Peculiar No More?

K. Mohrman. *Exceptionally Queer: Mormon Peculiarity and U.S. Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. Paper: $30.00. ISBN: 978-1-5179-1129-4.

Reviewed by Benjamin E. Park

It is a common adage that Mormons are a "peculiar people." The phrase, taken from the Bible, is meant to imply that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints paved their own path in establishing a distinct culture. The practice of polygamy, belief in theocracy, and other unique principles marginalized the faith throughout the nineteenth century, only to give way to a slow but inevitable march toward cultural assimilation in the twentieth. That is the general story, anyway.

More recently, scholars have taken this argument a step further by arguing that early Mormonism's peculiarity could be categorized as "queer"—not to mean an attachment to or embrace of homosexuality, but that Mormons' anti-monogamy, anti-capitalist, and, at least in Joseph Smith's day, racially universalist beliefs and practices placed them outside normative culture. (It does not hurt that the "Mormons are queer!" slogan is countercultural enough to draw laughs and highlight a juxtaposition with the Latter-day Saint institution's current anti-queer policies.) The faith's more recent assimilationist move, therefore, can be cast as a diversion from the Church's first generations.[1]

K. Mohrman, in her provocative new book, argues that this categorization fits well as a narrative arc but fails to capture the story's complexity. This is for several reasons. First, to cast Mormonism as "queer" is to assume a homogenous culture against which the faith transgresses. Such a forced dichotomy, however, overstates the coherency of mainstream

1. Though Mohrman identifies this narrative as endemic in the field, her primary interlocutor is Peter Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

society and overemphasizes its distance from the Latter-day Saint tradition. Second, this marginalized-to-mainstream narrative arc exaggerates the changes that took place within the faith following the 1890 manifesto on polygamy. Historians must do better, Mohrman argues, at demonstrating the congruities within the movement (157–66).[2]

Third, and most importantly, Mohrman posits that in casting Mormons as "others" in the United States—"queer"—historians have understated the extent to which the religion appropriated, expanded, and cemented broader standards of heterosexual and racial normativity. By drawing on "feminist, queer of color, and critical and comparative theories of race, colonialism, and religion to frame its examination of Mormonism," Mohrman explains, we can see that "ascendant white American nationalist formations" found root in even the most unique communities (14–15). The tradition that Joseph Smith founded was not a complete break with American culture but rather posed a particular "assemblage" of cultural traits, ingredients that were in wider use but now compiled in a "peculiar" recipe. Mohrman argues that the difference between Mormons and Americans was in degree, not kind. They perpetuated, rather than dissolved, ideas of manifest destiny, white supremacy, and gender roles.

By zeroing in on the language of Mormon peculiarity, Mohrman takes aim at scholars of the faith as much as its adherents. "The discursive construction" of Mormons as "queer" is, in the end, "itself a racializing civilizational assemblage in order to recenter the production and management of unexceptional . . . queer subjects" (305). Historians, Mohrman prods, have only fulfilled such an agenda when they reaffirm its narrative.

Mohrman backs up her claims through two strengths. First, she rejects traditional periodization and instead offers a sweeping history of

2. Though she does not cite him, this charge is similar to one that Grant Underwood made in an unfortunately overlooked article nearly four decades ago. Underwood, "Re-visioning Mormon History," *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (Aug. 1986): 403–26.

Mormonism that spans two centuries. This enables her to demonstrate symmetries within the faith rather than just generational changes. Throughout its entire existence, she shows, Mormonism has benefitted from its privileges as a community with white, heterosexual, and capitalistic priorities. Yes, polygamy was a challenge to monogamy, but it ended up reaffirming traditional gender roles (39–42); yes, the United Order was meant to critique the free market system, but its consistent failures reveal underlying capitalistic principles within the community (73–83). And while scholarship has ably demonstrated how Mormons were cast as racially "other," the Latter-day Saints still drew from a racial overlap with Anglo-Protestant citizens that was not available to African American, Native American, and Chinese American residents.

In the twentieth century, the "Mormon peculiarity discourse" evolved to emphasize the faith's commonalities with its host nation, though once again in a way to prove United States exceptionalism. At first, Mormons appealed to white American citizenship through their anti-communism. This included leadership's open hostility to socialism, an infusion of capitalistic rhetoric in Mormon theology, and a capitalist reinterpretation of Church history. Then, mid-century Mormons expanded white supremacy, American nationalism, and imperialism by shifting to the color-blindness rhetoric that came to dominate the contemporary United States. Indeed, Americans came to embrace Mormonism as a valuable conservative institution pre-1978 not despite its racial policies but regardless of them, and sometimes even because of them. The assimilation of Mormonism between the 1960s and 1980s, Mohrman notes, was "an important driver in the evolution of white supremacy's survival as a fundamental component of U.S. nationalism and imperial policy," as they moved from racial difference and segregation to color-blindness and equal opportunity (235).

The final chapter of *Exceptionally Queer* shifts the discussion once again to marriage. The legalization of same-sex marriage and decriminalization of polygamy, she posits, "were not watershed victories for 'sexual freedom' but rather signal a reassertion of heterosexuality,

monogamy, marriage, and, ultimately, whiteness as vested interests of the nation-state" (273). Using the Mormon peculiarity discourse as a lens, she offers a view of the debate that shows how these judicial rulings did not grant extensive sexual liberty but instead broadened regulation for heteronormative practices and rewrote history to emphasize that racial imperialism was left in the nineteenth century.

Mohrman's argument is deliberately provocative and is a welcome and even necessary challenge to the field. It can also be overstated. Some elements of her analysis, like her sophisticated framing of anti-communism as white supremacy, are stronger than others, like her engagement with the anti-ERA movement (257–75). Just as Mohrman is right when she says that scholars have overlooked nuances in their perpetuation of the Mormon peculiarity discourse, she too overemphasizes some elements while understating others when viewing Mormonism solely through the prism of race. And finally, one can agree with Mohrman's smart point that historians have focused too much on the faith's uniqueness while also feeling that Mohrman's counter-narrative similarly magnifies symmetries.

But such critiques are common when engaging a deliberatively provocative book. *Exceptionally Queer* is, at its best, a polemic, a term I use in its best sense: a valiant charge to disrupt the field and provoke response. Indeed, Mohrman's appeal for scholars of Mormonism to better utilize the tools of ethnic studies—her postscript is a delightful plea for the robust use of theory—is another sign of maturation within the field of Mormon studies. May such conversations continue.

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