

QUEER MORMON HISTORIES AND THE POLITICS OF A USABLE PAST

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The relationship between the queer community and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has received considerable attention in the last few decades, along with the overlap between the two communities and the queer Mormon experience. While both scholarly and amateur work on the history and identity of queer Mormons is on the rise (especially ethnographic work on contemporary queer Mormons), there have, as of yet, been no works outlining what kind of arguments are commonly made by people participating in the construction of queer Mormon vernacular histories and what they are trying to achieve with these arguments.¹

Queer Mormon vernacular histories employ arguments about people in the past to construct new ways of being for the future. Vernacular histories include publishing a pamphlet, writing a blog post, or writing an essay in a collection intended for non-academic readership. This work may, in some cases, be done by people with

1. A note on terminology: throughout this paper, I purposefully use the term “queer” to refer to a wide swath of non-heterosexual people (whether cisgender or transgender), including those who may identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, person with same-sex attraction, or a host of other possible terms. I turn to the umbrella term “queer” as a space-saving measure so that I am not constantly reiterating this extensive list of possible identities, as well as in recognition of its utility in scholarship on this and related topics, e.g., “queer theory.” I recognize that “queer,” which is, essentially, a reclaimed slur, is certainly a term that people of any of those categories may not necessarily identify with or might object to; I use it for its expediency, with full realization of these potential problems.

academic training in historical methods; however, more often than not, this is not the case. This does not mean that the authors of such work have not researched substantially on their own, or that they do not interact with academic work on the subject. I examine a variety of sources; many come from archival materials, the LDS LGBTQ organization Affirmation, Instagram accounts, blog posts, YouTube videos, and even advertising for commercial brands. These represent the variety of ways that popular accounts of the past make it to the general public. I focus specifically on material that not only explores the queer Mormon past but makes arguments about what that past means for the future. These materials come from different historical, religious, and political contexts but all seek to use the past to construct new futures. These texts are often written in a more informal register than comparable academic work and are often produced with a specific intention of shifting conversations about queer Mormons in the present. Points of view also vary: not everyone contributing to this vernacular queer Mormon past is themselves queer or even Mormon.

In this mode of engaging history, the past is seen as a resource that can help people to create more inclusive futures for queer Mormons. I aim to outline the parameters and modes of these histories and examine the patterns of their argumentation, using the work of John Boswell as a point of reference. I argue that the patterns evident in Boswell's work on the history of homosexuality are also apparent in many works of queer Mormon vernacular history. Namely, Boswell argues that "between the beginning of the Christian Era and the end of the Middle Ages" attitudes toward same-sex romantic and sexual relationships changed from relative indifference or toleration to active antipathy.² Queer Mormon vernacular histories make a similar framing, arguing

2. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

that early Mormonism was relatively tolerant of homosexuality and that recent antipathy toward it is an aberration.

Queer Mormon vernacular histories go further and argue that the past is proof that the future could be more accepting than the present. I take up David Halperin's charge that "the tendency to refashion past sexual cultures in the image of our own says a lot about our own historical situation, the functioning of contemporary sexual categories, our standard ways of thinking about the past. It is richly informative in its own right."³ I am less interested in whether these vernacular histories are "right" or "wrong" than in what they tell us about contemporary debates about the role of queer people in Mormonism. Some arguments made are more plausible or verifiable than others, but all of them offer value in understanding the ways in which people have sought to use the past to create new futures.

Mormon Conceptions of the Past

In order to understand queer Mormon historical modes, we must first examine the role of history and historical thought in Mormonism more broadly. Mormonism is, as a religious tradition, incredibly invested in history, not only as a means of memorializing the past but of orienting and constructing the self in the present. The verse in Doctrine and Covenants 21 admonishing Joseph Smith that "there shall be a record kept among you" is taken seriously (and literally) by Mormons. Former official LDS Church historian Marlin K. Jensen commented in 2007 that "the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, make clear that 'remembering' is a fundamental and saving principle of the gospel."⁴

3. David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.

4. Marlin K. Jensen, "There Shall Be a Record Kept Among You," *Ensign*, Dec. 2007, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/12/there-shall-be-a-record-kept-among-you?lang=eng>.

Since their earliest days, Mormons have felt that keeping a record of one's past is important and that it can shape the future. Historian Roger D. Launius has argued that "shared experience and misery has been one of the key elements of the Mormon religion."⁵

History is an essential part of the construction of Mormon identity; events like the Missouri persecutions, the progress of settlers to Utah, and other historical moments are often drawn upon as lessons in conduct for the modern day and as a shared, sacred history. This is a history that can even be literally reenacted, with the reenactment often promoted as an opportunity for spiritual growth by participants. These reenactments need not concern events that happened to one's own literal ancestors; once largely the province of pioneer-descended Utah Mormons, reenactments of the Mormon settlers' trek toward Utah have spread as far as Mongolia, where youth constructed handcarts and passed through parts of the Ulaanbaatar countryside labeled with the names of US states that Mormon settlers passed through in the nineteenth century.⁶ In his article "Playing Jane: Re-presenting Black Mormon Memory through Reenacting Black Mormon Past," Max Perry Mueller argues that, similarly, Black Mormons use recreations of the past to affirm both Black and Mormon identity and tie themselves to the Church's past in a way that creates a sense of identity important to the present.⁷

The LDS Church's emphasis on genealogical work and its salvific (in terms of temple ordinances performed on behalf of the dead) and practical purposes add to this overall sense of the importance of history

5. Roger D. Launius, "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Mormon Memory, Mormon Myth, and Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 4.

6. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormons Around the Globe Re-enact Pioneer Trek," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 10, 2012, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/54568506-80/dal-lds-zotto-trek.html.csp>.

7. Max Perry Mueller, "Playing Jane: Re-presenting Black Mormon Memory through Reenacting the Black Mormon Past," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 513-61.

within Mormonism. In the temple ritual of baptism for the dead, the past becomes present as those who have already passed on are offered a baptism and a blessing in their name. Additionally, journal-keeping is encouraged by Church authorities in order to preserve one's own history for future generations. All of these actions and encouragements demonstrate the ways in which history is uniquely valued in Mormonism, specifically a genealogical form of history in which one seeks to interact or identify with one's ancestors, be they literal ancestors or figurative ones. By this, I mean that both people one is literally descended from as well as famed figures from the Mormon past are treated functionally as ancestors. In the case of queer Mormon vernacular histories, the interaction and identification lean toward the figurative, in that many of these histories seek out past queerness as evidence that queer Mormons have always existed and as proof that the Church could change its stances on queer relationships and identity in the future.

Queer Mormon vernacular histories clearly draw from this Mormon sense of history along with a queer sensibility that also values connection to the past. Joseph Smith's well-known King Follett Sermon has often been summed up by Lorenzo Snow's infamous couplet: "as man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."⁸ We can perhaps imagine a similar concept at work in queer Mormon vernacular histories: "as things once were, things may now be." This vernacular history is not merely the kind of list-making of famous past figures that is often associated with LGBTQ histories but a more holistic endeavor that attempts to discover not just individuals but their contexts.

Queer Mormon histories work not just to draw on past events as resources for the present but to preserve present events for the future,

8. Gerald N. Lund, "Is President Lorenzo Snow's oft-repeated statement—'As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be'—accepted as official doctrine by the Church?" *Ensign*, Feb. 1982, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1982/02/i-have-a-question/is-president-snows-statement-as-man-now-is-god-once-was-as-god-now-is-man-may-be-accepted-as-official-doctrine.html?lang=eng>.

that their histories might serve a similar purpose for someone else. Commenting on his own journal-keeping, former Affirmation director James Kent wrote that “if this history can survive past my own lifetime, it can be of benefit to those who follow me. Should the future shine bright and give total equality of opportunity to non-heterosexuals, they can look back to a time when that was a journey of hope. Should the struggle continue far into the future, they will know from the past that they are not alone.”⁹ This is part of the importance of a queer Mormon vernacular history, according to its authors: it gives queer Mormons a historical context from which to evaluate progress or to reflect on the experiences of those who came before them. Recordkeeping is valuable not only because it preserves a record for one’s posterity; as Marlin K. Jensen noted, it takes on a form of sacred responsibility to future generations. We must also think about context here; Affirmation is a group for LGBTQ Mormons that comprises both former and active members, seeking to provide space for both. As such, it is unsurprising that someone in this context would speak to traditional Mormon thought on memory and history.

Traditional LDS recordkeeping has also contributed to the documentation of queer Mormons. In Utah Gay and Lesbian Community Center member Connell “Rocky” O’Donovan’s 1989 Gay Pride Day speech to Salt Lake City media members, he remarked that “often people first ask us ‘Is there even any Gay history in Utah?’ to which we reply emphatically ‘Yes!’ We are fortunate in our state because of the predominant view here that history should be recorded, and then these records should be maintained. Therefore there are several very large collections of private journals, newspapers, directories, court records etc. around this state, all of which give us clues and facts about

9. James Kent, “Keeping a Journal and Other Thoughts,” *Affirmation*, accessed Jan. 15, 2014. This post is no longer available on the Affirmation website at the time of publication.

who our gay foremothers + gay forefathers were.”¹⁰ O’Donovan, who was raised in the LDS Church, has written extensively on both LGBT and LDS histories as well as their overlap. This has included comparative work on the treatment of queer Mormons and the treatment of African American Mormons prior to the lifting of the priesthood ban in 1978.¹¹ O’Donovan, in his Gay Pride Day speech, draws a clear connection between queer history and Mormon history, noting the “predominant view” in Utah that “history should be recorded.”

Similarly, in an article originally published in the Affirmation newsletter *Affinity* in 1982 and reproduced on the Affirmation website, Ina Mae Murri reflects on the Mormon legacy of genealogy and recordkeeping for future generations, writing that “I have in my possession a folder in which my mother assembled all the family histories she had on both her and my father’s side. . . . [T]his also gives me food for thought as I look at my life and what I want my descendants to know about my life. Probably we have all heard stories in our families about an aunt, uncle, cousin, or some other relative who the family keeps quiet about. . . . [D]o we as homosexuals fit in the category in our family where they do not know our true story?”¹² Family history is

10. Rocky O’Donovan, “1989 Gay Pride Day Speech” (speech notes, 1989), Accn. 1918, box 23, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. Capitalization, punctuation, etc., present in original.

11. Connell O’Donovan, “I Would Confine Them to Their Own Species’: LDS Historical Rhetoric and Praxis Regarding Marriage Between Whites and Blacks” (paper presented at Sunstone West symposium, Cupertino, Calif., Mar. 28, 2009), available at http://www.connellodonovan.com/black_white_marriage.html.

12. Ina Mae Murri, “Family’ History: Leaving a Legacy of Truth,” *Affirmation*, accessed Jan. 15, 2014, http://www.affirmation.org/history/leaving_a_legacy_of_truth.shtml. This post is no longer available on the Affirmation website at the time of publication.

seen by Murri as something that connects people to each other, and she worries that a lack of attention to queer Mormon histories will result in people not truly knowing their kin.

These vernacular histories are intended to have public audiences. “Prologue: An Examination of the Mormon Attitude Toward Homosexuality” is one of the earliest sources we have in print of a gay Mormon making an argument for a queer Mormon usable past. The pamphlet was written by a gay Brigham Young University student, Cloy Jenkins, who was responding to a psychology professor who saw homosexuality as “pathology,” with the help of a BYU instructor, Lee Williams.¹³ In the words of the pamphlet, “The influence of the homosexual in the church has been positive and profound from top to bottom, from the temple sessions to the favorite Mormon hymns we sing each Sunday, from the Tabernacle Broadcasts to the welfare system.”¹⁴ This genealogical bent is crucial to understanding the ways in which queer Mormons navigate usable pasts by making queer members an inseparable part of Mormon identity.

The queer Mormon usable past spans beyond what we might think of as the traditional temporal domain of the LDS Church. In a 1988 pamphlet entitled “Homosexuality and Scripture from a Latter-Day Saint Perspective,” it is traced back to Book of Mormon times. Pamphlet author Alan David Lach examines varying attitudes toward same-sex intimacy in the ancient Middle East, arguing that “if a more relaxed attitude toward homosexuality did exist among the pre-exilic Hebrews, the Book of Mormon peoples would have brought it with them to the

13. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 85.

14. Cloy Jenkins, *Prologue: An Examination of the Mormon Attitude toward Homosexuality* (Provo: Prometheus Enterprises, 1978), 55, accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

new world.”¹⁵ Further, he argues that a global turn against same-sex intimacy occurred “during the period the LDS call the ‘great apostasy,’” implicitly linking anti-homosexuality attitudes with a period regarded in Mormon thought as a sort of spiritual dark ages.¹⁶

This pamphlet demonstrates the sort of thinking that reappears throughout materials that engage with creating a vernacular queer Mormon history: if homosexuality was not reproached (or was reproached less severely) by the historical Church, be it the Church in the 1950s or the Church before the birth of Christ, then queer Mormons can be legitimately woven into a sacred Mormon past, with attendant rights and responsibilities. If Mormonism is the restoration of God’s true Church upon the earth, this narrative goes, and if homosexuality was not seen as reprehensible during the time that this Church was originally upon the earth, or in earlier periods of the restoration, then the modern Church has no justification for current policies that penalize homosexual activity. Later in this same pamphlet, Lach rebukes Mormon apostle Dallin H. Oaks for claiming in an interview that the Church has always condemned homosexuality, arguing that “only recently, within the last quarter-century, have apostles and prophets made explicit statements condemning homosexuality per se.”¹⁷

These materials occasionally create an argument for a queer Mormon past based on absence of reference to it. Fewer direct references to homosexuality in Church materials in the past, this narrative commonly goes, may be attributed to greater tolerance for homosexuality by Church leaders. Lach makes the argument that Joseph Smith only refrained from openly condoning homosexuality

15. Alan David Lach, *Homosexuality and Scripture from a Latter-day Saint Perspective* (Los Angeles: Affirmation/Gay & Lesbian Mormons, 1988), 15–16, accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

16. Lach, 17.

17. Lach, 26.

because it would have been too distracting from his overall mission, writing, “What if Joseph Smith, for instance, had published a revelation claiming heavenly sanction of homosexuality? Its effect would have been explosive—enough to disrupt the reformation before it began.”¹⁸

A usable past is inferred not only through absence but also from instances where Mormons were punished for homosexuality but less harshly than they may have been today. One example of this can be found in the work of Robert Rees, who has written extensively for over two decades on LGBT Mormon issues and has served as an LDS bishop.¹⁹ Rees writes in a 2000 pamphlet entitled “In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium”: “I believe we have become less tolerant of homosexual relations. Fifty years ago . . . a music teacher was released from the faculty at Ricks College for homosexual behavior. A counselor in this man’s stake presidency wrote to the First Presidency asking what action should be taken. President J. Reuben Clark recorded the following in his office diary: ‘I said thus far we had done nothing more than drop them from the positions they had.’”²⁰ These treatments are then contrasted unfavorably with current threats of excommunication, disfellowshipping, or other punitive measures. Again, the argument conveyed is that if things once were a certain way, there is nothing to prevent them from being so again in the future. However, these writers often envision not merely a return to this

18. Lach, 27.

19. “Robert A. Rees,” *No More Strangers*, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/robert-a-rees/>.

20. Robert A. Rees, “‘In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See’: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium” (paper presented at Family Fellowship, Salt Lake City, Utah, Feb. 27, 2000), accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. This paper was subsequently published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 137–51.

quasi-acceptance but for this past state to be used as a launching point toward brighter futures, whatever they may be envisioned to be.

Madam Pattirini

One key example of vernacular queer Mormon histories is the wide-ranging use of Madam Pattirini, a famous character played by Brigham Morris Young, one of LDS President Brigham Young's many children. He served two missions in Hawaii and was one of the founders of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, the forerunner of the current Young Men program. However, Young is probably most known today for his performance persona of Madam Pattirini in part because of the popularity of this figure in queer Mormon histories. As Pattirini, Young wore dresses and sang opera arias in a falsetto. Some of the vernacular histories I examine use anachronistic terms like "drag" and similar contemporary terms to discuss Madam Pattirini, which allows us to understand what modes and practices of queerness are being put to work in discussion of Pattirini. In vernacular histories, Madam Pattirini is an example of a purported modern Mormon hypocrisy or another way in which prior Mormons were more lenient toward queerness.

Modern interlocutors have often framed Pattirini as an instance of socially accepted "drag" performance, one used today in primarily queer subcultures. A post on the blog *Indie Ogden* is an example of this phenomenon.²¹ Blog author Whitney gets into Young's personal history, drawing attention to his parentage and writing that "I was fairly shocked when I came across this bit of information and also very happy at the same time because it is truly a beautiful thing to see a person no matter their faith, or in this case, 'who's your daddy,' live unabashedly bold and fearless."²² Pattirini is constructed here as proof that queerness

21. Whitney, "Indie Ogden History: Madam Pattirini," *Indie Ogden Utah*, June 3, 2012. This post is no longer available on Indie Ogden website at the time of publication.

22. Whitney.

in the form of drag performances was once tolerated in Mormonism and that it could be tolerated more openly once again.

Young has been memorialized under official auspices like that of Utah Pride Center. In a section of their site called “Queer Utah Ancestors,” Utah Pride Center memorializes Young along several other LDS and non-LDS Utah residents, writing that “[t]he historical evidence points only to Young cross-dressing as public entertainment, but he paved the way for later cross-dressing entertainers who appeared in Utah, some of whom were LGBT.”²³ This is a careful parsing of Young’s legacy; he is not equated with drag performers or with transgender people but is seen as a forebear to whom LGBT people more broadly owe a debt of gratitude.

An Instagram account called @lgbt_history makes a similar claim. After giving a sketch of Young’s life more broadly, the account notes that while he was not “a drag queen in the modern sense” he “crossed Mormon gender barriers.”²⁴ Moreover, the account notes that Young was a streetcar driver, an occupation associated in the nineteenth century with homosexuality, and that he drove a route that included the Wasatch Municipal Baths, a popular cruising ground for men seeking sex with men.²⁵

A YouTube channel called LGBT Snapshots, which profiles various LGBT people from history, has also featured Madam Pattirini. In the video description, the channel’s creators wrote: “We’ve chosen Madam

23. “Queer Utah Ancestors,” *Utah Pride Center*, accessed Mar. 24, 2019. This post is no longer available on the Utah Pride Center website at the time of publication. You can find more information about Brigham Morris Young at “Brigham Morris Young: Son of a prophet, ‘Qween’ of the highest order,” *Latter Gay Stories*, Feb. 13, 2019, <https://lattergaystories.org/brighammorris/>.

24. @lgbt_history, “Madam Pattirini (a.k.a. Brigham Morris Young) (January 18, 1854–Feb. 20, 1931), c. 1900. Photo by C.R. Savage, c/o Church History Library,” Instagram photo, Jan. 18, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsyHUGpHmM4/>.

25. @lgbt_history, Jan. 18, 2019.

Pattirini as this week's Transgender Story, though we don't know for certain whether Brigham Morris Young was actually transgender, or whether Madam Pattirini was the feminine expression of a gay man or even simply a character created by a straight man for entertainment."²⁶ The video's creators walk a careful line; though they are featuring Young and Madam Pattirini as a "transgender story," they admit that there are other possibilities for how Young related to the character of Madam Pattirini. This struggle over terminology in relationship to historical identity is something that resurfaces in other discussions of LGBTQ Mormon history, as we will see later.

A particularly interesting element of the Madam Pattirini case study is the use of Pattirini's image for an Ogden, Utah liquor distillery's brand of gin. Referring to Pattirini as a "drag diva," an article from the *Ogden Standard-Examiner* mentions that Young was "one of Brigham Young's sons" and lauds the move on the distillery's part as "bringing a little-known piece of Mormon history to light."²⁷ A *Salt Lake Tribune* article similarly states that "Utah liquor distillers often enjoy poking fun at Utah's conservative Mormon culture, and the newest product from Ogden's Own Distillery—Madam Pattirini Gin—is no exception."²⁸ Naming the gin after Madam Pattirini is seen not as a neutral branding decision but as something meant to rattle conservative Mormons, presumably on queer issues. In this way, Young and the persona of Pattirini are just one of many contested queer Mormon histories picked over by both Mormons and non-Mormons in search of a usable past.

26. LGBT Snapshots, "LGBT Snapshots: Madam Pattirini," YouTube, May 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShMiJeAI2Z8>.

27. Makenzie Koch, "Ogden Distillery Pays Homage to Mormon Drag Diva with New Gin," *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, May 6, 2017, https://www.standard.net/news/business/ogden-distillery-pays-homage-to-mormon-drag-diva-with-new/article_1f36073a-73c3-5d2d-82a5-0557ec5e0c2a.html.

28. Kathy Stephenson, "Utah Distiller Introduces Madam Pattirini Gin, Named for a Little-Known Mormon Drag Diva," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 3, 2017, <https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=5222043&itype=CMSID>.

Gay By Any Other Name

What people call themselves, past and present, can tell us a lot about how they think about themselves. As the case of Pattirini has shown, terminology can be a point of some controversy in queer Mormon vernacular histories. Essentially, the debate becomes whether it is appropriate to apply the adjectives “gay,” “homosexual,” “transgender,” or similar terms to persons who lived before these terms had any meaning. Yale historian John Boswell freely used the term “gay” for medieval and ancient subjects who expressed a preference for same-sex romantic and sexual relationships, while recognizing it was a label impossible for them to apply to themselves, “making the question anachronistic and to some extent unanswerable.”²⁹

In professional Mormon histories, these terms are similarly fraught. D. Michael Quinn’s *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* is a book that must be acknowledged when discussing queer Mormon pasts. Quinn argues that same-sex relationships were relatively tolerated in Mormonism until the mid-twentieth century. Though it is a scholarly work, Quinn’s text has had a tremendous influence on vernacular histories, in part by interesting specific Mormon figures who had same-sex relationships. *Same-Sex Dynamics* influenced this debate over language in part by introducing the idea that names and concepts for behaviors had changed over time.³⁰ Some works, especially those emerging after this book, do note that the term “gay” has not always existed as it does now, and that people referred to historically with that term would not necessarily have recognized it or seen themselves as members of such a specific category of identity, while arguing that persons with a disposition

29. John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xxv; Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 41.

30. D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

toward same-sex attraction, in some form, have existed continuously throughout history even when it was not a basis for sexual identity.

The tension between a belief in transhistorical “homosexuality” and an obligation to restrict the use of the term to modern contexts appears in numerous vernacular treatments. For example, Seth Anderson, in a post on the blog *No More Strangers* presenting a timeline of Mormon attitudes toward homosexuality, wrote, “On a personal level, I do believe that homosexual men and women not just ‘homosexual acts’ have existed throughout all of human history. We have the privilege to look back in time with our late twentieth and early twenty-first century historical lens and can see things that seem ‘gay’ but we cannot impose that identity on a person who never identified as ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual.’”³¹ This distinction between “homosexual men and women” and “homosexual acts” nonetheless runs into Anderson’s insistence that even though said men and women have “existed throughout all of human history,” it is not appropriate to impose that identity on them. This paradox is left unresolved.

It is important to note that the acts/identity distinction has been a tremendously important one in the history of Mormon thought on homosexuality, not just in queer circles. Taylor Petrey notes that “the question of labels remained a preoccupation” even in quite recent discussions of homosexuality among the Mormon hierarchy.³² This issue has been a long-standing one in Mormonism, with debate over whether terms like “gay” or “lesbian” should be used at all, as they may imply that same-sex desire is a fixed part of a person rather than a behavior that is subject to change.

31. Seth Anderson, “Timeline of Mormon Thinking About Homosexuality,” *No More Strangers* (blog), Dec. 8, 2013, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/timeline-of-mormon-thinking-about-homosexuality/>.

32. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 195.

Conclusion

Queer Mormon vernacular histories draw on a usable past that is influenced by a Mormon emphasis on the value of history and a mode of recovering queer pasts. These pasts are then used to imagine more inclusive futures for queer Mormons, based on the idea that queer Mormons were once more tolerated by the LDS Church and could be once again. These draw on genealogies, archival sources, and other memory-making tools to present narratives and characters that challenge contemporary heteronormative thinking. Such constructions of history point to individuals, imagined historical contexts, and contemporary debates to tell an alternative counter-history to a master narrative of uniform, universal heterosexuality in the Mormon past. These stories seek to integrate queer Mormons into a more general Mormon history, to normalize queer identities and practices as part of the past, and to gesture toward another, more imaginative future. The point here is not to fact-check these histories, though that has its place, but to explore the ways that queer Mormons operationalize the past in distinctively Mormon ways. Using the logic of precedent and an attachment to Mormon storytelling, queer vernacular histories construct a usable past for a livable future.

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