

The “Queer” God(s) of Mormonism: Considering an Inclusive, Post-Heteronormative LGBTQI Hermeneutics

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A handful of studies have recently emerged dealing with Mormonism, its unique set of authoritative texts, and the topic of homosexuality. Some seek to demonstrate how Mormonism might imagine new or alternative theological positions in the Church by deconstructing dominant Latter-day Saint theologies and the verses of scripture that shape them. Specifically, two come to mind (among a handful of examples): Taylor Petrey has written an article titled “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” which was recently published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.¹ In another instance, Seth Payne has written an essay titled “Mormonism and Same-Sex Marriage: Towards a Mormon Theology of Gender,” forthcoming through the *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies*.² What has not been attempted, to my knowledge, is a work that deals with the “everyday theologies” of LGBTQ Latter-day Saints, their families/allies, and those who defend more traditional theological (and political) positions.

Primarily, such a work would seek to communicate the stories of LGBTQ Latter-day Saints by gathering and presenting data using a narrative, qualitative approach. Narratives from eight to ten LGBTQ Mormons, their families/allies, and even those who challenge them, may then serve as the impetus for both a systematic and thoroughgoing examination of Mormon theology in context. The present paper will demonstrate both (i) what an affirming, LGBTQ Mormon hermeneutic might *look* like, from what I am calling both “high” and “everyday” theological positions, and (ii) a brief demonstration of such from interviews with three New York City-based LGBTQ Latter-day Saints.

THE NEED FOR THIS STUDY

Most gay-affirming biblical hermeneutical projects tend to investigate three concerns: (i) what might be viable interpretations of what the Bible “most-likely” seems to say about same-sex, sexual practices,³ (ii) what the principles are upon

1 Taylor Petrey, “Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44 (2011): 106-143.

2 Seth Payne, “Mormonism and Same-Sex Marriage: Toward a Mormon Theology of Gender.” Last modified October 31, 2011, <http://ssrn.com/author=899149>.

3 For example: Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Theodore Jennings Jr., *Plato or Paul?: The Origins of Western Homophobia* (Plymouth: Pilgrim, 2009); Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 2009).

which such readings might become accepted and applied by religious leaders, congregations, and so forth, and (iii) what is it that is being created in the interpretative enterprise itself, and is that “it” ethical?⁴

The third of these concerns has a Mormon appeal. That is, Mormons—especially higher authorities of the Church (i.e., often called “general authorities”)—are usually more interested in the utility of what’s being done with beliefs, theologies, and scriptural texts over the substance or textual “truth” of what’s being read.⁵ This approach can be both advantageous and unfavorable to the gay Mormon hermeneutical project, mainly because behind the primary consideration of the “what’s being done” with interpretive readings is the larger question of “what’s promoting faith?” (i.e., what promotes allegiance to the teachings of the Church).⁶ Alternative hermeneutics are often considered to be decidedly anti-faithful because it is believed that faith is only represented acceptably or accurately if such agrees with the collective ethos within Mormonism as prescribed by general authorities.⁷ Nevertheless, there exists enough variation from within the faithful body of the Church on this issue that the question of how we are *using* our beliefs—specifically as this enterprise comes to resemble a voice of a Christ Mormons have come to know and love—might serve as the primary force that can generate what is necessary to inspire more inclusive positions within Mormonism.

The question may arise: why a Mormon-specific study? Mormons employ a unique approach to theological issues, especially when engaging notions of gender and sexuality. This approach makes traditional hermeneutical responses to these issues inadequate. LDS belief systems are organized in such a way that most in the Church feel quite comfortable taking or leaving biblical verse. More specifically, “Latter-day” revelation overrides “Old” or “New” Testament texts—revelation, which is delivered by the Church’s general authorities, in many cases, with the understanding that such proceeds literally from the mind and mouth of God. Furthermore, Mormonism’s positions on homosexuality stem from a distinctive and organic set of principles. Although discussions dealing with biblical verses are relevant, Mormonism pulls its primary legitimacy from its own scriptures and historical/cultural influences. Both have served to shape its very present—and, at times, severe—anti-gay positions and politics. Briefly, I now want to present a brief

4 For example: Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (University of Chicago, Chicago: 1996); Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (New York/London: T&T Clark Int’l, 2005); Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 2006).

5 All talks by general authorities of the LDS Church are available in full online at www.lds.org.

6 See: Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Potential, Your Privilege,” *Ensign* 41 (2011): 58-61. See also: “Acting on the Truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (Broadcast; delivered by Jan 2012; available on www.lds.org). See also: Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Way of the Disciple,” *Ensign* 39 (2009): 75-78.

7 Henry B. Eyring, “Trust in God, Then Go and Do,” *Ensign* 40 (2010): 70-73. See also: Michael F. Watson, “His Servants, the Prophets,” *Ensign* 39 (2009): 106-108; M. Russell Ballard, “Beware of False Prophets and False Teachers,” *Ensign* 29 (1999): 50-53.

outline of Mormonism's theology of gender, sexuality, and exaltation to show what exactly LGBTQ Mormons might be seeking liberation *from*, and why an affirming, more inclusive LGBTQ hermeneutic would not just be relevant, but desirable.

Before moving forward, we might note that Mormon-exclusive scriptures are entirely silent on the issue of same-sex sexual practices—even considering allusions to such. The only exception might be in the Book of Mormon, which includes a scripture that references a “sin” to be like that of “Sodom,”—one which resembles closely a verse in Isaiah.⁸ However, this scripture is seldom, if ever, commissioned when dealing with arguments against homosexuality in the Church.

Mormons believe, quite literally, that God is embodied⁹ and capable of reproducing.¹⁰ By extension, Mormons believe God is an example of what human beings may become.¹¹ That is, the ultimate human and divine trajectory—the ontological everything for and by which human beings live—is to grow and become like God: a heavenly Father for the men of the Church, and a heavenly Mother for the women.

Human beings are the embodied spiritual offspring of a heavenly Father and Mother. Furthermore, we are to assume that heavenly Parents, as such, create spiritual offspring by means of the same methods of intercourse known to human experience. Mormonism's heavenly parents participate in an exalted (hetero)sexuality; it is the religious obligation of the committed Mormon to attain godhood—i.e., to become *like* God.¹²

Central to this religious obligation, Mormons are enjoined to marry someone of the opposite sex; it is understood that their marriage will exist after death, continuing “throughout eternity.” After death, like their heavenly Parents, they will procreate offspring, and set those offspring on a similar path toward embodiment, growth, experience, and so forth, so that they may, in turn, inherit exaltation as gods and goddesses themselves.¹³

This theology of gender and procreation is, for Mormons, the comprehensive purpose of existence.¹⁴ Thus, we might see how there really seems to exist nothing as antithetical to Mormonism than the phenomenon of homosexuality as a non-procreative enterprise—not just a sociological or theological phenomenon, but

8 See Isaiah 3:9 and 2 Nephi 13:9. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: LDS Church, 1989).

9 Thomas S. Monson, “The Race of Life,” *Ensign* 42 (2012): 90-93. See also: Russell M. Nelson, “Thanks Be to God,” *Ensign* 42 (2012): 77-79.

10 Quentin L. Cook, “The Doctrine of the Father,” *Ensign* 42 (2012): 33-36.

11 See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” delivered by Gordon B. Hinckley (President of the Church at the time), September 23, 1995. Source: <http://www.lds.org/family/proclamation>.

12 Dallin H. Oaks, “They Spoke to Us: Fundamental to Our Faith,” *Ensign* 41 (2011): 22-37. See also: Thomas S. Monson, “Tears, Trials, Trust, Testimony,” *Ensign* 27 (1997): 9-11; Neal A. Maxwell, “Insights from My Life,” *Ensign* 30 (2000): 52-54.

13 It is common for members of the Church to downplay the literal idea of becoming “gods and goddesses,” at least in contemporary speeches and publications by the general authorities of the Church. However, among many examples of this concept articulated, see: Spencer W. Kimball, “The Lord's Plan for Men and Women,” *Ensign* 5 (1975): 10-12.

14 See again, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (cited above).

a soterio-ontological one (i.e., whereby salvation entails ontology). Furthermore, to deconstruct this fact for the purpose of creating an affirming, gay theology is to dismantle what has become fundamental to Mormonism itself, to a degree that which distinguishes it from other Christian denominations.

Parenthetically, Mormons generally do not believe as much in the traditional conception of a Christian hell (and, by extension, the avoidance of it), as they do in the notion of making it one's focus and goal to become like God, setting up Jesus as the ultimate standard for this. Heaven- and hell-like post-life conditions are understood as temporary locations. The closest semblance to what we see in many Christian conceptions of a permanent heaven and hell is the LDS idea of a temporary, post-mortal “spiritual paradise” or “prison,” where one resides prior to a consummational mass resurrection of the human family, followed by a period of judgment and assignment to three degrees of eternal glory.¹⁵ When all is said and done, a trivial few will be assigned to what Mormons call “outer darkness,” which is a separate location from any of the three degrees of glory, and resembles something of eternal damnation; but homosexuals, to my knowledge, have never been associated with those who will assume such a location as a result of their homosexuality.¹⁶

In all three of these periods, it should be noted, Mormon theology spotlights the importance of ontological growth toward this singular goal—i.e., to become like God, in some cases, assuring one that this optimal condition is available to all faithful members of the Church.¹⁷ The issue of homosexuality is not necessarily one of avoiding a damning afterlife condition, but rather securing that which is most optimal regarding human potential to achieve exalted status.¹⁸ In many cases, it is suggested that if there is anything to avoid, when all is said and done, it is unnecessary unhappiness that results from the breaking of natural laws (that both God and humans are bound to), thus damning one's natural progression.¹⁹ In a sense, one might imagine engaging in homosexuality as a waste of one's time developing one's best potential. Most Mormons understand that opposite-gender sexual activities will (and must) exist in the next life, as necessary to obtaining exalted status as gods and goddesses. The pressure toward this ontological location (needless to say?) cuts right at the heart of the straight-gay paradox in modern-day Mormonism.

In one of the key texts of original LDS scripture we read, “What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether

15 Russell M. Nelson, “Scriptural Witnesses,” *Ensign* 37 (2007): 43-45.

16 For a comprehensive outlining of the “Plan of Salvation” in Mormonism, see the following verses: *Doctrine and Covenants* (D&C) 138:55-56 on “Premortal Life”; D&C 59:23 on “Earth Life”; D&C 138:5-15 on “Spirit World”; D&C 88:14-17 on “Resurrection”; *Book of Mormon* 2 Nephi 9:15-17 on “Final Judgment”; D&C 76:98-102 on “Telestial Kingdom”; D&C 76:77-79 on “Terrestrial Kingdom”; and D&C 76:50-53 on “Celestial Kingdom.” See: www.lds.org.

17 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Temple Blessings,” *Ensign* 40 (2010): 4-6.

18 Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign* 25 (1995): 11-14.

19 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Brother, I'm Committed,” *Ensign* 41 (2011): 4-6. On the idea of sinful behavior leading to unhappiness, see also: (i) Henry B. Eyring, “Man Down!” *Ensign* 39 (2009): 63-66 and (ii) D. Todd Christofferson, “Moral Agency,” *Ensign* 39 (2009): 47-53.

by mine own voice or the voice of my servants, it is the same.”²⁰ By this understanding, the Church has produced new works of scripture, which are not only equal to, but even trump the authority of, the Bible. The concluding fact of Latter-day Saint scripture, and all that is communicated by the Brethren of the Church, is that such scripture surpasses (and in most cases, defeats) literal biblical authority. With this in mind, I want to spend a few moments detailing what general authorities have been and currently are saying about this issue.

THE MORMON POSITION

General authorities of the LDS Church began talking explicitly about homosexuality in 1969, with the emergence of a book by Spencer W. Kimball titled *The Miracle of Forgiveness*.²¹ From 1969 to 1995, they have spoken about and characterized the phenomenon of homosexuality in three primary ways. In the first, they want to insist that the term “homosexuality” characterizes a practice that one may adopt, but which is independent of a pre-disposed constitutional element of the one who practices it.²² In this regard, we see dozens of examples of the use of phrases like “homosexual acts,” “homosexual relations,” and “homosexual behavior” in lieu of the concept of *a* homosexual. In another way, general authorities seem to understand “homosexuality” as a word that describes an activity that, when participated in enough, one *becomes into* or *develops* something warranting an aberrant *identity*.²³ In this instance, the “homosexual” is one who participates in “homosexuality” in the same way that one who is an “adulterer” participates in “adultery.” In both cases, one who is a homosexual is so by turning away from some part of his/her better (hetero)sexuality. Finally, there is a third way in which leaders of the Church have tended to speak of homosexuals—i.e., as those with “abnormal tendencies” of desire “for relations with one’s own gender,” which mir-

ror “normal” desires toward other sexual behaviors.²⁴ In this case, the Church insists that the “unnatural” drive leading to homosexual activities must always be resisted, and in all cases, overcome. Thus, from within this first movement—again, roughly from 1969 to 1995—we apprehend a rather muddled understanding of the nature of homosexuality. In all three, however, leaders of the Church agree on its sinfulness, undesirability, and in most cases, its curability.²⁵

From 1995 to the present, some general authorities of the Church have tended to acknowledge the possibility of a homosexual *condition*, but always argue that (i) it is not necessarily an essential or genetic phenomenon, and (ii) it should be resisted, *regardless of its origin*. Furthermore, any mention of the term “gay” or “lesbian” is almost always preceded with the qualifier “so-called”—i.e., the “so-called gay,” etc.²⁶ In this sense, there is a denial of the existence of a “gay” or “lesbian” person, as such.

In recognizing the possibility of a homosexual condition or constitution, however, general authorities move the possibility of a necessary heterosexually inclined transformation into the next life. If gay Mormons, as the reasoning goes, must realize a heterosexual ontology to become like God, then at some point along the developmental line, one must become heterosexual, whether in this life or, what is more likely, the next. In October 2007, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the highest governing body in the LDS Church) recognizes, along with other authorities, that one may not realize such transformation until after death, as part of a reward for faithful living. Holland states: “through the exercise of faith, individual effort, and reliance upon the power of the Atonement, some may overcome same-gender attraction in mortality and marry... Others, however, may never be free of same-gender attraction in this life.”²⁷

In answer to this rather dismal predicament, Elder Holland promises: “Whatever the reason, God’s richest blessings will eventually be available to all His children if they are clean and faithful.” Thus, one might argue that for those who are pining to “be free” of “same-gender attraction,” and whose own efforts in this enterprise do not pay off, this appealing and optimistic view of the afterlife,

20 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Doctrine and Covenants* (Bookcraft: Salt Lake City, 1989).

21 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969). At the time this book was published, Kimball held a chair in the First Presidency of the highest governing body of the Church.

22 For examples, see: Spencer W. Kimball, “Voices of the Past, of the Present, of the Future,” *Ensign* 2 (1971): 12-15. In this particular article, President Kimball speaks of same-sex, sexual activities in terms of that which deserves death. See also: (i) Bernard P. Brockbank, “The Ten Commandments,” *Ensign* 2 (1971): 57-59; (ii) N. Eldon Tanner, “Priesthood Responsibilities,” *Ensign* 4 (1973): 85-87; (iii) N. Eldon Tanner, “Our Responsibility to the Transgressor,” *Ensign* 5 (1974): 76; (iv) Bruce C. Hafen, “The Gospel and Romantic Love,” *Ensign* 13 (1982): 64; (v) Spencer W. Kimball, “The Abundant Life,” *Ensign* 16 (1985): 3; (vi) Richard G. Scott, “Making the Right Choices,” *Ensign* 25 (1994): 37; (vii) Richard G. Scott, “Finding Forgiveness,” *Ensign* 26 (1995): 75; (viii) Richard G. Scott, “The Message: Serious Questions, Serious Answers,” *New Era* 25 (1995): 4.

23 For examples, see: (i) Bernard P. Brockbank, “The Ten Commandments,” *Ensign* 2 (1971): 96-98; (ii) Bruce R. McConkie, “The Coming Tests and Trials and Glory,” *Ensign* 11 (1980): 71; (iii) Harold B. Lee, “Admonitions for the Priesthood of God,” *Ensign* 4 (1973): 104.

24 For examples, see: (i) Steve Gilliland, “Chastity: A Principle of Power,” *Ensign* 11 (1980): 16; (ii) Spencer W. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Morality,” *New Era* 10 (1980): 39; (iii) Ezra Taft Benson, “Godly Characteristics of the Master,” *Ensign* 17 (1986): 45; (iv) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Talking with Your Children about Moral Purity,” *Ensign* 45 (1986): 57; (v) Spencer J. Condie, “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign* 24 (1993): 15.

25 Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Ensign* 25 (1995): 11-14. See also: (i) Boyd K. Packer, “Ye Are the Temple of God,” *Ensign* 31 (2000): 72-74; (ii) Spencer W. Kimball, “The Foundations of Righteousness,” *Ensign* 8 (1977): 4. Dealing with dating/marriage as a “cure,” see: Gordon B. Hinckley, “Reverence and Morality,” *Ensign* 18 (1987): 47.

26 Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?” *Ensign* 29 (1998): 70. See also: Gordon B. Hinckley, “Why We Do Some of the Things We Do,” *Ensign* 30 (1999): 52.

27 Jeffrey R. Holland, “Helping Those Who Struggle with Same-gender Attraction,” *Ensign* 38 (2007): 42-45.

together with Mormonism's rather tolerant view of suicide, can cultivate justification and even a sense of urgency for one to take one's own life.²⁸

Spencer W. Kimball's book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, which is often referred to, even to this day, responds to "sexual sin" thus: "...to those who say that this practice or any other evil is incurable, I respond: 'How can you say the door cannot be opened until your knuckles are bloody, till your head is bruised, till your muscles are sore? It can be done.'"²⁹ In February of 2000, Stuart Matis, a dedicated 33-year old Mormon from Los Altos, California, took his life on the steps of an LDS Church meetinghouse. His suicide, one among many, earned a great deal of media attention, specifically his suicide note, encouraging the Church to come to a better understanding of homosexuality.³⁰ In response to Stuart's suicide, Mark Miller writes, "Stuart Matis struggled his whole life to resolve [this] dilemma. The people who dressed him for burial were struck by the sight of his knees, deeply calloused from praying," (A rather eerie correspondence, I think, with President Kimball's directive).³¹

Stuart Matis' parents wrote a somewhat influential book titled *In Quiet Desperation*, following Stuart's suicide.³² In the book, Stuart's parents write, "Although losing our son was difficult, it has been comforting to know that he was faithful to his temple covenants." In one such temple covenant, among others key to the temple ceremony, one makes an oath, whereupon one promises to give everything one has, even one's own life (if necessary) to the Church. With sentiments such as these—still alive and well in Mormonism—we might intuit ways in which voices within the Church (on all levels) have inadvertently given its LGBTQ members a license to die for the cause of its understanding of the gospel of Jesus and the Plan of Salvation, as delineated by general authorities, insisting upon (i) the potential for exaltation as heterosexuals, (ii) the sinfulness of homosexuality, and (iii) the promise to receive the ontological transformation necessary for godhood in the next life.

Before I move to offer a demonstration of what an extended study of this sort might look like, I want to outline reasons for why I might employ the narrative approach. That is, I do so to acknowledge (i) the concept that the "researcher" is *also* "the researched," and (ii) "thick descriptions," as vital to presenting (and developing) an innovative hermeneutics.

28 For more dealing with the Church's more "tolerant" view of suicide, see: M. Russell Ballard, "Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not," *Ensign* 17 (1987): 14-16. Elder Russell's point in this talk to the Church is to comfort those who have lost loved-ones from suicide, while not downplaying the seriousness of the action. The seriousness, however, of such an action is to be judged, he says, by God. In most cases, this topic is treated with extraordinary sensitivity.

29 Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, 86. See also: Edward L. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Deseret Book: Salt Lake City, 1983).

30 Carol Ness, "Gay Mormon Hoped Suicide Would Help Change Church," *San Francisco Examiner* (2000).

31 Mark Miller, "To Be Gay—and Mormon," *Newsweek* 135 (2000): 38-39.

32 Fred and Marilyn Matis and Ty Mansfield, *In Quiet Desperation: Understanding the Challenge of Same-Gender Attraction* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 20.

Joan Laird argues for using emerging ideas in family therapy theory as a model for narrative research, specifically ways in which traditional power structures can be destabilized utilizing "reflexivity." Laird writes that therapy "is no longer defined as a matter of some kind of more or less powerful expert diagnosing a faulty family according to some prior epistemological map (i.e., family structure or rule system) and designating strategic or systematic interventions." Rather, the "therapist is seen as a conversational artist, a conferee, a consultant, an ethnographer. As conversation unfolds, no participant's observations or ideas, including those of the therapist, are privileged over those of any other."³³ Laird goes on to assert the notion that the ways in which stories and narratives are transmitted, ideally, must embody similar concepts.

This notion of the "conversational artist" that serves as an "ethnographer" is reflected in the works of Dawne Moon and Marla F. Frederick, who offer excellent examples of the sort of study I am proposing.³⁴ Moon distinguishes herself and her approach very much in terms of one joining the focus discussion in question from an experience-distant mode of investigational study. For instance, in setting out to analyze language structures from within the public debate between two United Methodist congregations, Moon investigates "...how congregation members, more or less effectively, used particular languages to make the world around them seem stable and sensible while naturalizing their grounding assumptions."³⁵ Furthermore, Moon relies heavily upon Foucault's concept of *discourse* to understand and represent not only *what is being said*, but also *what effect what is being said* is having on the congregations in question. Indeed, she sets out observing rather nicely Laird's notion that the interviewing process becomes "a matter of challenging the dominant story and externalizing the problem, in the process constructing alternative knowledges/stories that have previously been subjugated."³⁶ As Laird engages the question of how families construct and perform their unique narratives from within their situations and circumstances, Moon demonstrates the same as an issue of re-authoring.

What is absent, however, from Moon's work is Bertrand Cohler's notion of the "experience-near" mode of study and the vital enterprise of reflective mirroring, both of which would be necessary for an extended LGBTQ-inclusive Mormon hermeneutic.³⁷ Even though her work resembles Moon's as one from an experience-distant location, Marla Frederick, citing James Clifford and George J. Marcus, concedes, "the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or

33 Joan Laird, "The Human Sciences, the Life Story, and Clinical Research" in *Qualitative Research in Social Work*, ed. Edmund Sherman et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 178-79.

34 Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

35 Dawne Moon, *God, Sex, and Politics*, 11.

36 Laird, "Human Sciences," 179.

37 Bertram Cohler, "The Human Sciences, the Life Story, and Clinical Research" in *Qualitative Research in Social Work*, ed. Edmund Sherman et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 166.

economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control.” She continues, “...Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete.”³⁸

In a larger study, one might be concerned with observing a type of native anthropology that accounts for the experiences of a group of people who share a common view of the world as both Latter-day Saints and lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and so on. Frederick identifies aspects of “partial truth” in the matrix of her faith and emotional/ideological commitments, which are contrary to those of the “detached observer.”³⁹ In short, one cannot present such a study as if one is not a significant part of the “what,” which comes through in it. Furthermore, Bertram Cohler argues that it is in the relationship of the one interviewed and the one interviewing that “shared meaning” emerges.⁴⁰ Thus, in addition to the researcher as researched, so also is the interviewer-interviewee relationship; for, it is therein that we may observe the force of current LDS theologies, as well as new theologies that come to pass.

A brief demonstration.

I interviewed three Mormons—two men and one woman. Their names are Kevin, Emmanuel, and Tina. Both men identify as gay; Tina identifies as a lesbian. Kevin and Tina were born into the Church; Emmanuel joined in his late teens/young adulthood. Kevin and Emmanuel are both sexually-active; Kevin is partnered. Tina has decided to live a “celibate” life in the Church, abstaining from relationships/sexual activity. At one point, she was married for seven years to a woman. Her decision to be celibate is primarily because she is not interested in dating at the moment, and has no desire to start a family.

All three live in different neighborhoods in the New York City area. Tina and Emmanuel attend LDS Church services regularly (and are currently in conversation with church authorities to provide informational “fireside” discussions about this topic to NYC-area Mormons); Kevin has not attended LDS services regularly since 1987. Furthermore, Kevin currently participates with a Unitarian congregation; Tina considers herself Buddhist as well as LDS (Tina made a comment: “I went back to [the LDS] Church to become a better Buddhist”). All three are also involved in *Affirmation*, an LGBTQ Mormon support group with national presence.

When asked how he maintains a Mormon identity, Kevin remarked that he considers himself a Mormon in the same way that many people in the Jewish community consider themselves Jewish, without attending synagogue regularly or participating in Jewish rituals. Kevin responded that he considers himself, in a sense, ethnically Mormon—it is something, he says, that he simply cannot *not* be, regardless of whether or not he attends.

38 Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 20.

39 Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays*, 20.

40 Bertram Cohler, “The Human Sciences,” 167-171.

I entered these interviews with two questions in mind: What is it precisely that LGBTQ Mormons seek to be liberated *from*? How might responses to inquiries of such convey, say, a “liberation” theology? The answer to these questions appears to be three-fold: it is emancipation from the notion that (i) homosexuality is a temporal condition, rather than an eternal one, (ii) unhappiness is a natural condition of homosexuality, and (iii) legitimate Godhood necessitates procreation.

In considering the non-temporality of one’s homosexuality, both Kevin and Tina referred to such in what could be understood as, more or less, eternal terms. Kevin remarked that he believed his homosexuality to be pre-existent:

I have often felt that I am a hopeless romantic, because I did have the concept of myself of being gay... as a young man... [I felt that] it was a gift from God... Consequently, heavenly Father... wanted me to have a family and that families were still important in our heavenly Father’s plan... I felt that I would find someone that I would be with... someone I met in the pre-existence... and maybe through the meetings or on my mission, we would be able to recognize each other... and we would create a family together with children...

[This] seemed to fit in with the church’s values.

He then continues,

I was really shocked when I found out about how the Church really felt about being gay and the likelihood of being able to [fully realize this].

In another instance, Tina remarked that Mormons are taught to believe:

all things are made spiritually prior to the temporal. If God created us male and female prior to birth,... then why isn’t being homosexual part of that too?... We just have to realize that there are more than two options.

She continues, by stating that if LDS theology were to include its LGBTQ members more fully, it would recognize this point, perhaps as a first principle.

Tina also spoke of two rather significant personal revelations she experienced in coming to terms with understanding herself *as* a lesbian and with regard to finding a partner. She recalled:

When I was 12,... just out of primary, we were taught, when we say our prayers to stay on our knees and see if we can receive an answer to prayer. I don’t remember what I was praying for, but I decided to

stay kneeling beside my bed. I was just quiet and still. And I was feeling the Holy Ghost. And in that moment, the awareness came to me that I was gay. And it was just really clear... I took that knowledge and shoved it to the deepest recesses of my body and soul, because I knew that it was all bad and no good in the Mormon faith [to be gay, i.e.]... After doing a lot of scripture study in the past year, I have to absolutely agree with Kevin that we are created gay... that it's not a mistake by heavenly Father, and that he will honor homosexuals in the life hereafter.

In a response to my question about the nature of her decision to remain celibate, Tina responded:

Right now, it is time for me to be working in the church to live a celibate life, being a voice from the inside out. It is not the act of being with someone that makes it bad or wrong, but a personal call... I asked heavenly Father if I'd be single for the rest of my life, and he said 'no.' He told me what she would look like.

In another instance, Tina explained to me the nature of a change she had recently experienced as part of her renewed activity in Mormonism. Part of this included the notion that Tina felt her newfound happiness was not directly connected to a type of lifestyle, but rather a certain frame of mind. She says:

I think a big part of my happiness comes from the fact that I am no longer resisting the fact that I am gay or Mormon. There comes great peace in just accepting who I am. And, I think that's a big relief. I also feel like my happiness comes from going back to my community that I grew up in... I feel happy because I feel that with all this self-acceptance, I can relax into life for the first time, which is a big source of happiness: accepting my religion, my faith, and my homosexuality.

Tina then connected this experience with developing a more open relationship with God, which included rather than denied her homosexuality.

The final question to my interviewees dealt with how they imagined themselves in the afterlife—as LGBTQ Mormons. Responses to this question were surprisingly diverse. Both Emmanuel and Tina stated that they would remain ontologically homosexual, affirming that they didn't feel there was anything in this regard that needed to be modified or converted.

Most of Emmanuel's response dealt with how he imagined the immediate post-life prospect, rather than the more comprehensive soterio-ontology. General authorities of the LDS Church often speak of the work—rather than the respite—

one will encounter after this life during the transitional phase prior to resurrection and judgment; the work is to fix mistakes that one has made during mortal existence. Emmanuel remarked that he imagines general authorities of the Church working to fix the damage they have caused LGBTQ members of the Church (and beyond) as a result of their homophobia:

General authorities are going to have to fix this. There is no place in heaven for anything but love. So, you can't get there with any feelings of hatred or any other feelings for that sake, whether it's sexism or homophobia or hatred for your neighbor. You are going to have to fix it. That's what [they] are going to be working on... if they aren't working on it in this life.

When I pressed Emmanuel a bit more with regard to the more extended LDS position on godhood, he replied that he didn't feel that there was any problem with being gay and part of celestial glory:

At the start of creation, homosexuality is inherent. You are a vibrant example of it. We are both born of people who are heterosexual. Yet, they fathered or mothered a gay son or a lesbian daughter. It is inherent to the creation process, and there is a place for us in that process.

Emmanuel consented to the possibility for a sort of sexual progression—i.e., an ability for one to realize other forms of sexuality and sexual expression as part of an eternal process, even to the point that he was willing to admit that if procreation is a necessary aspect to becoming like God, there might be some way of realizing this at some point, while still remaining “homosexual.” He relegated this to the realm of science and philosophy, stating: “I don't want to make this determination... it's probably doable, but I'll have the answer in the next life.” However, Emmanuel clarified his current position thus:

I am not going to cheat nature. There are some parameters out there that you cannot cheat. You have to deal with it. Even if there's some scientific achievement that will challenge this, this is where I am at.

Tina and Kevin both talked about the role they might play in the “creative process,” in ways that might not include typical procreative measures. Kevin spoke in terms of creativity and spirituality as synonymous, asserting:

the creative process is part of what we see in Genesis, and where we see ourselves as being in the image of God as creative beings. I take it in this framework, not necessarily as gods that are creating worlds or

in the concept of Elohim creating the universe, but honoring our own creative capacities: creating music, life, images, and so on.

In many cases, there was the sense, in the responses to this question, that *we simply do not know what's in store for us in the next life*, which was accompanied by a sense of confidence in all possibilities, and a dedication to a current truth in light of one's disposition and circumstance. Tina added that she felt such a focus (i.e., on post-life conditions) distracted her from the essential and pressing circumstances of *this* life:

I don't sit around thinking about being a god... [such things] take us out of the moments and gives us excuses to not tend to problems at hand.

Both Tina and Emmanuel regularly attend LDS services, even though, in the latter case, Emmanuel is living with his boyfriend. When I asked them to help me better understand what their experience is like in church (on any given Sunday), their responses differed. For instance, Tina replied that in her Brooklyn congregation, she “feels love, the strong presence of the Holy Ghost,” as well as “acceptance, guidance, and genuine gratitude” as a byproduct of her outness among them. Emmanuel, on the other hand, responded that he often felt he was “surrounded by hypocrites” in Mormon services. When I asked him what kept him coming to Church, he replied: “I'm not uncomfortable with this, because religion sets this up” (i.e., by virtue of being religion). “But,” he says, “I like to think I am bringing some meaning to [Church].”

When asked how all three tend to respond to the Church's strong anti gay marriage initiative, Tina and Kevin replied that they felt “rage” and “betrayal”; all three, however, recognized that the Church is a work in progress, and part of their position as LGBTQ Mormons, as such, is to work to move this progress along.

I asked Tina how she dealt with her rage internally. She replied: “I turn it over to God... I pray and I ask for understanding and compassion, and for charity... I also do a lot of scripture study with that in mind. I seek for answers in the scriptures about homosexuality and how to confront these issues... how one might make a case for homosexuality in the LDS Church... I have found a lot of answers.” Among them, Tina quoted Isaiah 56:3-5 and Acts 10:15.

As stated earlier, this demonstration can only present a small fraction of the relevant points a larger work would cover. In such a work, I might also consider (i) how data diversifies along socio-economic, racial, or ethnic contexts, (ii) the issue of how it is in the stated interests of church authorities to recognize and affirm its LGBTQ members, (iii) how the question of the *ethic* of what's being done with official LDS theology subdues the question of what a greater hermeneutical project would look like, particularly with familiar Mormon methods in mind (to which this approach makes an appeal), (iv) the issue beyond the mainstream Latter-day Saint Church, (v) ways in which “high” theological works are in conversation with the “everyday” theologies of LGBTQ Mormons, and vice versa.

Suffice it to say, a larger study would utilize hundreds of hours more of interviews, in order to produce as “thick” a description as possible, focusing primarily upon interview subjects in the New York City, Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland/San Francisco, and Salt Lake City areas. New York and Washington are homes to dozens of LGBTQ Mormons, who are still attending Mormon services regularly. In California, due to anti gay marriage measures, hundreds of LGBTQ Mormons and their supporters have coalesced to oppose the Church's political involvement in this issue. This has operated to polarize the Mormon community in the Oakland/San Francisco area. In my view, a study of this polarization is ideal for an extended examination. Finally, the Midwest is home to the “Community of Christ” (formerly the “Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints”). This more progressive sect of Mormonism is currently working on official measures to include its LGBTQ members in such a way that surpasses the deadlock political and theological position of mainstream Mormonism. In this case, tracking this emergent movement utilizing the same research methods above may very well facilitate this study in representing how Mormonism is moving forward, if not strictly from within Utah.