue that in these forms of religious regulation, the Church is enacting control as well as discipline because “while discipline works at the level of identity, control works at the level of affective intensification.”³² While the Church would discourage my identification as “queer” because it buys into a secular rhetoric of sexual orientation and desire, the true problem is the misuse of my bodily capacity and agency. As Church leader Dallin H. Oaks has stated, homosexual relations are “a confusion of what it means to be male or

31. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

32. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), 122.

female.”³³ In discouraging identification with the Other through the language produced by the queer community *and* forbidding physical enactment of sinful internal desires, the Church seesaws between discipline and control, identity and affect, public declarations of self and private desires.

The Marriage Certificate and Periodization

When historians speak of the non-normative Mormon past, they often use the term “peculiar.” The epithet was a popular way to signal the oddity, even the spectacle, that Mormonism posed to the mainstream Protestant American East in the nineteenth century. In his famous book *The Angel and the Beehive*, Armand Mauss proposes that Church history can be described in periods of assimilation—changes to more resemble other American Christians— and retrenchment—self-described opposition to Protestant and secular American values.³⁴ This ebb and flow of reliance on and opposition to norms reflects external pressures, usually from the state, for the Church to conform to American hegemony. Mormons have taken up a difficult historical position: simultaneously being white and struggling for whiteness; being actively pushed out of Missouri and then pushing Native Americans out of what is now Utah; striving for both mainstream acceptance and religious particularism.³⁵ In the late nineteenth century, the conflict between Mormons and other white Americans culminated in an ultimatum posed by the

33. Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/10/same-gender-attraction?lang=eng>.

34. Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

35. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.

government: stop practicing polygamy or leave.³⁶ Many, including members of my family, fled to Mexico when the Church leadership issued a statement declaring that polygamous unions were no longer compatible with the faith.³⁷

The history of polygamy was largely covered up by Church historians between its denouncement in the 1890s and Leonard J. Arrington's term as Church Historian in the 1970s. He is often recognized as the first person to "open up" the Church archives to non-members and to release more sensitive information regarding the history of prominent figures like Joseph Smith.³⁸ Today, some of the archives are also digitized; the Church curates the Joseph Smith Papers, where one can find documents relating to the early history of the Church. Some information on your (the reader's) family members, Mormon or not, can be found on the Church-members-only FamilySearch.org or its more popular, "secular" cognate, Ancestry.com. While not owned by the Church directly, Ancestry.com is owned and operated by Mormons who became invested in genealogy through their faith.³⁹ The site allows users to create profiles for deceased relatives and find, label, or upload their own documents that prove relationships between the dead.

Each profile, however, only allows one spouse per person. Ironically, figures like my great-great-great-grandfather have multiple profiles, one for each spouse. Some contain all available information

36. For information on this process, see the *Reynolds v. United States* Supreme Court case of 1879.

37. Wilford Woodruff, "Official Declaration 1," *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979 edition), 291.

38. The impact of Leonard J. Arrington and his fall from the graces of Church leadership is described in various essays appearing in *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, edited by George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

39. Wikipedia, s.v. "Ancestry.com," last modified Oct. 9, 2020, 20:11, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancestry.com>.

about him on the website, and some do not. The problem of polygamy (or of monogamy, depending on how you look at it) pervades the site's cataloguing system. The inability of the Church to either hide or reconcile its own past is evident in this discrepancy. As a result, the lives of some of the most important and influential early members⁴⁰ are distorted and misrepresented. The heteronormativity that the Church today so desperately clings to in its mission to both be accepted by outsiders and bring outsiders in skews its ability to catalogue its own peculiarity. This crisis in the catalogue is like the one posed by the ever-changing standards and practices of gender and sexuality that make cataloguing and finding queer experience so difficult.⁴¹ It's clear here that the organization of the archive itself is political: if Mormons were to design a user interface that allows more than one spouse, they would reignite the spectacle, or for some even confirm the suspicion, that they still believe in and practice polygamy. Instead, the spouse for which there was a legal marriage certificate is featured on the profile. Spiritual marriages with no proper legal documentation are disregarded.

There is no solution for this problem in terms of Ancestry.com that does not expose the website's affiliation with the faith, risking its profit and user rates in the process. However, Church officials and members find comfort in the largely accepted historical divisions between the "early" Church and the "modern" Church. Mormonism is centered on the claim of ongoing revelation. Beginning with Joseph Smith, the mantle of First President has been passed down with all theocratic authority over the Church. It is similar to the power of the pope: not

40. Polygamy was a financial difficulty and thus only a certain few men were able to provide for multiple wives. Polygamous marriage was also considered to be a sort of "special calling" that some men were especially instructed to pursue as part of their religious duty to God.

41. Drabinski. "Queering the Catalog."

entirely unchecked (quorums of apostles also contribute to theological, political, and official positioning), but incredibly effective. Their claims to sovereignty simultaneously rest on liberal humanist discourse embedded within the teachings and culture of Mormonism as well as in the careful periodization between Mormons who were “peculiar” and Mormons who are almost unbearably *normal*.

Mormon leadership’s claim to sovereignty lies in this historically insufficient and politically intentional archival organization. Kathleen Davis argues that modern claims to statehood are based in logics of juridical precedent in which the details that affirm historical presence and ownership are acknowledged while details of transhistorical difference between the past nation and present nation-state are grounded in a carefully constructed division.⁴² This division, in her study, marks the difference between the “medieval” and the “modern” in categorizations and interpretations of English literature for British national interests. In the case of the Mormons, however, demarcating the “early” Church from today’s Church separates the faith from the racialized and politicized practice of polygamy that historically barred access to whiteness and normative sociality, according to scholars of race and Mormonism like Max Perry Mueller and W. Paul Reeve.⁴³ The Church’s periodization takes President Wilford Woodruff’s declaration against polygamy as its turning point. Rhetorically, the 1890 Manifesto, and the loss of one of the key tenets of the faith, marks an early commitment

42. Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

43. For recent scholarship on the racialization of early Mormons, see Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color*, Max Perry Mueller’s *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), and Peter Coviello’s *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

to assimilation and the entrance into the privileges of nineteenth-century whiteness that had eluded the faith community since before Missouri.⁴⁴

There's a nebulous community of people in the United States that I lovingly refer to as the Bitter Ex-Mormons. Many of them (us) are academics, punks, activists, queers. Whether our difference from our families is innate, manifesting from the inside out, or our own agential misgivings, failing to internalize exterior discipline and control, most of us consider ourselves traumatized or disgraced by the Church. Many us no longer identify as "faithful" or "practicing" Mormons, but as "ethnically" or "culturally" Mormon.⁴⁵ Mormons and non-Mormons outside the community tend to take this phrasing offensively; after all, it's understood that there is *no one* whiter than Mormons, and "ethnic" is often perceived as coded language for "brown." Non-Mormons think that by using this term we're playing into the Mormon claims to victimization, appropriating the aesthetics and pathos of histories of ethnic cleansing and racial discrimination. These non-Mormons tend to associate Mormon history with polygamy, which is more easily imagined as a story of Mormon patriarchal violence against women than as a story of state violence against Mormons, or even as part of the history of the creation of a racially coded Mormon culture.

Polygamy is still the fascination of historians and feminist theorists of Mormonism today. Often, the field recreates the centuries-old question of "was polygamy good for Mormon women?" Reading through this literature, from the 1800s polemics like Metta Victor's *Mormon Wives*, which calls polygamy "a thing more loathsome and poisonous

44. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 186.

45. Devan Mark Hite, "The 'Queer' God(s) of Mormonism: Considering an Inclusive, Post-Heteronormative LGBTQI Hermeneutics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 64, nos. 2–3 (2013): 52–65.

to social and political purity”⁴⁶ than slavery, to *Salt Lake Tribune* articles that vehemently deny or affirm *just how many* wives Joseph Smith sealed himself to before his death, can become tiresome. The history of Mormon sexual deviance (it was, in fact, so deviant as to “require” government intervention and the incarceration of practitioners in Utah) presents a specific kind of pleasure to a Bitter Ex-Mormon like me; the ability to cross-identify with my own ancestors is the only chance I feel I have left to identify at all with my biological family, to reclaim Mormonism for myself on my own terms.⁴⁷

The first Mormon in my family, Parley P. Pratt, was a famous early apostle. He wrote several hymns and the famous *A Voice of Warning*, was an excellent missionary, and even ran a newspaper in New York City in the mid-1800s called *The Prophet*.⁴⁸ I got a job at the Brooklyn Historical Society shortly after moving to New York. Their archive and library consist only of Brooklyn history, including a prominent genealogy section. Out of sheer habit, I checked the P’s for any record of my line. I audibly yelped when I found a manila folder labeled “Parley Parker Pratt” on the bookshelf. I opened it and carefully slid the only item, an actively disintegrating, small blue book, onto a nearby table. This first edition copy of *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* is older than the building that houses it. I go back to visit it occasionally when I’m homesick; I must admit that’s not very often.

There’s a special joy in my family’s legacy crumbling in my fingers, a perverse pleasure I take in watching the memory of the man who I learned to respect highly as a child sit idle and unnoticed on a shelf next

46. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, *Mormon Wives: A Narrative of Facts Stranger than Fiction* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856).

47. The concept of “cross-identify” I take from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 1–20.

48. The title page of the primary source is missing, so here I refer to the republication information: Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1874).

to the Pratt family that *really* matters in New York. Carolyn Steedman in *Dust* states that “there is a particular pleasure in willfully asserting of a text so intimately connected by its authorship to the practice of deconstruction.”⁴⁹ In this case, I find pleasure in the intimacy of the life and death in that book; it is literally deconstructing itself before my eyes, a process I encourage every time I lay the oils of my queer fingers on its pages, even as I find new ways to bind my own narrative to the one it houses on the bottom shelf of the genealogical section.

It was this draw of the archive that first inspired my interest in genealogy when I was a child, the reason I was gifted floppy disks of dead peoples’ personal information while my cousins received gift cards to the mall. Today, I love to declare to my friends, “I’m a better Mormon than anyone else in my family.” It’s a joke, mostly, because by today’s standards, I’m a horrible, awful, unworthy Mormon. But in the archive, I found the connective tissue between my life and the lives of my ancestors and began, unwittingly, to identify with them in new, more peculiar ways than I ever imagined possible as a child.

Most notably, about five or six years ago I became interested in the women in my lineage who were in polygamist marriages. When I came out as queer in my first year of college, I also started practicing polyamory. This more recently developed attack against monogamy is usually cited as specifically juxtaposed to the heteronormative institution of marriage, but I was inspired to “convert” to it because of the autobiography of my great-great-grandmother Bertha Wilcken Pratt.⁵⁰ After an abusive monogamous marriage to a man in Salt Lake City, she was granted divorce by the Church and moved to Chihuahua, Mexico to marry her sister’s husband, Helaman Pratt. In the account of her life

49. Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 10.

50. Bertha Wilcken Pratt, “Bertha Wilcken Pratt,” Jared Pratt Family Association, http://jared.pratt-family.org/parley_family_histories/bertha-wilcken-autobiography.html.

she wrote shortly before her death in 1947, she said, “Now began a great contrast between this marriage and that other one. I have been recognized, respected, loved, and esteemed as much as any wife could desire without infringing upon the rights of others.”⁵¹ Before I read this, it had not occurred to me that being loved could infringe on anyone else. Since then, it is all I think about when I talk to my partners or anyone else that I or they become involved with. There is something I find conceptually queer in considering love, like the Foucauldian concept of power, as something that exists in a dynamic between entities rather than as something one can simply have, give, or take away. In a way, it is a more significant formation of love because a dynamic is something you must continuously choose to maintain and nourish rather than relying on stagnant incarnations of past selves’ desires. Polygamy and polyamory force us to ask ourselves: do we want love to be an object?

In all reality, Bertha Wilcken Pratt would think me a sinful and disturbed woman—a woman, specifically, even though I haven’t thought of myself as such in years. I have no delusions about the relationship between me, as a living polyamorous queer partner, and her, a deceased heterosexual polygamist wife. I allow myself to be enchanted by this trace of a familial connection between us and extrapolate that trace to a political stance because, as Zeb Tortorici says, “that process of extraction [of queerness from the archives] is more effective if we understand all that we seek through them, and all that we are never quite able to locate, uncover, or grasp within the archives themselves.”⁵² I knew going into her story that I was looking for family. I may never be able to find a “real queer” in my family archive because the Mormon archive is built on the heterosexual logics of reproduction as resembled by the

51. Wilcken Pratt, “Bertha Wilcken Pratt.”

52. Zeb Tortorici, “Archival Seduction: Indexical Absences and Historiographical Ghosts,” *Archive Journal* 5 (Nov. 2015), <http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/archival-seduction/>.

family tree itself. This archival structure forbids any affirmation that my experience of my gendered sexual body is comparable to those of my ancestors. However, when I take into account that family history archives are mutually constituted by Mormon theological and state legal conceptualizations of how humans *should* relate to one another (and themselves) and not necessarily how they *did*, I open the possibility for myself to reclaim pieces of the past that the Church itself has surrendered in its own mission of self-preservation.

My joke-not-joke that I am the best Mormon in my family is not appreciated by my cousins or grandparents. Unlike my family, I have not abandoned the communitarian economics, non-monogamy, or vegetarianism that were so important to nineteenth-century Mormons. Sodomy aside, my lifestyle is arguably more “correct” than the socially isolated capitalist, monogamous, middle-class lives of my cousins when compared to those of our common ancestors like Bertha. Neither my family, nor the modern Church, can get out of the archive what I as a queer person can. In fact, they go to great lengths to cover up the same past I revel in.

The Death Certificate and Consent

“Let us, therefore, as a church and a people, and as Latter-day Saints, offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness; and let us present in his holy temple . . . a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation.”

Doctrine and Covenants 128:22–24

Baptisms for the dead, like polygamy, are Mormon practices that are rooted in the often-unused parts of the New Testament, what we might call a highly curated archive. Early Church leaders like Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery led the Church in the revival of these practices as part of the larger return to a select covenant with God. While speaking of the logics of physical resurrection, Paul asks, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they

then baptized for the dead?”⁵³ In section 127 of Joseph Smith’s *Doctrine and Covenants*, where the ritual is most discussed, he places emphasis on the importance of record-keeping: “When any of you are baptized for your dead, let there be a recorder, and let him be eye-witness of your baptisms; let him hear with his ears, that he may testify of a truth, saith the Lord.”⁵⁴ In the cases of the birth certificate, the temple recommend, and the marriage certificate, the power of the state archive is drawn upon to supplement the power of the Church itself. The records of baptisms for the dead, however, institutionalize a separate archive. This archive is carefully guarded from secular intrusion by being created and stored in the temple itself.

Organizing and performing ordinances for the dead still rely on the outside archives, however. For baptisms or sealings of the family to be done, state-archived information like birthplace, death place, dates, parents’ names, names of spouses, and dates of marriage are necessary. The state information is drawn upon and, through ritual, transformed into another, more sacred archive. This archive deals in the dead exclusively. In a much more literal way than Achille Mbembe intended, these rituals “keep the dead from stirring up trouble” in the present.⁵⁵ A posthumous baptism does not automatically convert a deceased person to Mormonism. Rather, the theology states that it gives their post-mortal soul the opportunity for conversion in the afterlife. Eternity, through the archive and its uses, is collapsed onto the present. The dead retain their ability to consent, make decisions, and relieve their spirit even after death.

Surprisingly, baptisms for the dead cause relatively little legal trouble for the Church. It’s difficult to imagine that the state, which so

53. 1 Corinthians 15:29.

54. *Doctrine and Covenants* 127:6.

55. Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton, et al. (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 24.

carefully presents itself the ultimate life-binding force, would meddle in the politics of dead people that the state itself did not kill. This sacred archive is part of the larger project of preparing for the eschaton. “Early” Mormons were millenarians to the core, helping along the coming of the rapture through conversion and the literal gathering of Zion. Baptisms for the dead are a continued part of this project, a solution for the Church’s inability to convert all of the living. A posthumously baptized person can accept or reject the offer of salvation, but they cannot accept or reject their presence in the archive. They are necessarily implicit in the always-already political, sacred, or secular organization the state, the Church, or the lay archivist subjects them to.

Luckily for the Church and the state, it seems that most people are not interested in excusing themselves from inclusion. The intense interest in genealogy that has made its way to mainstream American culture reveals that people are increasingly interested in “where they’re from.”⁵⁶ Queer negativity theorists like Lee Edelman would argue that this information does nothing more than play into heteronormative logics of reproductivity and “legacy” and distract from contemporary political concerns by rooting them in historical violence and nostalgia.⁵⁷ But it is unlikely that queer theory will detract from the spectacle of death or the greater and more violent spectacle of heterosexuality.

Mormon baptisms for the dead are one of the more eyebrow-raising contemporary practices to the American public. Particularly, my fellow leftists scoff at what seems like an overindulgence of ancestral white pridefulness. At the same time, we read Marx and talk about him as if we had coffee with him last week. We speculate as to what Audre Lorde,

56. Samuel M. Otterstrom, “Genealogy as Religious Ritual: The Doctrine and Practice of Family History in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” in *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts*, edited by Dallen J. Timothy and Jeanne Kay Guelke (New York: Routledge, 2008), 137.

57. For example, see Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3. (Sept. 2012): 453–74.

Mikhail Bakunin, or Malcom X would do if they were alive now. We argue about archives and museums. We want the mummies to go back to Egypt. We want reparations. We are all obsessed with the dead. Some of us imagine we don't believe in the afterlife, but there is no denying we believe in *something* that provides the basis for our righteous indignation when *our* dead are disrespected. Some people pay the county clerk for a death certificate or search FindAGrave.com for their death tourism, some of us visit Haymarket or Stonewall.

When my cousin and I were eight and six our great-grandfather Emerson Pratt, Bertha's middle son, died. His funeral was the first I ever went to. It was an open casket, and my cousin and I were too young to understand the severity of Old Papa "moving on." We became obsessed with his lifeless body. Someone had brought over a stool for the children to step up and kiss him goodbye. We stood next to each other on it.

"I think he's wearing makeup like a girl," she cried.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"Yeah! Look!" She wiped some blush from his cheek and showed it to me. We both started laughing loudly at the absurdity of our Old Papa, *a man*, with makeup on. Our mothers were appalled. They stormed over and pulled us away from the casket and out of the room of women hiding their crying faces in their black shawls. My aunt was the real disciplinarian: "You *cannot* talk about Papa's makeup!"

"Why?"

"Because you shouldn't disrespect the dead."

Conclusion

Two questions spring from the existence of the archive, both state and Church: does the archive control us? Do we, in our un-categorizable self-perceptions and actions, exist in the archive in any meaningful way at all? For queer people, the desire for inclusion is always in tension with the desire to fundamentally change the operations of society. Is it

enough to have a marriage certificate, or should romantic and sexual relationships be defined in new ways that better reflect our lived experiences? When do we declare our gender and to whom? How can we effectively disregard sex? What does it mean to be “Mormon” without a temple recommend? Documentation that supports the heteropatriarchal structure of both the Church and state enforces its power and persuades us to work toward reform, recategorization, and recognition rather than disruption. The family tree, birth certificate, temple recommend, marriage certificate, and death certificate are all part of this cycle. And surely we can all, regardless of identity, find ourselves and stories like ours in the archive if we work hard enough. The theological and political question that is then posed to us is: how should we use the archive as we construct our own worlds around us? As queer people, what do we fight for?

KIT HERMANSON {kh2850@columbia.edu} is a PhD student of religion at Columbia University. Their work revolves around the racial, sexual, and economic self-conceptualizations of radical leftist religious commune members in the nineteenth century.