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"This is How You Navigate the World": Impacts of Mormon Rhetoric on White Queer Members' Identity Performances

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"THIS IS HOW YOU NAVIGATE THE WORLD":

IMPACTS OF MORMON RHETORIC ON

WHITE QUEER MEMBERS' IDENTITY PERFORMANCES

By

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B.Sc. in Communication, Weber State University, 2017

THESIS

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At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

—Albert Schweitzer

First of all, I would like to acknowledge anyone who sits, or has sat, in congregations not knowing if the next speaker will condemn your being as sinful or evil, or to those who, during a casual encounter in a church hallway, have heard queerphobic remarks either outright or masked as jokes. This is for you.

This is to those who keep their queerness a secret because they don't want to recognize it out of fear of God, country, family, friends, or church members.

This is to those who face discrimination because of Mormonism for other reasons including racism, ageism, ableism, marital status, and so many more forms of hate that unfortunately have found homes in Mormon congregations and temples.

I want to acknowledge the often illusive, but very real, power of love in treating others with genuine care. If one scripture holds true and clings to me more than others, it is "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

I want to acknowledge that I have personally perpetuated cisheteronormativity. I have turned a blind eye to it and the White supremacy that I enforced—usually in the name of God.

While I can never make up for the harm I did then, I know that now I can do my best to stop such hatred, starting with me.

This is for my parents and grandparents, for my siblings, and my best friends, especially Kenzie, who have taught me so much and took care of me. While many of you may not agree with all I say, I hope we will choose love over our differences.

This is for Richie.

This is for all the professors, mentors, supervisors, and leaders who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. This especially includes my committee, Drs. Eguchi, Hong, and Weiss, who gave me insights, inspiration, and moments for which I will be forever indebted. Shinsuke, your wisdom, guidance, critique, and support has helped me in my personal life and academic life, and I am thankful for all you've done. Sun, I am so glad for all your expertise, for the moments of growth in which you enlightened me, and for all the comfort and encouragement when I doubted myself. David, I'm thankful for your insights, suggestions, critiques, and opportunities that pushed me to be a better student, writer, and researcher.

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Finally, this is for the participants. Thank you for sharing your stories.

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ABSTRACT

The Mormon Church is one of the fastest growing and most conservative religious organizations in the world. The Church's conservatism has meant that its rhetorics, doctrines, and discourses have cultivated a culture of queerphobia and anti-queer sentiments. By interviewing 15 transgender, bisexual, and gay Mormons who are active in the Church, I conducted a critical thematic analysis that yields insights and critiques into how Mormon rhetoric impacts the identity performances and relationships of queer members. Using queer theory and Whiteness as conceptual and theoretical lenses, the analysis revealed four major themes: 1) queerness as non-identity, 2) the primacy of divine identity, 3) paradoxes of ideologies, and 4) health issues regarding identity performance. The communicative impacts of these themes highlight the intricate influence Mormon rhetoric has on relationships and shaping the participants' identity performances. Limitations are discussed and future directions are encouraged.

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PREFACE

If the concept of God has any validity or use,

it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving.

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the lives of queer individuals who are current, active members of the Mormon Church. This is a group that has been marginalized, discriminated against, invalidated, erased, and oppressed, all in the name of God. A secondary but equally important feature of this thesis is to critique the systems that perpetuate and enforce the abovementioned hegemony. This critique is meant to bring about change and not solely revile. I understand this thesis might seem like unwarranted academic malediction, but instead of framing my work as unfounded, arcane, or the work of the devil, I invite you to meditate on the injury the Church has done in discriminating against God's children who are trying their best to follow Jesus Christ's call to love.

To the decent non-queer Mormons who have not found their voices yet on these issues, I encourage you to listen to the stories and experiences of the queer members of the Church: listen to understand them and their journeys. After you have heard them, I hope that you would act, speak out, and join them in solidarity. Because unlike you, they haven't always had the privilege to be heard. But just like you, they yearn to be loved and pray to feel like they belong

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To be inside and outside a position at the same time—to occupy a territory while loitering

skeptically on the boundary—is often where the most intensely creative ideas stem from. It is a

resourceful place to be, if not always a painless one.

—Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

In this introductory chapter, I present the problem statement and briefly review the

history and hierarchical structures of Mormonism. Then, I set forth an overview of the research

questions, highlight the goals and purposes of this research, and emphasize why it merits

academic exploration. The chapter is concluded with a preview of the remainder of this thesis.

Problem statement. Since this thesis focuses on queer Mormons, it is necessary to explain

how queerness will be defined henceforth. West (2018) explains that while "conceptualizations

of queerness vary greatly…they typically rely upon some sense of resistance, including the

refusal to afford legitimacy to discrete classificatory schema or essentialized elements of

identities" (para. 2). Thus, it might be painstaking to list all the labels that accurately capture

queerness, but common terms include *gay, lesbian, pan/bisexual, same-sex/gender attracted,*

asexual, intersex, transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, and *two-spirit*. In their seminal text on

racialized queerness, Eguchi and Asante (2016) argue that queerness is not only a feature of

identity, but also a social construct with attached ideologies and expectations. This thesis, then,

views queerness as an ideological feature of the self that challenges cisheteronormativity, a

"form of violence, deeply embedded in our individual and group psyches" that places cisgender heterosexual bodies as the privileged norm (Yep, 2002, p. 168). For this reason, queer theory (in tandem with the academic concept of Whiteness) will be used as the major theoretical framework for this thesis. With a conceptualization of queerness established, the next section provides a quick review of Mormonism's history and hierarchy.

A brief history of Mormonism. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known by its informal moniker, the Mormon Church, has a captivating history which will be briefly reviewed. Despite its relative youth as a distinct religion, a simple glance through web pages or books dedicated to its historical roots reveals a large number of connections to troubling subjects such as magic, polygamy, pedophilia, (neo)colonialism, racism, and cishetero-normativity. In recent decades, the Church has done its best to distance itself from many of these issues. For example, the Church currently forbids its members to associate with the occult (Church Handbook 1, 21.4.8), the practice of polygamy was formally condemned in the late twentieth century (Bitton & Lambson, 2012), and the Church's racist policies were revoked 14 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ("Official Declaration 2," 1978). Unfortunately, the Church still continues to honor and enforce policies and doctrines that discriminate against its members and others based on their sex, gender, and sexuality (Human Rights Commission, 2019; Quinn, 1996; Stacker, 2017). Despite this discrimination, some queer individuals still identify as members of the Church and actively participate in its functions.

The Church was founded in upstate New York "[d]uring a time of great [religious] excitement" known as the Second Great Awakening, by Joseph Smith, a young farmer (Joseph Smith History 1:8). Through a spectacular theophany in which God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him, Joseph said the Deities chose him to restore the ancient Christian faith that had

been corrupted throughout the centuries (Joseph Smith History 1:17). As such, Mormons believe that their Church is "the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, … and so forth" (Articles of Faith 1:6). While the Church claims to believe in the organization of the ancient Judeo-Christians, it seems to conveniently overlook and erase the existence and importance of prophetesses, a point of tension for some Mormon feminists who desire more leadership opportunities for women among the Church's largely White, cisgender, heterosexual male hierarchy (Brooks, Hunt Steenblik, & Wheelwright, 2016).

Throughout its early decades, the Church steadily grew in size, eventually establishing large cities such as Nauvoo, Illinois, which, at its apogee, rivaled the eminence of Chicago (Whitney, 2007). Non-Mormons' fear of religio-political and economic dominance in the areas where Mormons concentrated, coupled with a disgust for their practices of polygamy and theocracy, eventually sent the Mormon faithful on an exodus to the Mexican Territory, where the majority of members settled present-day Utah. Today, the Church (2019) reports a global membership totaling more than 16.3 million. Beyond sermons given by Church leaders which are considered modern-day scripture, Mormons also believe in the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price as sacred texts.

The Mormon hierarchy places the prophet at the top, his two councilors and 12 apostles below, and then, below them, several quorums of regional leaders known as seventies. Individuals in these positions are known collectively as General Authorities. There is only one prophet at a time, and he serves as the President of Church, overseeing its many nonprofit and for-profit organizations. At the time this thesis was written, the current prophet and president is Russell M. Nelson. As a prophet, he, along with the other General Authorities, can dictate new scripture and receive revelations, or divine communicative instructions and warnings from God.

Together, they comprise the upper echelons of the Mormon hierarchy ("LDS Church

Leadership", 2018). A quick glance at the photographs of the General Authorities illustrates how

the leadership is overwhelmingly comprised of White, U.S. American, cisgender, heterosexual,

elderly males. Local leaders, known as bishops and stake presidents, oversee smaller

geographical regions, similar to Catholicism's parishes and dioceses; I would expect one would

find more identity diversity in those lower levels of leadership.

As of late, the Church has experienced growing pains, which has led to a recent

rebranding. President Nelson (2018) invited the media and others to use the Church's full name

instead of using their Mormon moniker. His recent decision relies heavily on the power of words

and rhetorical appeals; for example, Diaz (2019) states the name change can be a tool for the

Church to distinguish itself from other sects of Mormonism, such as the notorious

Fundamentalist Mormons who still practice polygamy. In this light, Simmons' (2018) suggestion

that religion is a "modern rhetorical invention" used to socially unite and divide minds and

societies is clearly applicable to Mormonism (p. 33). This thesis will historically and rhetorically

situate its findings through space, time, and Church culture. I would like to assert an important

point here: until the Church recognizes the harm in misappropriating pronouns and invalidating

queerness, I refuse to acknowledge their requests of naming; ergo, the Church will be referred to

throughout this paper as *the (Mormon) Church*.

Changes in Mormon doctrine and rhetoric are not phenomena unique to this sect since all

religions evolve over time. Judaism and Christianity have changed over centuries, zigzagging

across capricious enactments of various rituals, or leaving the true God for idols (Exodus 32, and

Galatians 1). Similarly, as "Islam interacted with foreign religions and cultures," it influenced

indigenous regional beliefs while simultaneously being influenced by those traditions and

systems (Husseini, 1956, p. 2). The Mormon Church, an organization that claims to be Christian, and yet whose founder was nicknamed the American Muhammad by newspaper editors (Schmidt, 2013), is no exception and has also changed since its inception. These structural changes, accompanied with rhetorical support, undoubtedly impact the identities, communicative processes, relationships, and behaviors of its adherents. For this reason, the next subsection focuses on the crux of this thesis: identity performance.

Identity performance. Because traveling the path of uncertainty for Mormons and queers is full of battles and negotiations, it will be a time-consuming and time-intensive communicative process, just like the process of becoming who we are. As human beings, we are constantly performing or socially presenting our identities based on a variety of factors (Goffman, 1956). One's sense of being should not be considered without a goal of understanding one's sense of belonging. Ting-Toomey (1993) asserts that we must be mindful of our various cultural and personal identities; a major part of the performance with our self, society, and the Divine comes from our quest to balance these identities.

Tensions can arise when we fail to reach an equilibrium within ourselves and with other members of cultural groups (Abdi & Van Gilder, 2016). As part of this balancing act, Philips (2005) asserts an important insight regarding queer and Mormon identities, substantiating the differences between "gay Mormons and Mormon gays" (p. 114). This distinction alludes to how, for some members, the primacy of Mormon identity may overshadow their queer identity; to others, one's queer identity may be more important than their religious identity and, for that reason, they may choose to leave the Church. Such a distinction may likely arise because of one's feeling of social belonging within the groups to which one's identities align (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). The concept of home is of special importance as LGBTQIA Mormons might

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experience a feeling of not belonging in the Mormon Church because of their queer identity, all the while feeling that they are also rejected in queer communities because of their affiliation with a church that openly discriminates against queers. Thus, the individuals' performance and negotiation of their identity is heavily involved in search of a community of belonging—in search of a home.

In the words of Eguchi and Baig (2018), "home emerges through the symbolic, emotional, relational, and the social" and functions in a "political, economic, and historical space" (p. 45). Therefore, for this study, *home* should be understood as a very material and local space; it should also be understood as a metaphysical, mental space of feeling safe. A study conducted by the Human Rights Commission found that 69% of Utah LGBTQIA teens reported living in unwelcoming communities, and 74% felt their churches were not queer affirming or accepting (as cited in Rogers, 2012). Tolerant and supportive communication has a role in curing this malady. After all, I argue that communication is at the core of the creation, development, maintenance, negotiation, and performance of all human and nonhuman relationships, including with ourselves. To help in the exploration of queer Mormons' identity performance and negotiations of rhetoric, I offer my research questions below.

Research questions. Through examining the influence of Mormon culture, doctrines, rhetorics, and policies, the communication processes behind building healthy relationships (including healthy identity performance) of queer Mormons can be better understood. This careful attention to various systems and influences of organizational culture leads to three research questions:

RQ 1. Why do transgender and gay Mormons stay involved in a Church that historically and presently discriminates against them?

RQ 2. What are the ideological and rhetorical mechanisms present in the culture and social systems of the participants that impact their agency?

RQ 3: What are the communicative patterns of identity performances by queer Mormons in regard to their queerness and relationships with themselves, others, and God?

I am aware that religion is a personal choice to an extent; for example, if someone joins a religion as an adult out of a genuine desire. However, we cannot ignore the macro-level societal, cultural, and organizational pressures which undoubtedly impact interpersonal and individual choices. In the words of Dawkins (2014), "How thoughtful of God to arrange matters so that, wherever you happen to be born, the local religion always turns out to be the true one" (para. 1). For example, Utah is a place where, from the moment you are born into a Mormon family, you are expected to live as a Mormon, marry a Mormon, raise your own children as Mormons, and die as a Mormon—and, of course, to see Mormonism as the (only) true religion. The Mormon Church demands its adherents to be faithful to its doctrines and leaders in a way that most other contemporary Christian sects do not. Mormonism is also distinct in its conservative approach to counseling its members on what media they can consume, what their diets and courses of wellbeing should or should not consist of, how to dress, and with whom they should interact (*For the Strength of Youth,* 2011).

The Church's culture is deeply rooted in its doctrinal soteriology, or tenets of how one is saved, that makes salvation a goal of the family, which pressures parents to ensure they raise their children in the Church (Ballard, 2003; Lawrence, 2010; Tanner, 2003). Because of these tenets, rhetorics, and cultural values, Scharp and Beck (2017) aver that "Mormonism is

considered one of, if not the most, high cost religions in the United States" (p. 132). Those high costs can include social isolation, stigmatization, and mistreatment for those who choose to leave the organization. Together these structures in the Mormon system demarcate the religious institution as unique from other religions, which allows this thesis to investigate an inimitable and under-researched organization in queer contexts.

Outside of religious and spiritual pressure, many Utah Mormon communities stigmatize parents whose children are not active in the Church (Passey, 2017). I experienced this while growing up by observing parents berate their children into going to Church and felt that same pressure within my own home. This cultural feature is powerfully palpable. One's behavioral choices cannot be disconnected from one's interpersonal interactions and relationships (Hong & Rojas, 2016). In Utah and other communities with dense Mormon populations, leaving the Church is not an easy process. Doing so stigmatizes one as an apostate, which can have social ramifications for individuals' communities, workplaces, schools, and even families (Golden, 2016; Passey, 2017). This pressure to remain in the Church is so powerful that not all of my family knows about my research I am conducting. The culture's pressure to be a good Mormon propels one's belongingness in the family and community. Stepping away from the Church is just as much a spiritual choice as it is a social statement. Scholars have warned of the maladies that occur when people—especially those in marginalized groups—fail to find a place to call home (Anzaldúa, 1987; Floyd & Hesse, 2017; hooks, 2009). One of the end goals of this research is to provide information that leads Mormon communities to embrace queers with understanding and empathy.

As for this thesis's investigation into identity performance, the impacts of religious rhetoric from the contexts of the family, church leaders, the Divine, and the self will be explored.

Communication scholars who work with queer theory have examined the role of identity in how LGBTQIA individuals disclose and perform their self (Calafell, 2015; Eguchi, 2014; LeMaster, 2018; Muñoz, 1999).

Preview of the thesis. The remainder of the thesis will consist of four chapters. The next chapter (two) will provide a literature review which will discuss topics relevant to this thesis including the theoretical frameworks of queer theory and Whiteness. It will also examine extant research conducted by scholars in the communication field and other disciplines regarding the nexus of religion and queerness, including within Mormonism. I will end chapter two by discussing ways that this thesis can contribute to the literature of communication studies as well as to bolster the presence of queer Mormon research within the field.

In chapter three, I provide an overview of the methodological assumptions, approaches, and tools that I will employ. These include performative interviews and critical reflexivity, under the auspices of a critical approach. This methodology is intended to identify and critique features of a harmful system and offer solutions to build a positive, kind, healthy, and inclusive community. Procedures for recruitment, data collection, and analysis, and will also be discussed. In chapter four, the data will be interpreted using content analysis. Four main themes will emerge, revealing the impacts of Mormon rhetoric and patterns of the participants' identity performances. In an effort to give thick descriptions of the participants' insights, I will contextualize my analysis with respect to rhetorics, cultural values, and doctrines of the Church. In the fifth and final chapter, I will discuss the significance, limitations, and future directions of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Please remember, especially in these times of groupthink…, that no person is your friend

(or kin) who demands your silence or denies your right to grow and be perceived

as fully blossomed as you were intended.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*

In this chapter, I review the theories and conceptual frameworks that will be used, namely queer theory and Whiteness. Then, a review of existing data on LGBTQIA issues, Mormonism, and other relevant religious institutions will be conducted. In reviewing these literatures, I contextualize my study for understanding the impacts that discriminatory Mormon rhetorics and cultural values may wreak on identity performances as well as on interpersonal behaviors and relationships.

Theories and Frameworks

Queer theory. This project uses queer theory as the theoretical framework to analyze the data; in other words, the narratives and experiences explored will be *queered.* Queer theory began to emerge during the sexual revolution in the U.S. as a way to counter cisheteronormative structures and identities, but it did not start to take hold in the field of communication until the 1990s (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). Since the 1990s, communication scholars have frequently investigated queerness at its intersection with other features of identity such as race, gender, family, age, ability, and place (Abdi, 2014; Eguchi & Asante, 2016; Johnson, 2001). By

understanding the theory's (and the movement's) history—the recognition of queerness as a

reality beyond someone's identity as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

queer/questioning, intersex, asexual), but as a realm of ideology and politics that challenges the

norms—is crucial (Eguchi & Asante, 2016). Rather than dictating what *queer* means, the

theory's concept of disidentification equips community members (especially queers of color) to

"resist the dominants' perceptions of their identities and empower them in developing their own

subject formations" (Acosta, 2018, pp. 408-409). At its core, then, queer theory seeks to

dismantle hetero/homo/transnormative structures, perceptions, and non-queer supremacy.

As Alexander (2008) offers, "Queer theory is interested in remapping the terrain of

gender, identity, and cultural studies," especially in dealing with ideas and identities that counter

cisheteronormativity (p. 108). This remapping is required because of supremacy of

cisheterosexuality in the U.S. and beyond. *Queer*, then, must be understood as a verb and an

action word that is rooted in activism (Jagose, 1996). As Milani (2014) says:

> [Q]ueer theory provides us with an important analytical toolkit to unpack the operations
>
> of power in relation to gender and sexuality (and other social categories) without falling
>
> into too easy conflations between "processes" (a man's/woman's desire for another
>
> man/woman), on the one hand, and "identities" ("gay"/"lesbian"/"heterosexual"), on the
>
> other. …[Therefore,] it is more productive to think of queer as a …form of dissent. (pp.
>
> 203/207)

Thus, to queer, or to utilize queer theory, is to critique the powers-that-be, challenge structures of

(cisheteronormative) oppression and provide hope for those who are marginalized through

resisting the normative.

As a framework with real-world implications, queer theory critiques the taken-for-granted assumptions—or hegemony—surrounding various features of identity, cultures, spaces, and discourses regarding gender, sexuality, and social supremacy. Because of this, Muñoz (1999) emphasizes the importance of queer theory as offering or creating possibilities, particularly in the fight against White cisheteronormativity. But it is also rooted in possibility as futurity in that queer theory "becomes a bridge to the unknown rather than a predetermined destination" (Goltz, 2007, p. 10). With that being said, the ultimate hope of queer theory is to create societies that cultivate social equity. As Muñoz (2009) would later frame it, "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world" (p. 1). In the case of this thesis, that potential world is one of peace, equity, and love; a space and place where queer Mormons can be accepted as equals to their non-queer peers; a Mormonism where love is not justified as a rhetoric to harm or make someone an Other.[1] To queer a Mormon scripture, the possibility of queerness allows one to "hope for a better world," a place where we are "always abounding in good works" to one another (Ether 12:4).

Under the paradigm of queer of color critiques, queer theory focuses on the body as a site of knowledge in understanding and analyzing reality (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). While it views features of identity as products of social construction, it validates the very real and embodied experiences of queer folks. Thus, "queer theory challenges the modern system of sexuality [and gender] as a body of knowledge that structures and organizes the personal, institutional, and cultural life of individuals" (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003, p. 4). One unique feature of the theory is

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[1] Mormon leaders repeatedly taught that the 2015 policy which banned children of LGBTQIA parents from baptism and marked married queers as apostates was "motivated by love" (Stack, 2019, para. 9).

that while it explores the meso/macro levels of humanity, it also carries with it an innate self-reflexivity. As one communication scholar explains:

> One of our most immediate and continuing tasks as queer theorists will be to monitor our thoughts, to see always the connections between things rather than the disparities, and to catch ourselves when we teeter on the edge of a dichotomous thought, bringing ourselves time and again back to the knowledge that we are, after all, kin—a rowdy human family implicatively set into rough-and-tumble relationships with each other so that we may see the contrasts. (Gearhart, as cited in Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003, p. xxix)

Thus, queer theory relies on interpersonal and identity differences in the scholars themselves who wield it to yield insightful findings, while simultaneously generating a sense of community. It also, then, borrows features from other critical approaches including the theories of intersectionality, multivocality, and standpoints.

Upon examining the fluid and precarious nature of queer identity, I have found that the theory's concept of liminality is especially important in this thesis. Liminality can be understood as a space of in-betweenness of being—or to use Anzaldúa's (1987) terminology, a "borderland"—in which one doesn't quite belong in any culturally demarcated space. LeMaster (2011) avers that using "liminality as an analytic tool" of queer theory can highlight the resistance of "normalizing processes" (p. 108). In this case, Mormon culture is at the crux of understanding communicative behaviors and relations amidst queer Mormon identity performances. The "normalizing processes" in Mormonism include rhetorics, expectations, discourses, rituals, rites, and behaviors that perpetuate cisheteronormativity. In terms of queer theory's methodological components, Acosta (2018) writes:

[Queer theory] methodology is less about any one research method and more about orienting or queering a method by adopting a queer lens (McCann, 2016). Inherent in this process is embracing the messiness that comes with queer data collection and approaching that messiness not as a problem to be fixed but as an important avenue for exploration in itself. (p. 415)

Therefore, inherent in queer theory is the embrace of centering the experiences of the participants, however complicated or messy that may be.

Unfortunately, similar to early iterations of feminisms, queer theory historically (and still) uncritically focuses on White individuals. This has been, as it should be, one of the major critiques offered by scholars skeptical of aspects of the theory(Acosta, 2018; Eguchi & Calafell, 2020; Johnson, 2001). Muñoz (1999) called the spate of queer theory studies "a place where a scholar of color can easily be lost in an immersion of vanilla while [their] critical faculties can be frozen by an avalanche of snow" (p. 11). Anzaldúa (1998) similarly noted how White queers "control the production of queer knowledge in the academy and in the activist communities" which has led to the abstractions of queers of color (p. 265). In an effort to combat this, I will be using Whiteness as a framework in which to analyze the data alongside queer theory.

Whiteness. For the purposes of this thesis, Whiteness is understood as a concept that goes beyond skin color; rather, it is a social construct that has embodied societal, social, and even religious expectations that normal is White (Baldwin, 1963). Through historical events, rhetorics, discourses, and zeitgeists, White becomes not only the normal, but the apex of humanity. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) taught that "Whiteness has assumed the position of an uninterrogated space" (p. 293), meaning it becomes the default of a society and thus, the privileged expectation. Similarly, Winnubst (2006) proposes that in order to understand the

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complex structure of Whiteness in the United States, it must be conceptualized as a "phallicised Whiteness" (p. 10), or a series of interlocking systems of politics, power, and patriarchy that are socially constructed to dominate those who are non-male, non-Christian, queer, poor, differently abled, and people of color. Ergo, Whiteness should also be examined as a performance that occurs in various contexts of everyday life (Alexander, 2018; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; LuLevitt & Calafell, 2018). DiAngelo (2016) argues that Whiteness permeates into communities of color in terms of "White fragility," a tendency that causes feelings of unease when racism is discussed, often resulting in the silencing of people of color with "White wrath" (p. 153).

Whiteness and Mormonism

The modern perpetuation of Whiteness can be easily connected to the Church's former history, racial doctrines, and discriminatory policies (Reeve, 2015). Khabeer (2016) highlights the importance of race in religion, suggesting while "religion may seek the Divine, religious identity is not transcendent[; rather, it is] …produced through intersubjective relationships charged by the complexities of race" (p. 227). Therefore, the role of race—or more specifically, Whiteness—and its ideologies, is a crucial feature of queer Mormon identity that will be explored. To understand how Whiteness operates in modern Mormonism, including in the lives of the participants, it is important to briefly examine the Church's past regarding race.

In its early days, Mormon recruitment via members and missionaries was largely focused towards White Americans and White immigrants from Western and Northern Europe (Colvin & Brooks, 2018). After Mormons were forced to leave their utopia of Nauvoo following Joseph Smith's murder, Brigham Young led some of the Saints to the American Southwest, which belonged to Mexico at the time. There, they enjoyed communal living and isolation from outside influences of the Mexican and United States' governments. Today, there are densely populated

Mormon communities in Utah, Nevada, Arizona, southern California, and Idaho, a place

Yorgason (2003) calls the Mormon Culture Region. He categorizes the area as having a regional

distinctiveness that fixates on American values while prioritizing the patriarchal power of its

Mormon leaders, is obsessed with political and economic conservativism, and grasps tightly to

the communal togetherness and identity of persecution cherished by the inhabitants' pioneer

ancestors.

These claims have been steadily corroborated in the past decade, with a landscape study

conducted by Pew Research Center (2014) found that most Mormons are politically conservative

and 85% of U.S.-based members are White. Reeve (2015) calls attention to the historical and

contemporary White heritage that the large majority of the residents in the Mormon Culture

Region share. Beyond that, Mormon influence and culture has leaked through to all aspects of

life in these communities, impacting politics, government, recreation, education, economy, and

community engagement (Whitney, 2007). While there are pockets of these saturated Mormon

communities elsewhere, Utah is still the stronghold of Mormon culture and orthodox ideology

(Riess, 2019). In such a stronghold like Utah, it is little wonder that there are great similarities in

the Mormon communities and families. In light of such homogeneity, Pace (1998) proposes a

Mormon ethnicity which would amalgamate the intersection of the religio-cultural and racial

similarities manifest in the region's church members. This suggestion dovetails with the

Church's history, one full of distressing events and rhetorics regarding race and Whiteness.

For example, the former prophet Brigham Young (1863) taught that if "[a] White man…

mixes his blood with the seed of Cain [miscegenates with someone of African descent], the

penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so" (Journal of

Discourses 10:110). This policy-backed racism, particularly targeted against Blacks—not just

African Americans—remained brazenly in place during the U.S. Civil Rights movement and continued afterwards (Wilson & Poulsen, 1980). Reeve (2015) cogently observed the interplay between politics of race and the Mormon faith, suggesting Mormon leaders "[were] not simply negatively situating blacks within Mormon theology, [they were] attempting to situate whites more positively within American society" (p. 155). This strategy quietly led to "legal and theological architects of 'the Kingdom of God on Earth'" that "established…a white supremacist space" (Brooks, 2018, p. 57).

Presumably to mitigate some of the pressure the Church was facing from progressive ideologies and campaigns during the latter half of the 20th century, the Church launched an auxiliary organization called the Genesis Group in 1971. The goal of this organization was, "under the direction of members of the Quorum of the 12 Apostles, …to serve the needs of African-American Latter-day Saints" (LDSGenesisGroup.org, "History," n.d., para. 1).

Seven years later, during a televised sermon, Prophet Spencer W. Kimball (1978) revealed that God "heard [their] prayers, and by revelation… confirmed that…all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood[2] without regard for race or color" (Official Declaration 2, para. 9). While this revelation was lauded by some Mormons, it was also met with resistance by others (McConkie, 1978). But of course, there have always been Black members of the Church who have remained steadfastly loyal. As one modern example, Smith and Vranes (2014), two Black Mormon women, wrote an epistolary book chronicling their

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[2] The Mormon priesthood is a rite of passage offered to all able-minded Mormon men. It is an ordination that endows them with "the authority to act as God's servants" (Monson, 2011, para. 41). Mormon boys typically enter into the priesthood at the age of 12. Unlike other sects, the Mormon priesthood is comprised of the lay members who receive no formal training. Instead, they learn their duties and what it means to be priesthood holders in Sunday School.

experiences with the Church; they are considered progressive members of the Church who use their positionality to critique features of Mormonism while staying devout.

In an interview with Green (2017), historian Max Mueller explained this dialectical and tenuous religio-racial turbulence of Whiteness in the Church. He said:

> Within Mormonism's history is this concept of Whiteness as Godliness and purity. …The kind of White supremacy that's at the heart of a lot of Mormon history, and the contemporary church that rejects White supremacy, both embody the same space.
>
> …Mormons engage in respectability campaigning that is not unlike a lot of Black church-going communities in the early 20th century. They're trying to present themselves to mainstream, White, partisan gatekeepers as pious, patriotic, family-oriented, hardworking, contributing to the society, and willing to fight for the American flag in war. But unlike Black Americans, Mormons were more easily accepted because of their skin pigment. … Unity is very important for Mormons. Religious unity used to be mapped onto racial unity. Today, it's celebrating racial difference and racial history as a key part of the church. (para. 8-9, 11, 32)

Thus, while offering neither reparations nor apologies, Mormonism is beginning to peel back the White supremacy that it perpetuated and has begun to embrace diversity as the Church attempts to become a global organization. However, some in the Church claim that this move lacks genuine care for, and desire to, cultivate equity in communities of color and instead is rooted in neocolonialism and colorblind multiculturalism (Colvin & Brooks, 2018).

As a recent example, in 2013, the Church produced a groundbreaking essay called *Race and the Priesthood.* The essay closes with a statement of disavowal of all expressions of racism:

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form. (para. 18)

This essay cogently established the Church's anti-racist stance, and began to, however shallowly, admit that its past racism is now wrong. Unfortunately, in January 2020, the *Come Follow Me* manual, written for families and individuals to study, contained content which taught certain Indigenous peoples, known in the Book of Mormon as Lamanites, were, for their evilness, cursed by God with dark skin (Walker, 2020). The Church framed it as a misprint, one that was quickly apologized for and recanted. At the time of this thesis, the Church has not ordered members or leaders to discard the manuals, but they have updated the digital version of the text on their website. In an interview with Stack (2020), Dr. Jerri Harwell, a Black associate professor shared their view on the situation:

[The manuals] should have been shredded when this egregious error was found prior to international distribution[.] …The money that would have been lost on this is nothing compared to one day's interest on $100 billion in [the Church's] reserves. [This event] will have far reaching and perhaps eternal consequences to the souls of many[.] …It saddens me that although the [top church leaders of the Church] may denounce racism, racist acts, and racist thoughts in their speeches, a manual that espouses racist gospel teachings has gone out to all 16 million members and teaches in black and white (no pun intended) the opposite.

Thus, while the Church may offer rhetorics that condemn White supremacy, some of the leaders' choices speak otherwise. It should also be noted that the latest edition of the Book of Mormon, updated in 2013 by the Church as its official online version, still contains the following verse which perpetuates the rhetoric that dark skin is cursed:

> And he [God] had caused the cursing to come upon them [the Lamanite tribes], yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. …[W]herefore, [so] that they might not be enticing [to marry]…the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. (2 Nephi 5:21)

While Mormons may assert the passage should be read figuratively and not literally, or perhaps they might frame the curse as a natural byproduct of exogamy, by not rewording the text, the Church has chosen, for whatever reason, to enshrine the racism of its past in its most current version of scripture. Similarly, a passage in the Book of Moses—another Mormon scripture—proclaims that a "blackness came upon all the children of Canaan, …[and] they were despised among all people" (Moses 7:8). By keeping these racist verses in the scriptures, I argue Mormonism continues to be a system of White supremacy. But dismantling Whiteness in the Church will be more difficult than simply editing its scriptures—a task that has already been done thousands of times (Horton, 1983). The Church, including its leaders and members, must confront its past racism and fight against its lingering effects in word and deed.

While "diversity has emerged almost defiantly from the relics of its racist past [such as] early Mormon teachings [that] Black people [were] inferior, cursed by God and unworthy to serve as clergy" (Ramirez, 2005), there are still structures of White supremacy to dismantle. This goal of unity spoken of by Mueller, for example, is still unrealized according to some Black Mormons, who make up about six percent of the Church's membership (McCombs, 2018).

Jenkins (2009) notes how Mormonism's refusal to send missionaries to Black Africa until after the priesthood ban of 1978 has led to "disappointing" recruitment efforts there, reporting that the Church in Africa "remain[s] a very marginal presence" (p. 12). At the time of the writing of this thesis, there has never been a Black leader (nor one who is openly queer, for that matter) serving as a prophet or apostle, the highest offices of Mormon hierarchy. Racial diversity is also observably lacking among the highest echelons of women leadership in the Church.

Mormons are expected to honor and praise their leaders and make a covenant, or divine promise, to never speak ill of them (Oaks, 1987). Thus, obedience to the Church's hierarchy emerges as a powerful tool of Mormon Whiteness. Non-White people have historically been undermined to not have privileges, including the privilege of agency or resistance to obedience (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996). Thus, a crucial piece to understand Mormon Whiteness is through agency and obedience. To Mormons, obedience is key, and Mormons are taught to use their agency to obey the Church's commandments. This is not a rare virtue in religious systems; in fact, it might be rarer to find a religion which does not value conformity to the organization's commandments or rules. Mormons believe that through performing rituals and strictly observing the instructions attached, they can enjoy heavenly blessings (Cook, 2018). They cite many Biblical verses, as well as passages from Mormon scriptures, that highlight the importance of good works coupled with faith. Perhaps the most potent of these is attributed to Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15, King James Version). Therefore, Mormons consider obedience to be "an expression of our love for Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ" (*Obedience,* n.d., para. 4).

While most, if not all, organizations and institutions have rules that they enforce, there are also often negative consequences set in place when these rules are violated, and incentives

when they are followed (Giddens, 1984). Poole and DeSanctis (1990) remind us that groups, such as religious communities, "are organized around common social practices…[like] making decisions, accomplishing work, socializing, …establishing power and status relations, and meeting individual needs" (p. 178). When the organization's needs are not met, control is threatened by an imbalance of power. One of the utilities of religious organizations is to meet the spiritual needs of its adherents by providing communication networks with the Divine, leaders, and peers; thus, one of the overarching goals of a religious organization's management is to use this communication to meet its own needs while simultaneously meeting the needs of its adherents, all while regulating their behavior (Johnson, 2015). This regulation may appear in scriptures, edicts, revelations, policies, rhetorics, and even informal dialogue, including silence, such as queer erasure.

In Mormonism, members are often promised heavenly blessings which may be endowed and administered in this world, or in the afterlife, for their obedience; if they choose not to obey, there are divine consequences (Holland, 1999). While doctrines and policies of stringent obedience are not uncommon among other religious groups, communities with influential Mormon presence have crafted a culture of critique-lessness bolstered by pressure to conform, complete with warnings that angels are recording all actions (Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 237). As Reicher and Haslam (2011) observed, those who are in an agentic state, or a mindset that they are solely following the commands of another, are more concerned about how well they follow through with an authority's commands rather than what those commands entail. Sadly, in Mormonism, this is a common phenomenon which has its roots in the founding years of the Church. As Joseph Smith taught, "Whatever God requires is right, no

matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof until long after the events transpire" (as cited by Benson, 1981, para. 44).

Continuing the narrative of blind obedience as being virtuous and not actually blind, Mormon prophet Spencer W. Kimball condemned critics of impervious obedience:

Blind obedience! How little they understand! . . . When men obey commands of a creator, it is not blind obedience. How different is the cowering of a subject to his totalitarian monarch and the dignified, willing obedience one gives to his God. The dictator is ambitious, selfish, and has ulterior motives. God's every command is righteous, every directive purposeful, and all for the good of the governed. The first may be blind obedience, but the latter is certainly faith obedience. ("Teaching of Spencer W. Kimball," 2006, p. 139)

In line with this teaching, Mormon leaders have framed uncontested obedience as faith. A Mormon revelation, given from God to Joseph Smith, reads, "I, [God] give unto you a new commandment, that you may understand my will concerning you; Or, in other words, *I give unto you directions how you may act…,* that it may [be]…for your salvation" (Doctrine and Covenants 82: 8-9, italics added). This scriptural passage highlights how God is the authority figure who directs behavior and choice; to go against His will is to embrace the opposite of salvation, which is damnation.

Because of such strict requirements for obedience in its strongholds, the Church relies on the culture to bolster and maintain membership through this structure of White non-resistance ideologies (Baldwin, 1963). Thus, Whiteness goes far beyond the amount of melanin one's body possesses. It breeds in the ideologies, structures, expectations, cultures, and social contracts that diffuse from rhetoric into everyday life as members of a society are pressured and socialized to

perform and enact Whiteness. Therefore, Whiteness should be understood as a system of oppression whose power impacts marginalized groups differently based on other features of their identities at certain points in time. Race must be examined in the context of queerness, especially since "LGBT[QIA] people do not have uniform interests, but [their]… interests differentiate along race and social class lines" (Meyer, 2015, p. 169). To this point, the next subsection briefly deals with the Church's history regarding queer issues.

Queerness and Mormonism

Since its early days, the Church's relationship with queers has been unpleasant. The first widely documented instance of the Mormon Church dealing with homoeroticism concerned John C. Bennett, a physician in the Mormon utopia of Nauvoo, Illinois. Bennett had originally been welcomed by the Mormons but soon created discord with his abolitionist views, as well as being rumored to be lascivious (Mitton & James, 1998). Writers for a Mormon newspaper called the *Nauvoo Wasp* (1842) recorded this uneasiness by reporting Bennett practiced "adultery, fornication, and …[b]uggery," a term interchanged with (gay) anal sex (p. 2). Whether he was actually homosexual is debated by Mormon scholars Mitton and James (1998), but Taylor (1971) suggests this ambiguity could be clarified "since Bennett never denied the charge [of sleeping with another man], perhaps he was a bisexual" (p. 134).

Decades later, when the Mormons migrated west, their leader Brigham Young created a theocracy in the Territory of Utah. There, he perpetuated homophobia by outlawing homosexual acts (Stewart, 2015). As per the Laws and Ordinances of the State of Deseret (1851), whereas consensual heterosexual sex outside marriage was also subject to punishment, the courts allowed significant latitude in assigning penalties for those found guilty of consensual same-gender sexual intercourse, or "sodomy" (Richards, 1851, p. 30). Sadly, but of noteworthy contrast, the

courts were also granted this autonomy in cases of rape, essentially assigning the two crimes to be of equal evil. This rhetoric permeates some Judeo-Christian circles and can likely be traced to the encounter of the queer men of Sodom and Lot's angels in the Old Testament (Genesis 19-20). A year later, the law was quickly revised, perhaps because of the amount of freedom concerning the court's punishment. Although the revised law did not include sodomy as a crime, "there was still a social stigma attached to homosexuality" among the Mormons and residents of Utah (Stewart, 2015, p. 1200).

This stigma continued throughout the generations. Near the end of the nineteenth century, concurring with many Biblical scholars of the time, Apostle George Q. Cannon (1897) wrote that homosexuality was the reason the Old Testament cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were "utterly destroyed" (p. 65). Cannon added that the only way to stop "these abominable crimes" of homosexuality was "the destruction of those who practice it…[or else] they would soon corrupt others" (p. 65). From statements like these, the creation and maintenance of homophobia in Mormonism is obvious. In fact, the social pressure to conform to heteronormativity is so strong still today that it has been identified as one of the primary factors leading to Mormon LGBTQIA suicides in the 21st century (Barker et al., 2017; Hilton et al., 2002; Knoll, 2016; Zwald, 2015); sadly, this is not a new story. In 1926, a Mormon lesbian couple committed suicide after feeling pressure to end their relationship ("Order Inquest," 1926).

This culture of pressurized, cisheteronormative views was carried into non-American societies by Mormon missionaries who voyaged the globe spreading the Mormon message. For example, upon traveling to Hawaii, one Mormon apostle condemned traditional *aikāne* relationships, which involved sexual relations between royal males and their male helpers (Quinn, 1996). Similarly, another apostle prognosticated that, through the Lord's wrath, the

inhabitants of Burma, present-day Myanmar, "were about to become extinct" because of their homosexual traditions (Jones, 1854, p. 46). Therefore, as the Church spread throughout the world, societies that challenged White cisheteronormativity were Othered and framed as wicked and ungodly. Simply put, they became the scapegoat for the evil in the world and the supposed cure was Mormonism. This rhetorical framing illustrates Girard's (1986) scapegoat mechanism, which observes that through imperialism or colonialism (which I argue Mormon missions perpetuate), the non-dominant individuals and social groups become Othered and scapegoats for the dominant group's problems. Harmoniously enough, the concept of scapegoats arose out of a Jewish ritual in which a priest removed all of the people's sins, transferred them onto a living goat, and then banished the sin-absorbed animal to the wilderness (Leviticus 16:20-21). In this case, in historical and contemporary Mormon rhetoric, queer individuals are made into scapegoats for the world's woes. Cheng (2011) explains how the process unfolds, writing, "Once the scapegoat is expelled or destroyed, societal order is restored. This mechanism then repeats itself over and over" (p. 95). Indeed, the cycle of making queers into scapegoats would continue to amass in Mormonism throughout the centuries.

Throughout the latter half of the 1900s, and into the Sexual Revolution, the Church slowly simmered their violent anti-queer rhetoric, with one notable exception. In a sermon by Apostle Boyd K. Packer (1976), the leader included a story of a missionary who assaulted his gay companion for reportedly hitting on him, an act that the apostle commended. But outside of this exception, Church leaders began to move away from physically threatening queers, and instead perpetually crafted a culture that socially and psychologically paralyzed LGBTQIA communities. But later, in 1993, the rumbustious Packer again promoted anti-queer sentiment by pontificating to faculty and staff at Brigham Young University (BYU), a top school in Utah

owned by the Church, that along with intellectuals and feminists, homosexuals were the biggest

threat to the Church (Whitney, 2007). Not only did their rhetoric promote homosexuality as a

harm to the organization, but also taught that homosexuality was harmful to those who identify

as gay.

Spencer W. Kimball (1969), a soft-spoken yet stern president and prophet of the Church,

taught that homosexuality was evil and "an ugly sin" (p. 39) but, like diseases, it can be cured,

and with "the aid of the Spirit… [homosexuality can be] totally conquer[ed]" (p. 42). Ergo,

convinced that homosexuality was an illness that could be cured, BYU conducted therapies well

into the 1980s intended to change or shock the patient into heterosexuality. It wasn't until a

decade later that Mormon psychologists at BYU and elsewhere gave up this view, admitting that

"the great majority of those who are homosexually oriented cannot fundamentally alter their

feelings by desire, therapy, or religious practice" (Schow, 2005, p. 134). In the early 1970s,

homosexuality was being removed as a mental illness from most psychiatry and psychological

diagnosis manuals (Cochran et al., 2014) and the Church soon began to change their etiological

perspectives as well.

These changes in the social sciences paralleled changes in debates for civil protections

and liberties in the United States during the 1980s, remnants of the Civil Rights movement

decades earlier. As debate grew in the United States surrounding a new version of the Equal

Rights Amendment, or ERA, that sought protections for women and queers, the Church

published an article in their *Ensign Magazine*, indicating that the Church has the responsibility to

share its anti-ERA views with its adherents and citizens. Using fear-mongering and other

manipulative communication, the article shares one of the reasons the Mormon Church (1980)

brazenly opposes the law:

Passage of the ERA would carry with it the risk of extending constitutional protection to immoral same-sex—lesbian and homosexual—marriages . . . A result would be that any children brought to such a marriage by either partner or adopted by the couple could legally be raised in a homosexual home. While it cannot be stated with certainty whether this or any other consequence will result from the vague language of the amendment, the possibility cannot be avoided. ("Frequently Asked Questions," para. 44)

This statement is not only concerning in its rhetoric purporting that it is immoral for folks of a same gender to marry, but also in its stance that a homosexual couple is less able to provide a healthy home for children. The article also condemned transgender, non-binary gender, and intersex individuals, claiming, "In the beginning God did not create a neuter 'them'—but 'male and female created he them'" (para. 69). It also seems to condemn those who do not agree with traditional gender roles of male and female parents, stating, "Life was meant to bring—and can bring—great joy and happiness. But that happiness depends, in part, on men and women, as parents, discovering and fulfilling the roles to which each is especially suited" (para. 69).

Despite such vehement hate and traditional expectations, a unique sense of fresh air arose when apostle Dallin H. Oaks (1995), gave a sermon condemning gay-bashing or "physical or verbal attacks on persons thought to be involved in homosexual or lesbian behavior" (1995, para. 20). However, Mormon leaders maintained their heterosexist stance suggesting that homosexuality undoubtedly leads to "discouragement, disappointment, and despair" and that the legalization of same-sex marriage would "unravel the fabric of human society" ("Frequently Asked Questions," 1980, para. 17, 18).

Not only does Mormonism consider homosexuality immoral and disruptive or even destructive to society, it can be argued that same-gender attraction is treated as a type of disease.

According to Mormon scripture, during the resurrection, an immortal state achieved after every human dies, their "spirit and …body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame" (Alma 11:43). This means that in the afterlife, every person's body will be free from any illness, ailment, or disability they experienced on Earth. This doctrine has undoubtedly given hope to many people, and especially to those who are differently abled and experience any kind of handicap (Andersen, 2008). Unfortunately, a modern apostle, Jeffrey R. Holland, likened homosexuality to one of these physical challenges. He said, "I do know that [homosexuality] will not be a post-mortal condition. It will not be a post-mortal difficulty" (Whitney, 2007, para. 71). Thus, the "curing" of homosexuality, like a disease or a disability, is viewed analogously to an amputee growing her leg back, or someone healed of Down syndrome, through the resurrection. This rhetoric frames queers as mentally ill—to say nothing of the Church's rampant ableism broadly.

More recently, perhaps one of the most harmful new policies of the Mormon Church concerned children who lived with same-sex couples. This 2015 "baptismal" policy mandated that church leaders ensure that children did not live with a same-gender couples and that they were "committed to live the teachings and doctrine of the Church, and specifically disavow... the practice of same-gender cohabitation and marriage" before they were allowed to be baptized (Church Handbook 1, 2015, para. 5). The policy was dictated in a private handbook only meant for church leaders, but it was leaked soon after its revision (Dobner, 2015). The changes sparked public outrage as Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah and elsewhere "pour[ed] out their pain and confusion at family dinners and on Mormon blogs" (Goldstein, 2015, para. 3). In an effort to protest the policy, a mass resignation was quickly planned and executed in a Salt Lake City park

near the Church's headquarters, resulting in about 1,500 Mormons resigning from the Church (Moyer, 2015).

Beyond the societal repercussions the baptismal policy evoked, it is also a violation of contemporary Mormon doctrine. "All are alike unto God," as a Mormon scripture says (2 Nephi 26:13), and in a similar vein, a prominent Mormon scholar notes:

> Whenever an individual or a nation achieves greatness in the Book of Mormon, it is because the people...treat each other as equals. In contrast, the many tragic pitfalls of pride that the Book of Mormon outlines can be traced to a person or persons withholding charity [Christ-like love] and thinking they are above another. (Newell, 2007, para. 3)

The policy also contradicted one of the Articles of Faith, which are "important statements of inspiration, history, and doctrine for the Church" (*Church History,* 2003, p. 257). The second Article of Faith proclaims that people "will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression" (Articles of Faith 1:2). This belief clearly removes Mormonism from the concept of original sin, deemed here as "Adam's transgression," and one could argue that the scripture corroborates Ezekiel's charge in the Old Testament that "[the] son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son" (Ezekiel 18:20).

However, Mormon and Judeo-Christian scriptures also contain examples of one person's choice affecting the lives of future generations (Deuteronomy 5:9; Doctrine & Covenants 98:28; Hebrews 7:5-10). Nevertheless, I contend that the spirit of the Mormon law is rooted in personal agency and accountability for the individual. Since Mormons view the purpose of life as a chance to develop and grow in order to experience "the kind of [eternal] life that God lives" (*Gospel Principles*, 2011, p. 276), then one must remember a cardinal Mormon scripture: you "are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life"

(2 Nephi 10:23). Because the baptismal policy aggressively punished children of same-gender couples for their parents' "sin" of cohabitation, I argue this baptismal policy violated its own doctrine. One argument I have heard from loyal Mormons is that the policy extends equally well to children of polygamous families, as if a policy that discriminates against children of polygamous parents validates a policy that discriminates against children of LGBTQIA parents. In my mind, it doesn't. Children of polygamous families are just as innocent as children of same-gender families. While the Church has issued a statement that the baptismal policy "is about love and especially the love of the Savior and how He wants people to be helped and fed and lifted" (Weaver, 2015), it is clear that through these policies that children of same-gender parents are not welcomed.

In the spring of 2019, just prior to the annual General Conference, Church leaders called a press conference announcing the reversal of the policy. They offered no apologies and only said that the change was intended "to reduce the hate and contention so common today" (Wamsley, 2019, para. 2). Given this continuing strain of ambiguity and dissonance among Church practices and practitioners, the Mormon Church's relationship with its LGBTQIA members and allies remains uncertain. One example of recent precarity occurred in February and March of 2020 when changes in BYU's Honor Code created consternation regarding queer students' rights to date individuals of the same gender (Walch, 2020). With regards to the future, former church historian Marlin K. Jensen shared in an PBS interview that while it was very unlikely for the Church to ever fully embrace homosexuality, "through revelation, …anything could be changed" (PBS.org, "The Mormons: Interview Marlin Jensen," para. 51). Such a statement dovetails nicely with the function of possibility that lies at the root of queer theory.

While the Mormon Church has undergone significant and often timely reforms and restorations in its recent past, in terms of queer issues it is still obdurate. In 2012, the Church launched an official webpage for its queer members, called "Mormon and Gay" (Walch, 2016). The webpage promulgates the belief that "the doctrine of marriage between a man and woman is an integral teaching of The Church…and will not change" (MormonAndGay.org, "Frequently Asked Questions," para. 11). In an attempt to provide resources for parents of LGBTQIA children, the Mormon Church posted on that site a page called "Ten Tips for Parents." There, they invite parents to understand that queerness is no one's fault, encourage parents to not ask God why or to take away this challenge, exhort parents to remember there is no shame in grieving, and advise parents that the "most helpful question you can ask is…[h]ow can I help? How can I be the mom or dad my child needs? How can we learn from this?" (Mormonandgay.lds.org, 2018, para. 9). Limited as it may be, I believe this resource is a step in the right direction and can hopefully promote understanding and true love in Mormon families and communities so that queer members are able to live in safe spaces.

Now that an overview of the rhetorical history of Mormonism and queerness has been discussed, the next section more broadly explores how other religions and Mormonism, impacts queer identity and relationships. Then, existing research regarding the Church and queerness will be reviewed.

Research on Queerness and Religion

Most, if not all, major world religions have policies or doctrines regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. The nexus of queerness and religion can be difficult to manage and experience in terms of psychological, relational, and spiritual impacts (Dreyer, 2013). Instead of focusing on how to cure the heterosexist hate within their own religious communities, some religions,

including Mormonism, emphasize that they must instead cure or fix the "sinful," "ungodly," or "unnatural" love that queer people feel for others. In other words, Mormonism treats queer love as anathema, and perpetuates an intolerance and, in some cases, a hatred of queers. Thus, their energy is spent on regulating and condemning queer love, instead of condemning the hate some of their members have towards queers. Unfortunately, sometimes, queer children may experience this hate manifested by those who introduced them to the religion in the first place: their family.

The family. For most children, queer or otherwise, the home is their first contact with religion. In religious families who are traditional or orthodox, religious views can be devasting to queer children. Some queer individuals who grow up in such circumstances experience intense family pressure to conform to their parents' religious ideologies. Al-Sayyad (2010), for example, found that this restrictive, homophobic familial pressure was especially prevalent in some communities in regions of North Africa and the Middle East. Religious culture, though at times ubiquitous in many cultures, can be amplified within the walls of the home. As Abdi and van Gilder (2016) avouch, "separating Islamic values from Iranian culture is not easy, as many of the shared histories that shape Iranian identity are inextricably linked to [the religion]" (p. 73). Analogously, slivers of Mormon ideology are manifested in Utah culture generally and loom around the communities and homes of orthodox Mormon families.

Instead of being places of love, safety, and comfort, homes of religious families can send a message to LGBTQIA youth that queerness results in nothing but anxiety, shame, hate, psychological and physical harm (Yep, 2003); and in religious homes, I would add to that list the spiritual pain of believing they betrayed their God. Researchers have linked unsupportive families with a myriad of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2010). By

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contrast, parental support, when it is offered, can have a positive impact on queer individuals; as Grafsky (2014) suggests, "many parent-child relationships either stay the same or improve" after the child discloses their queer identities with the family (p. 37).

Extant research on queer Mormons. Individuals with intersectional religious and queer identities are at risk for a decline in mental health (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015). Utah, the motherland of the Mormon Church, suffers from a unique problem of morosely high levels of suicide, including among queer individuals (Utah Department of Health, 2017). Some submit that the Church's rhetoric and culture may be a factor in this horrific phenomenon (Barker et al., 2017; Hilton et al., 2002; Knoll, 2016; Zwald, 2015). Unsurprisingly, then, much of the research conducted thus far on the topic has been done by mental health professionals (as opposed to church officials), who have emphasized the importance of addressing the peculiar concerns of wellbeing surrounding queer Mormons (Cranney, 2017; Goodwill, 2008; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014).

John Gustav-Wrathall, a gay Mormon, presented a talk (2017), which was later transcribed in an independent Mormon quarterly journal, sharing his reasons for staying a Mormon despite his excommunication due to his same-sex marriage. He professed that God told him to stay in the Church and that is why he stays. While Gustav-Wrathall founded Affirmation, one of the oldest organizations dedicated to serving queer Mormons, this speech's data only provides insights from one person; therefore, the topic needs to be explored more in-depth.

To date, I have found only two projects conducted by communication scholars regarding queer Mormons. The first is a conference paper presented at the National Communication Association by Scholz (2008), a trailblazer in understanding queer Mormons' identities. In her paper she "legitimize[s]…the field of public communication as a significant means to studying

homosexual identity formation" (p. 3) and offers insights on how "GLBT individuals rhetorically construct and negotiate their conflicting identities and the consequences that follow" (p. 4). Scholz used content and rhetorical analysis of webpages by an online LGBTQIA-Mormon community called Affirmation to analyze how rhetoric produced by the Church hierarchy impacts group membership and identity disclosure.

The second is Roberts's (2015) dissertation which explores Church rhetorical devices used to yield First Amendment protections as justifications for anti-queer political activism. By analyzing the *Mormon and Gay* website, Roberts develops a theory of "(lie)alectics" which is based on the Mormon Church's rhetorical communication that attempts "to appear non-homophobic while maintaining homophobic church doctrine" (p. vi). Roberts's dissertation, like Scholz's work, is groundbreaking, but both of these studies used only online data. The present thesis will be the first study in communication to collect data from in-person interviews, and to focus on the intrapersonal and interpersonal impacts surmised therefrom.

As for fields outside of communication studies, a team of psychologists (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2015) investigated the psychosocial navigation and negotiation of queer Mormons. They found that "rejecting one's religious identity is the most common path for [Mormon] LGBTQIA individuals" (p. 20). Not only does it seem to be the most common, but that "option [also] appears to be associated with greater psychosocial health and quality of life" as compared to "rejecting one's LGBTQIA identity or compartmentalizing one's religious and sexual identities" (p. 20). Therefore, these scholars found, it was "rare" for queer Mormons to successfully "integrate" or "compartmentalize" their two very different identities (p. 20). The present thesis takes up these authors' call to discover the lives of this "rare" group of individuals

who choose to integrate both identities, including revelations on the reasons why some are willing to sacrifice their wellbeing to participate in the Church.

This chapter has reviewed past research conducted involving queer Mormons. While there have been a handful of studies related to the present study's topic, this thesis will be the first to examine identity performance with regards to the liminalities and paradoxes of being a White queer member of the Mormon Church. This chapter has also examined theoretical and conceptual frameworks that will inform the analysis of the data, including Whiteness and queer theory. The next chapter discusses how these frameworks will be used alongside research methodologies to inform the thesis's inquiries regarding identity performance.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGIES

Racialization is a myth told about God in the sense that race has been thought to be embedded in

the very fabric of divine creation. Race is [in reality] a colonial story.

—Luis D. León, *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez*

In this chapter, I recapitulate the research questions posited for the thesis. Then, I have

the privilege of introducing you to the participants. After that, I cover the methodological

approaches used while conducting the interviews, including the review of data collection

procedures and compliance with the Institutional Review Board. Finally, this chapter ends with a

brief glance at the themes that emerged based on the thematic analysis of the interview

transcriptions.

Research Questions

In the present study, I will be seeking to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do queer Mormons stay involved in a Church that historically and presently

discriminates against them?

RQ2: What are the ideological and rhetorical mechanisms present in the culture and

social systems of the participants that impact their agency?

RQ3: What are the communicative patterns of identity performances by queer Mormons

in regard to their queerness and relationships with themselves, others, and God?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed 15 active members of the Mormon

Church who are transgender, bisexual, or gay. The next section offers more details about the

participants, as well as the format of the interviews and the methodologies deployed to collect the data.

Data Collection

Interviewees. In the fall of 2018, I conducted a survey study on LGBTQIA Mormons. At the end of that study, the majority of respondents indicated that they were willing to participate in any future studies I might be doing (i.e., this current thesis). This indication allowed me to know their contact information and willingness to participate. I sent emails to all of the survey participants and asked if they would like to participate in this current study. I also used my connection with Affirmation (a queer-Mormon nonprofit group) to spread the word to other groups (including on the group's social media pages—which many allowed me to share on their Facebook pages). From there, several participants reached out to their peers which resulted in snowball sampling.

Exclusion criteria included prospective participants' age (not a legal adult), non-queer identity, and inability to understand English. Before the interviews began, I asked the participants if they understood the criteria for this research study, or if they had any problems with the consent form. All participants agreed to the consent form and decided to participate. While Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that saturation, or the plateauing of new information from participants, generally occurs after 12 interviews, I had the honor of interviewing 15 participants.

Since some of the participants have not shared their queer identity with anyone, or a very small number of people, I allowed them the choice of choosing an alias or having me choose one. Out of the 15 participants, 12 of them are cisgender and gay; the other three are transgender, one of whom is pansexual, while one is straight and the other gay. The three transgender

participants are known throughout the study as Fielding, Taylor, and Nelson. The 12 cisgender participants are named Joseph, Monson, Ezra, Gordon, Brigham, George Albert, Wilford, Lorenzo, Heber, McKay, Harold, and Kimball. All of the participants' pseudonyms are names of Mormon prophets.

All of the participants in this study were currently active in the Church at the time of the interviews. While the Church has no publicly available statement about how they measure activeness, I borrow Dehlin and his team's (2015) criterion as attending church meetings once a month. Church is held every Sunday, even on holidays. However, because the nature of this project involves identity, I also wanted to ensure that the participants attend church meetings because of genuine personal beliefs. Therefore, all participants have a personal belief, or testimony, in most (if not all) Mormon topics, attend church meetings consistently, and most of them have a calling in their local congregations, known as wards. Since the Church relies on volunteers of the members to sustain its wards, Mormons are offered to serve in specific leadership positions termed *callings*.

The age of the participants varied between 21 and 55 years old. Six of the 15 participants are married, all to spouses of a different gender. All of the participants identify as White or Caucasian. Two participants identify as British and live in the U.K.; all the others are U.S. Americans, who live in the continental U.S., mostly in the Mormon Culture Region that was discussed in chapter two. The homogeneity of the participants (particularly in regard to race and gender) was unplanned. However, as this thesis is a critical exploration, I would be negligent to not highlight this issue. This homogeneity, I believe, arose in part because of the recruitment methods (mostly Facebook); it appears that my apparent White maleness could have an impact on the alacrity of non-Whites or non-males from participating in a study done by someone who

looks like me. I was also new to these groups (I joined them as a recruitment tool) and thus my trust, or even familiarity, in the online communities had not yet been established, potentially stopping more (diverse) people from participating. A scroll through the membership rosters of the groups reveals the large majority are White and male-bodied. The limitations of the participants' homogeneity are discussed further in the final chapter.

Interviews. To gain a rich understanding of the participants' experiences, I utilized performative interviewing to collect and analyze the data. According to Denzin (2001), performance interviews arose out of the ethnodramaturgical approach, which seeks to situate the interviews "in complex systems of discourse, where traditional, every day and avant-garde meanings…come together and inform one another…[and the] meanings of lived experience are inscribed and made visible" (p. 26). The interview consisted of open-ended questions, allowing the participants to share their thoughts, emotional expressions, narratives, and ideas.[3] These questions were aimed at exploring the participants' lived experiences as queer Mormons in multiple settings, contexts, and relationships throughout different times of their life; for this reason, the interview covered a wide range of questions and topics. Some questions were dedicated to learning about participants' family, for example, "What was it like growing up with your family?" This question provided a foundation upon which the participants expounded on their dynamics of the past, so that I was able to ask follow-up questions regarding their current relationships, and how they envision their future.

Other questions explored their relationship with the Divine, church members, their mission experience, dating or marriage, living in Mormon-saturated communities, obedience and conformity, identity performance, involvement with LGBTQIA communities, and their

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[3] A copy of the interview guide can be found in the appendix.

relationship with themselves. These inquiries included prompts such as "Tell me about your relationship with God," "Can you think of a time you felt pressured to conform in the Church?," and "How do you decide with whom you will share your queerness?"

During these interviews, I paid particular attention to the participants' embodied performance. Anzaldúa (1987) suggests that only "through the body…can the human soul be transformed. And [in order] for …words [and] stories to have…transformative power, they must arise from the human body" (p. 97). Her insights remind us of the knowledge held within the body itself. There is no way to separate the experiences of humans without recognizing the position and function of the body. In this case, "performative" means the verbal and nonverbal communicative acts, or performances, that promote not only an identity, but also the cultural and societal expectations that are tied to such acts (Eguchi & Collier, 2018). Therefore, as queer theory reminds us, the body is a site of knowledge production that generates unique information and experience— even among individuals from the same culture or group—a production of knowledge that is "charged by a desire for a generative and embodied reciprocity" (Madison, 2006, p. 320). To conduct performative interviews is to be mindful that the participants "are real bodies and real persons being theorized and analyzed" (Moreman & Briones, 2018, p. 220). This approach leads the researcher to engage in critical reflexivity, a method that suggests that I also became a participant during this process. To this end, I was open to sharing my perspectives, positionality, and experiences; my goal was not to monopolize or discredit, but instead to move the interview from an interrogation to a discussion (Eguchi & Baig, 2018).

Using a semi-structured format, all interviews were either conducted over the phone or via FaceTime. Nonverbal cues, including paralinguistics and kinesics were noted during the interviews to aid in emotional communication. These notes also aided my methodological goal of

performative interviews—particularly with regards to the importance of the body, and a reminder that a performative approach is "intimate play" (Alexander & Meyers, 2010, p. 263). Not only were the participants performing themselves to me, a stranger (except for two of them, who were old friends), but I was also performing with them. Thus, every time I noticed a significant nonverbal cue, such as vocal pitch intonation or an emotive facial expression, I wrote it in my interview notes in real time and highlighted the nonverbal performance to the participants' verbal communication in context.

Alexander & Myers (2010) consider interviews "a collision of forces, the real and the thought to be real, co-habitating and co-animating in intimate play" (p. 263). Therefore, performance of one's self reminds us that humans are capable of creating ourselves. How we perform our identity changes based on contexts and situations in space and time. Our identity is impacted by social factors, personal and shared experiences, relationships with others, perceptions of events, and, sometimes, perceptions of how others perceive us. This social and emotional arena is where queer theory's emphasis on the body and its affect was particularly helpful. While such explorations can be complex and monotonous, Yep (2010) argues it "can produce more nuanced, richer, and more intricate research" (p. 174).

By affirming the participants' experiences, and sharing some of my own, I did my best to create a safe space for the interviewees so that they felt like they could explore and perform their true selves without feeling judged or used. Conquergood (1985) commented on the goals of the research experience, urging interviewers to resist conclusions, and provide interactions in which both parties can "question, debate, and challenge one another" (p. 9). The interactions with all participants were done with beneficence. It was important to recognize the participants' words, utterances, and lack thereof. Weiss (2005) suggests that "a person's language, the aggregation of

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[their] individual utterances, is reflective of that person's identity: We …reveal our 'selves' to others, we believe, through the medium of speech, and conceal our 'selves' through our silences and evasion" (p. 78). Thus, the interview process not only revealed important experiences lived by the participants, but crucial features of their identity.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As a queer individual raised in an orthodox Mormon home in Utah, I have experienced challenges which can arise from Mormon expectations and dominance and its inextricable influence on Utah culture. Even now, as I conduct research to explore the lives of Mormons who do not fit within the confines of heterosexuality or the gender binary, I risk ruffling feathers in the Mormon community. Delving into the history and rhetoric and describing the culture that has grown out of the Church is frightening and paralyzing at times. I am constantly engaging in self-reflexivity. In the pithy but trenchant words of Ahmed (2017), "When you expose a problem, you pose a problem" and "[you] become a problem when [you] describe a problem" (pp. 37, 39). According to loyal Mormons, the issues caused by White cisheteronormativity are not at all the fault of the Mormon structure or organization, but perhaps I might be at fault for shedding light on these topics. Mormonism, after all, according to its own set of scriptures, is "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30), so how dare I critique it?

Because of my positionality, it is crucial that I engage in critical self-reflexivity as I conduct this "mesearch." This method is a step towards recognizing my personal biases and positionality through constant mindfulness and social awareness. Perhaps the word *step* does not quite capture its essence, as McIntosh and Hobson (2013) assert that "reflexivity is a process" that requires "a constant acknowledgement of our bodies in relation to power and difference" (p.

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3). This process is not to be underrated or taken lightly. Because of critical reflexivity's nature, Jones (2010) warns scholars that this approach is "uncomfortable," "laborious," and painful (p. 124). Critical reflexivity also reminded me to be aware of the humanness of the participants and, really, their courage, by sharing their potentially traumatic and painful memories and experiences. This reflexivity called for awareness of my own experiences during the interviews and required mindfulness of a phenomenological and embodied discussion and discourse produced by myself and the participants (Sekimoto & Brown, 2016).

In this thesis, I adopt a critical approach, meaning the research's purpose is to critique the systems and structures of oppression and harmful hegemony (Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2013). By acknowledging injustices, scholars can offer solutions on how to build more equity in affected communities (DiAngelo, 2018); improve quality of life, including among queer people of color (Eguchi & Asante, 2016); develop healthier family relationships (Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Chevrette, 2013; Eguchi & Long, 2019) and more inclusive organizations (Gamson, 2003; McDonald, 2015). The participants' experiences highlight all these different situations and sites, requiring the thesis to pay attention to the complexity of the rhetorical impacts on their behavior and communication. As Fontana and Frey (2005) remind researchers, "It is clear that gender, sexuality, and race cannot be considered in isolation; … [they] are all part of the complex, yet often ignored, elements that shape" one's life (p. 712). Thus, I was mindful of the complex features of identity performance in an effort to add richness to the findings.

Data Analysis

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants. All of the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. The discussions were conducted in English since all the participants spoke English (American or British dialects) as their mother tongue. On average, the

interviews lasted 120 minutes. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview, the participants were asked the same questions; however, the flow and depth of each answer varied depending on the participants' insights and experiences. After the interviews were conducted, the interviews were transcribed.

The transcription data from the interviews was separated from the participants' names, since some participants have not shared their queer identities openly; thus, failure to take measures of their participation in this research could have negative consequences by accidentally "outing" them (Eguchi, 2009). All documents and recordings were kept in a safe location and stored on locked devices. As discussed above, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. After the transcription, a critical thematic analysis was done to identify and organize common themes.

Thematic analysis is a family of flexible methodologies whose goals are to interpret and analyze texts based on identifying similar patterns, known as themes. While there are many iterations of thematic analyses, Braun and Clarke (2006) demarcate the methodology by considering it a six-step process: 1) the researcher should familiarize themselves with the data; 2) they should begin to generate initial codes, based on a wide-range of emerging topical patterns; 3) the researcher should begin to search for themes throughout the various texts; 4) a review of the themes should be conducted to ensure accuracy and inclusion; 5) these nascent themes should be named and defined; 6) the research can release the report of the thematic findings. Similarly, Owen's (1984) tripartite guide to thematic analysis encourages researchers to identify and deconstruct the data based on recurrent, repeating, and forceful communicative happenings. Forcefulness relates to the power behind the words in terms of the significant meaning they have to the specific data, the participants, and for which purposes. Owen (1984) distinguishes

recurrent themes as similar words or phrases used by various participants throughout the data that are not necessarily verbatim, while repeating themes are times in which the participants actually use the exact words or phrases as other participants—providing insights into key words or cultural-specific terms.

For this thesis then, the process of the coding consisted of reading and re-reading the transcripts for various themes, printing each of the transcripts so they were separated per participant, and then color-coding the transcribed interviews to help organize the separate topics. For example, all interview data regarding self-hate was color-coded in red, while data regarding participants' relationship with the Divine was color-coded in blue. I wrote the various themes on a large white board in an effort to keep the various themes organized. On this white board with the various themes, I would note which page numbers on the transcript participants the data was found. For example, for the theme of personal connections with God, I would note how data could be found on page two of Taylor's transcript, page four on Monson's, and page seven on Wilford's. This organization was crucial considering the length of the interviews provided many themes to emerge—some with more richness than others.

While drafting sections of the findings, I would revisit the notes I made during the interviews to refresh any emotional or nonverbal expressions that were not easily evident in the transcription. The rounds of coding began to form a plethora of topical themes and patterns known as axial codes, which ultimately revealed overarching and encompassing human qualities shared by this unique group (Charmaz, 2006). Those axial codes revealed patterns that became the four major themes discussed in the next chapter.

While I followed the steps and guidelines listed from above from Owen (1984) and Braun and Clarke (2006), I conducted the analysis using a critical lens; thus, the data was analyzed

using a burgeoning methodology some scholars are labeling critical thematic analysis (Lawless

& Chen, 2019), an analytical tool which blends the use of critical approaches to thematic

analysis methodologies. Again, critical approaches include "any research that recognizes

power—[and] seeks in its analyses to plumb the archeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to

understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be" (Cannella and Lincoln,

2015, p. 244). Therefore, when I conducted the tripartite guide and six-step process of thematic

analysis, the sociocultural and ideological structures of Mormon White cisheteronormativity

were constantly being identified and applied to the interview data provided by the participants.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Our Heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings,

than we are ready to believe or receive.

—Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet*

In this chapter, the major themes from the interviews are revealed, explained, and analyzed. These themes, which illuminate features of White transgender, bisexual, and gay Mormon identity performances are: 1) queerness as non-identity, 2) the primacy of divine identity, 3) paradoxes of ideologies, and 4) health issues regarding identity performance. The communicative impacts of these themes highlight the various intricacies of Mormon rhetoric, culture, and discourse in the participants' lives. In an effort to elucidate the participants' experiences within their unique religio-cultural spaces, each of the themes is situated in context of Mormon rhetoric, including manifestations of Whiteness. This chapter will analyze each of the four themes as subsections, providing a thick description analysis of the participants' narratives and experiences, situated within the rhetorical effects produced by Mormon structure and culture.

Queerness as Non-Identity

As this analysis is dedicated to explorations into gay, bisexual, and transgender Mormon identity, it is important to acknowledge that some participants avoid these labels and instead prefer the term *same-sex attracted*, or that they experience gender dysphoria. In other words,

some of the participants choose to perform their queerness as something a piece of their human experience, not as a feature of their identity. This strategic communicative distancing between one's self regarding their attraction or gender expression and how one views themselves in terms of queer identity, becomes what I refer to as *non-identity*. Verily, performing queerness as non-identity appears to be a strategy of self-preservation in which some of the participants choose to not identify as transgender, gay, or bisexual—instead they consider their attraction and gender expression as experiences, not as features of their identity.

Mormon rhetoric is a propellant in developing non-identity and encouraging queer members to embrace it, and thus some of the participants adhere to these rhetorics in attempt to uphold the status quo. Perhaps the most salient example of this can be found on the Church's official webpage MormonAndGay.org, which declares, "[a]ttraction is not identity" (*About Sexual Orientation,* 2018, para. 4). This brief but poignant example may be an attempt to coax the individual to distance themselves from their queerness, or, perform queerness as non-identity.

For example, Heber prefers the term same-sex attracted, because it is the term the Church widely promoted around the time he was coming to terms with his sexuality. For decades, Church rhetoric historically asserted that gay identity was innately a term used by the worldly and unrepentant (Kimball, 1969; Monson, Eyring, Uchtdorf, 2015; Rector, Jr., 1981). In an anonymous article written in the Church's *Ensign Magazine*, the author (1986) warns:

> "The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality." Thus spoke President Ezra Taft Benson in his first general conference address as President of the Church. "In the category of sins," he continued, "the Book of Mormon places unchastity next to murder."
>
> …If we are to preserve our children from the plaguing sin of this generation, we must teach dearly and provide guidelines that will protect them. They must understand

the sacred nature of procreation.…We also need to teach our children plainly that

homosexuality is a perversion of the Lord's designated roles of men and women.

("Talking with your Children", para. 1, 2, 10)

Under the purview of protecting the traditional family by instructing members to obey strictly the

laws of sexual chastity—and thus, shielding children from evils of the world—the Church

equated homosexuals with perverts. From a young age then, Mormon children were (are)

rhetorically inoculated to believe that homosexuality is a perversion and a tool used by the devil

to destroy families. Due to rhetorics similar to this, it takes little imagination to suppose why

many queer Mormons are reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation or identity, even to

themselves (Ivanov et al., 2016).

Consider some examples of Mormon rhetoric on gender dysphoria and transgender

issues. An official Church essay professes that the devil "seeks to... distract us from the truth…

[and] attempts to undermine the family by confusing gender" ("*Satan*," n.d., para. 4). Thus,

according to Mormon rhetoric, the devil is to blame for gender dysphoria, transgender identity,

and other gender nonconforming performances, which will lead to the destabilization of

families. By choosing to associate themselves with someone who experiences same-sex

attraction or gender dysphoria instead of someone who is gay or transgender, some of the

participants manifest their identity performance as members of a Church that labels queers as

unholy—and in the case of nonbinary individuals, as mentally ill or defiant of God's creation of

the gender binary.

These problematic discourses and rhetorics have direct impacts on shaping self-

perception and self-worth. My participant Lorenzo said that he always avoided the term *gay*

until recently because of the Church's condemnation of the term as a reference to a way of life he

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chose not to adhere to. Through doing research and personally studying homosexuality, Lorenzo

is currently in the process of negotiating this (non)identity. He spoke to the difficulty of changing

his views because of growing up surrounded with the anti-gay messages and cultural values of

the Church:

> I grew up in the Church, and my family—we were like the extra-Mormony Mormons.
>
> We were weird even in our ward because we always had family scripture study every
>
> single day without fail, we were always at the church, my mom was Relief Society
>
> President a couple times and my dad was on High Councils.
>
> So, growing up in the Church was good, but I always associated the term *gay* with
>
> a lifestyle choice, and I just don't adhere to that, but I don't have a problem with it. I think
>
> it fits sometimes; it's an easy word to use in certain situations where it makes sense to use
>
> it, but just in being correct about myself, I'd never use that word about myself before. But
>
> I've been doing a lot of personal research and a little bit more studying, and, for a long
>
> time ... I'm trying to get away from looking at my orientation as a psychological
>
> altercation or like some kind of illness or something, you know? I'm trying to just look at
>
> myself as a person of what I am versus that I have something. I am trying to get away
>
> from looking at my orientation as some kind of sickness and just looking at myself as a
>
> person.

First, Lorenzo's self-communication is caught in the crossfires of this delicate identity

performance and negotiation. His sentiment and situation acknowledge how challenging it can be

to move past religious-based bigotry and accept one's authentic self. Of course, these

interpersonal impacts of the Church's rhetoric are exactly what this thesis aims to uncover. The

words taught by Church leaders get passed down to parents, who share with their children the

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Church's viewpoints as absolute truths. In these families, continual inculcation makes it difficult for Mormon youth and even adults to make decisions independent of the Church's teachings. For queer members, this can lead to intense identity conflict, especially internalized queerphobia.

When someone who is queer has disgust, hatred, or fear of queer folks—whether homosexual (homophobia), transgender (transphobia), asexual (acephobia), or against any other queer identity—they are experiencing what I amalgamate as *internalized queerphobia.* Scholars have captured the psychosocial maladies wrought by internalized homophobia/transphobia for decades (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Cronin, Pepping, & Lyons, 2019; Rood et al., 2017; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002) and have catalogued how religious organizations have perpetuated these queerphobic structures of intolerance and enmity (Boswell, 2015; Cheng, 2011; Foucault, 1990). Sadly, all of my participants shared that they either currently or formerly experienced internalized queerphobia. It appears that this self-hatred is a common pattern that leads some of the participants to perform their queerness as non-identity.

As was exemplified by Lorenzo's narrative, the majority of participants come in contact with queerphobic messages through family members, Church materials, and in Church events or meetings. In an effort to combat the barrage of constant doctrinal influence, some of the participants labor to convince themselves and others that they are not queer. This was the case with Lorenzo, who viewed his sexuality as a sickness, and thus something that he wished could be cured. He subsequently distanced himself from any queer label in fear that it would only validate his "illness" further. Now that he recognizes this misinformation, he is beginning to embrace a feature of his identity he formerly considered a frailty.

For example, Joseph, a gay young adult who was raised in the Church, shared how

Mormon rhetorics impacted his decision to disclose his homosexuality, attributed to his internalized homophobia, and ultimately impacted his self-identify:

> Back in high school, I remember seeing all of the different messages. Some of them were videos from North Star [a conservative Mormon-queer group] and their conclusion would be a big coming unto Christ moment. Like, "I just realized that this attraction's not a big part of who I am. And I'm focusing on my relationship with Christ, nothing else." And I remember in contrasting that with a YouTube video that I saw, of someone coming out as a gay Mormon. And me thinking, "What? What is this? Is this allowed?" And I actually felt drawn to that, which, at the time, I felt was Satan, saying, "You should just identify with the attraction."

> I remember wanting to come out to my high school, and saying like, "Hey, I'm a gay Mormon, whatever that means," and that would have been catastrophic, because I had no idea who I was, really, at that point, because I hadn't even actually scooped out the internalized homophobia.

> ...I remember having a church meeting at someone's house and there was this guy who looked very gay, he sounded very gay, and I was just so uncomfortable. Not that I had never seen someone who gave off gay vibes, but it reminded me of the things that I was uncomfortable about myself. Like, any time I would see a recording of myself, or hear my voice recorded, I just like, "Oh my gosh. I don't like that."

Thus, Joseph's experiences growing up in the Church provided ample opportunities to engage with Church (or unofficial Church-related) materials that contributed to his internalized homophobia. He believed that a desire to identify as gay—instead of solely resigning his sexuality to an experience and not a feature of identity—was a temptation from the devil.

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Therefore, to some of the participants, to perform queerness as non-identity is to embrace the lies

of Satan. It is alarming to hear in the 21st century that some believe that the devil is to blame for

queerness, but of course, there is no stronger rhetoric in Mormonland than us versus the evilness

of the world.

As a common Mormon song, "Who's on the Lord's Side?" (Hymns of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 260), goes:

> We wage no common war, Cope with no common foe.
>
> The enemy's awake; Who's on the Lord's side? Who?
>
> We serve the living God, want his foes to know
>
> That, if but few, we're great; Who's on the Lord's side? Who?

Such rhetoric made it difficult for my participants to choose which side they were/ are on,

especially in their formative years. On the one hand, they of course, want(ed) to be good

Mormons, but at the same time, they experience(d) a yearning and understanding of their

queerness, something the Church does not fully offer or accept. This, once again, reinforces

binary thinking that plagues individuals of many religious institutions, especially in Christian

structures (1 Kings 18:21; 1 John 4:6; Matthew 7:16-20; 12:30; Revelation 3:15-16). The binary

rhetoric causes an inescapable double-bind in which the participants have to make a choice to

exist on two different ends of spectrum—when in reality, they live in the middle. For example,

they want to be obedient to the Church, but at the same time, they all yearn for queer

relationships. Because of this very common, maybe even innate, dialectic, they might be judged

as having little faith and deemed sinners if they ever enter a queer relationship.

As illustrated by Joseph's encounters, those predicaments can lead to internalized

queerphobia because the individual wishes to please their Mormon family, community, and God.

Fortunately, throughout the years, Joseph shed his internalized homophobia, and now believes that his sexuality is from God, not the devil. He shares:

> Having faced this internalized homophobia, I finally realized if my gestures are effeminate, if the way that I speak, gives off gay vibes to people, that's their problem. And I'm not going to do anything in order to make people more comfortable around me, because that's not my job.

This assertion allows Joseph to be his true self by performing his gayness as something acceptable in the Church. He also recognizes the cisheteronormativity which oppresses queers by mandating their sacrifice of their genuine self for the sake of others' comfort. To this end, Joseph chooses to perform his identity in a way that accepts his own gayness, regardless of any judgment that would come from non-queers in his community.

In a pilot survey I conducted in 2018, I found that many Church members do feel uncomfortable around queers and even go as far as to regale anti-queer sentiments. The study revealed that the average number of stories queer Mormons heard about being treated negatively during Church services was nearly 32—among inactive queer Mormons, this average number jumped to 57 stories. It is clear to anyone who has consistently dwelled in Mormon spaces that they can be judgmental, and this judgement can indeed influence the identity performances and wellbeing of queer members of the Church. The Church's non-queer dominance is an outward manifestation of its Whiteness in that members and leaders alike seek to maintain the status quo. These interpersonal dynamics are indelibly connected to the structural and cultural discourses produced by the Church's rhetorical messaging.

Unfortunately, the Mormon Church's rhetorics of White cisheteronormativity and non-identity have done less to improve inclusivity and instead have caused more oppression, erasure,

and invalidation. The structural rhetorical architectures of invalidation and erasure are especially true of transgender and gender nonbinary identities. For this thesis, I had the opportunity to interview three individuals, Taylor, Nelson, and Fielding, who identify as non-cisgender. Taylor and Fielding identify as transgender, while Nelson prefers to perform non-identity and to say that he experiences gender dysphoria.

While Nelson and Fielding grew up in the Church and in Utah, Taylor currently remains active in the Church in the American south. Despite such geographical distance, all three of them, regrettably, experienced ignorance about what their non-cisgender experiences meant until adulthood. They all felt like they were the only person in the world who was experiencing the feelings and struggles that they were going through. All three of them spoke to how Mormon culture and discourse kept them shielded from these topics, which caused intrapersonal distress. Beyond this tension with the self, Harold, a cisgender gay participant who works in queer activism, explains the larger, systemic impacts of the Church's non-identity rhetoric on transgender issues:

> Unless, there's the recognition of transgender identity in the Church where people can go to Relief Society [Sunday School for women] if they're a trans woman and be gendered and recognized in the temple, unless that feeling is recognized…, there's no equality for our people.

Creating Mormon communities and congregations of social equity is one important goal of the present research, and my participant Harold identified one barrier to its realization. Many policies, rhetorics, doctrines, and cultural values in the Mormon system are in many ways cisheteronormative, which, according to LeMaster (2017), are usually structures of sexism as

well. Together then, it appears that Mormon cisheteronormativity can also be understood as cisheterosexism.

For example, women have the *option* of serving a full-time mission, and if they do so, the duration of their calling is 18 months. Mormon men, however, are *expected* to serve a full-time mission, and their calling currently demands a 24-month service. Along these lines, former prophet and President Gordon B. Hinckley (1997) said in a sermon, "Young women should not feel that they have a duty comparable to that of young men" (para. 44). In Mormonism, the genders are framed as binary, and they are described as having different goals and authorities.

This rhetoric causes issues when queer members challenge the binary. For instance, how would a transgender man serve a mission? Would they serve as an elder, the honorific title of a male missionary? Or would they serve as a sister, the honorific title of a female missionary? Or would their local leader openly discriminate and deny them any service as a missionary whatsoever? What about if the individual is intersex? These are just some examples of cisheteronormativity imbedded in Mormon policy that highlights the stultification of nonbinary gender issues. While the mission policies provide concrete examples of this discrimination, there is another germane context for this study's transgender participants which can be observed in Sunday meetings. At local church houses every other week, men and women are segregated. Adult women attend Relief Society while their male counterparts attend either Elder's Quorum or High Priest Quorum, based on their status within the priesthood.

Highlighting the overt cisheteronormativity, Nelson shares his insights on ways to help nonbinary members, saying, "I definitely hope for more trans inclusion, to [have structures or strategies to] help with their transition [so that they] can attend Relief Society or Elder's Quorum based on how they identify." As illustrated here, until the Mormon Church crafts policies that are

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open to nonbinary attendance, which I argue would require a massive cultural and maybe even doctrinal shift, strict demarcations regarding sex and gender will continue to marginalize nonbinary members. This exclusion forces many transgender and nonbinary Mormons to ask themselves, *where do I go?* or, more poignantly, *where do I belong?*

To this end, some of the participants testify that being a nonbinary member means that they are opening themselves up to being pushed to the margins even further. Thus, as transgender and nonbinary members choose to perform their queer identities, their belongingness is threatened. Fielding, a transgender participant, explains:

> At any time, someone in the Church could say that I couldn't do something, and I'd have to be like, "Okay. Thank you." Like they could say, "Sorry, you can't go to the temple." And then I would have to say, "Well then, alright. I guess I won't go to the temple." If it gets into the petty stuff too, like, "Hey, you can't go to relief society." I would probably say, "Then I don't want to hang out with you if you're going to be like that." I just have to figure out that if people are going to push me, am I gonna stay the same and let them push me around?

Fielding's example of identity performance magnifies the spiritual turmoil that they are (un)willing to experience in order to obey the Church's cisheteronormative policies and conform to its conservative culture. But their narrative also shows that there is a breaking point, that at some juncture, the dissembling crumbles, and the emotional-identity honesty sets in. Data collected by Riess (2019) affirms that the Church's brazen lack of inclusion is a deal-breaker for some younger Mormons, many of whom see themselves as allies in LGBTQIA communities. So, what is keeping the Church from recognizing this tumult?

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I suggest that one cause of the reticence is the inextricable culture that has twisted itself into doctrine or pseudo-scripture. Since the Church has policies, rhetorics, and doctrines that clearly promote cisgender heterosexual power and privilege, the attitudes of members to comply are rooted in ardent religious convictions and those can be difficult to change (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014). My participant Brigham admitted that "[Mormons are] very culturally discriminatory and bigoted." Agreeing to the bigoted ideologies in the Church system, George Albert said:

> It just seems to me we're willing to lose good people [LGBTQIA members and allies] to keep the bigots happy. And frankly, I think that the Prophet ...needs to get up at the pulpit and say, "Do you know what? You guys need to just grow up. These are your sons, your daughters, your children, you must love them." And there needs to be a rebuke from the stand.

While "the Church leadership has a huge sway on the culture," as participant Joseph explains, he believes that "the culture of the Church is not... ready" to support statements of queer love and acceptance. This creates a predicament; since the reversal of the 2015 baptismal ban, along with the Church's lobbying of LGBTQIA rights in the workplace, it appeared the Church's approach to queer relations—and with it, Mormon culture's move toward LGBTQIA tolerance—was ameliorating.

However, such a hope is too soon celebrated, especially for transgender or otherwise gender non-conforming members of the Church. A recent Church (2019) press release by a high-ranking apostle, Dallin H. Oaks, did the opposite of the "rebuke from the stand" for which George Albert calls. In this statement, Oaks unequivocally invalidated non-binary gender identity by stating the "intended meaning of gender …as used in Church statements and

publications…is biological sex at birth" and that God's "'male and female'…binary creation is essential to [God's] plan of salvation [and that]… will not change" (para. 13, 15, 17). Such a troublesome line of rhetoric causes some of the participants—even the cisgender ones—to balance the messages from their personal beliefs and nonbinary gender identity. Thus, while performances of non-identity for cisgender participants seems doable due to their attempts to parse apart their sexuality from behaviors, it appears that this separation is a messier process from nonbinary members since the Church's guidelines for what behaviors can and cannot be done as a transgender member have been inconsistent—the only exception being a Church-wide ban of surgical or hormonal therapies.[4]

To this end, McKay, a cisgender gay man, shares how performing non-identity might be more difficult for transgender members than for those who are cisgender:

I think the doctrine of the Gospel is very open and able to include people that are same sex attracted. I think being transgender is a little harder. I haven't talked with enough people who are [Mormon] and transgender to fully understand how that fits in. I have a lot of questions there.

Even McKay, a devout member who is dedicated to living the Church's standards has questions regarding how one might perform their identity as a transgender member of the Church. It appears that some perform this in-betweenness by denying their transgenderness and distancing any identity label through queerness as non-identity.

Recall when Nelson hoped that policies would change, ushering in transgender members' ability to shed performances of non-identity. His thoughts highlight an important function in the

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[4] In the spring of 2020, nearly a year after the interviews were conducted for this thesis, the Church released a new Handbook discouraging medical and social transitions including surgeries, name changes, and expressive dressing for transgender and otherwise queer individuals (General Handbook, 38.6.21). The impacts of this new change should be followed up in future studies with LGBTQIA Mormons.

Mormon system with regard to its messages of non-identity and identity (in)validation. Not only does he recognize that discourses impact identity but also the designs of Mormon worship services as (cishetero)sexist structures play a role in maintaining cisheteronormativity. These material structures of dividing members by gender forces many nonbinary members to perform against their transgender identity in order to belong in the community. As an exception, Taylor, a transgender participant, shared how her local leaders have no problems with her attending Relief Society, although her sex at birth was (and on Church records is) male. The impacts of inconsistent leadership approaches on identity performances will be discussed more in the fourth and final subsection of analysis.

We have seen from the participants how these messages have impacted themselves and other queer members. In so doing, the Church has reserved its spot as an ultra-conservative institution, which has equated biological sex with gender. Such an approach not only disregards the experiences of nonbinary, transgender, and dare I say, intersex individuals (if sex is gender, based on Mormon logic, intersex individuals are both genders—once again a violation of their strict binary interpretation), but also a contradiction to the preponderance of social scientific and medical evidence which cogently demarcates biological sex from psycho-sociocultural gender (Butler, 1999; Short, Yang, & Jenkins, 2013; Torgrimson & Minson, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987; World Health Organization, n.d.).

It also appears that the strategic performance of non-identity is rooted in the privilege it affords the participants by distancing themselves from any outward expressions of queerness. Because of this, such a performance can be considered a symptom of Whiteness (Eguchi, 2018). What I mean by that is that through performing their non-identity, they are allowed to exist in an uninterrogated space of privilege. The power dynamics change once a Mormon begins to apply

the identity to themselves because it challenges the Church's belief that identity is different than attraction (MormonAndGay.org). Then, employing non-identity is not just a weapon in the fight against identity dissonance caused by being queer in a queerphobic religion, but also a material manifestation of privileged Whiteness as they continue to contribute to the organization that marginalizes those who dare own their queerness as identity.

While crucial differences exist between queer members and their non-queer peers, leaders, and policymakers, this section has highlighted how participants' mindful performance of non-identity—and those participants who choose to perform queerness as identity—is a space of intergroup factions within the Mormon-LGBTQIA communities. Thus, I would be negligent if I did not elucidate that these differences exist. Some non-queer Mormons may believe that there is nothing wrong with homosexual relationships, for example, while others consider it an evil inspired by the devil. Similarly, perceptions of the righteousness of same-sex relationships and nonbinary gender identities vary in levels of acceptance among queer Mormons. Thus, the abovementioned cultural shift required for actionable change in Mormon societies must have the ability to permeate both Mormon mainstream culture and the culture of the subaltern.

While this first section of this chapter focused on the pattern of the participants distancing themselves from attributing their queerness as identity, the next centers on the part of themselves that they believe is the most important: their divine identity.

Primacy of Divine Identity

In the Mormon Church, a core doctrine is that every human being is the literal offspring of God, who is our Heavenly Father (Moses 3:5). Members often sing a popular hymn called "I am a child of God" that emphasizes this doctrine (Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 301). In fact, the phrase "I am a child of God" has become so popular in

Mormon culture that a simple search on the websites of Deseret Book and Seagull Book—two

Mormon merchandise bookstores in Utah—results in multiple products such as necklaces and

bookmarks adorned with the phrase. Divine identity, then, is the belief that one is a child of

God—literally.

Perhaps one of the most salient rhetorical examples that connects divine identity with

queerness comes from apostle Dallin H. Oaks in a press release written by the Church (2006). At

the time, the U.S. was at the center of a frenetic political battle of equal rights for queers, and

religious institutions—including the Mormon Church—wanted to make it clear where they stood

on the matter. In this press release, Oaks sets in motion a rhetoric of how to negotiate being

LGBTQIA and Mormon by teaching that one should consider their divine identity as the most

important facet of themselves, and by framing queerness as a challenge, not necessarily a piece

of identity. As Oaks (2006) explains to a reporter who asked the apostle how Mormon parents

should respond to their hypothetical son who shares they are gay:

> I think it's important for you to understand that homosexuality, which you've spoken of,
>
> is not a noun that describes a condition. It's an adjective that describes feelings or
>
> behavior. I encourage you, as you struggle with these challenges, not to think of yourself
>
> as a "something" or "another," except that you're a member of The Church of Jesus
>
> Christ of Latter-day Saints and you're my son, and that you're struggling with challenges.
>
> Everyone has some challenges they have to struggle with. You've described a particular
>
> kind of challenge that is very vexing. It is common in our society and it has also become
>
> politicized. But it's only one of a host of challenges men and women have to struggle
>
> with, and I just encourage you to seek the help of the Savior to resist temptation and to

refrain from behavior that would cause you to have to repent or to have your Church

membership called into question [e.g., entering a gay relationship]. (para. 9)

Thus, queer identity is delegitimated as a mere "challenge" or "temptation" and that, by

remembering one's Heavenly heritage, one can overcome. Now, about a decade later, the

Church's official webpage, MormonAndGay.org, teaches that some people consider their

queerness a piece of identity—and that's fine—but one's "primary identity [should] always be as

a child of God" (*About Sexual Orientation,* 2018, para. 4).

While other Christian churches may believe that we are children of God, no other faith

believes in a literal, metaphysical creation of souls quite like Mormons (Alexander, 1980).

Because of the Church's focus on this unique doctrine, I was not surprised to find that, for the

majority of my participants, divine identity was the most important feature of their self. In the

words of one of the participants, Kimball, a cisgender gay man:

I feel like there's a lot more depth when you do things because of your divine identity as a

son or daughter of God because you pattern your life after an actual individual [Jesus]

who is all powerful, all loving, et cetera.

This knowledge-turned-action is an explanation for why divine identity, a personal and spiritual

belief, is connected to a religious identity as a member of the Mormon organization. But Kimball

goes on to validate queerness as well:

I believe my divine identity is most important because it's eternal. I obviously have

absolutely no way of knowing I'll be gay in the next life. I don't believe I will because of

things about the resurrection and whatever. Maybe it will be a part of me, but glorified

and perfected. I'm not saying sexual orientation isn't important because it is. It's

something to be embraced—and it's very important in its own way.

Thus, Kimball is able to perform his queer and religious identity by giving his divine identity as a son of God a more important status than his queerness. Interestingly, in this performance, he does not invalidate either his spiritual connections or his sexuality; rather, he is able to focus on his spiritual connection with God now and in the eternities. As a result, the difference between religious and divine identity can be complicated.

Superficially, one might be able to sustain the importance of divine identity regardless of the level of activity in the Church; however, this does not seem to be the reality for the participants. Wilford marked this phenomenon by sharing "I am a son of God" as the most important feature of his identity. "After that," Wilford said, "it's definitely that I'm a member of the Church." While the Church is the vehicle in which the participants are taught the truths, and their identity of members of the Church strengthens their relation to those truths, their (inter)personal connection with God and Jesus Christ is the ultimate tenet of their self-identity. Thus, the performance of Divineness is recognized as more important than the identity performance—or salience, for that matter—of Mormonness or queerness.

In fact, to some of the participants, their queer identity is just another feature of themselves. One such participant is Wilford, a young man who is currently attending a Church-sponsored school. After returning from a mission, Wilford began validating the homosexual feelings he's had since childhood. But the intrapersonal validation of his queerness does not mean it is the most important facet of his identity. He explains:

> I'm a son and a brother, of course, but I'm a cousin and grandchild, grandson. ...Someday I'll be an accountant. And that's another part of [who I am] but that's just one of many. Just like I'm also not straight.

Therefore, after the primary identity (divine identity) is established and prioritized, this intrapersonal processing funnels other identities as a list of identity features in no particular order. To this end, another participant, Ezra, explains, "I try not to give one [identity] more attention than it deserves because it's just one part of me." Some of the participants devalue parts of their own identity, such as their sexuality or gender, and consider its importance with social positions, such as their identity as a worker or cousin.

On the other hand, none of the participants—all of whom are White—perceived their race as the most important feature of their identity. This finding corroborates social science research that suggests U.S. Whites typically think less about how their race impacts them than do people of color (Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019). This ignorance—and I mean that in the sense of purposefully not wanting to learn, and innocently not knowing—of not recognizing the privilege of Whiteness is a barrier to intercultural competency and building communities of equity. Its lack of recognition also speaks to "how whiteness secures its centrality, maintains its invisibility, and masks the racialized privileges afforded to white people" (Griffin, 2015, p. 149). Unfortunately, these privileges remain true. As one notable example, "the institutionalization of white male…dominance has been the norm" in the Mormon Church, an organization that "continues its overrepresentation of whiteness" (Bringhurst & Smith, 2004). Mueller (2017) suggests however, that as the Church continues to grow globally and attract people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities, Mormonism will rhetorically situate itself through a focus on unity in order "to become the spiritual home to all" (p. 231). Thus, colorblindness, one of the major tenets of Whiteness, remains intact. This colorblindness not only downplays the race of people of color, but also includes the reluctance of White Mormons to acknowledge any of their implicit privilege or the impact of their social locations.

Of course, the thoughts and perspectives enshrined by the participants have not occurred in a vacuum. On the contrary, these identity performances should be understood as discursive reactions to Mormon rhetoric. For example, on the Mormon and Gay webpage, readers are counseled:

> If you're asking yourself whether you're gay, you've probably experienced same-sex attraction and are wondering how to interpret these feelings. Sexual desires are complex and shaped by many factors. While a romantic, emotional, or sexual attraction can signal a sexual orientation, you should not automatically assume that it does. Sexual desire can be fluid and changeable. If you are questioning, you should not feel pressured or rushed to reach conclusions about your sexuality. …
>
> If you experience same-sex attraction, you may or may not choose to use a sexual orientation label to describe yourself. Either way, same-sex attraction is a technical term describing the experience without imposing a label. This website uses this term to be inclusive of people who are not comfortable using a label, not to deny the existence of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity.

Now, it should be noted that Mormonism is not the only structure at fault for this harmful rhetoric; it is simply operating under the cisheteronormativity of U.S. culture at large. While the webpage offers that it is not trying to deny the existence of homosexuality, the evidence of past rhetorics pontificating the opposite is staggering—as is the connection between denying an LGBTQIA label and a Mormon's devoutness and internalized queerphobia (Lefevor et al., 2019).

Insights shared by Wilford illuminate how, through interactions with others, Mormon rhetoric and culture connect to construct heteronormativity:

I don't know if I would say there is straight privilege, but I do feel that there is a little bit of the dominating thing. But that's just more or less because no one talks about the other stuff [queerness]. And that's all because for a lot of Church members, it's awkward, and uncomfortable, and they don't understand it. This was the case even for myself for a long time, that [queerness is] awkward, uncomfortable, and I didn't understand it. That's part of it.

…And because people in the Church are generally straight, frequently when people do talk about it, they misunderstand it as you trying to throw your sexuality in their face all the time, when in reality, you're just trying to show them that you're a little bit different. I've heard this said too: Be careful not to have your gayness as your primary identity.

Wilford has taken that to heart, for personal convictions, and thus he believes that his queerness should not be a priority. It also follows the script of the erasure of queer identity in Western discourse which minimizes queer presence, thus causing LGBTQIA individuals to form their own ways with little societal structure (beyond the intolerance) on how to form relationships, behave in public, or view themselves.

But as the Mormon scripture goes, "there [must be] an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11, Book of Mormon), and this seems to be the case regarding identity salience. Unlike Wilford, my participants Harold and Gordon, among others whose personal beliefs seem to channel that of Mormon rhetoric regarding queer salience, believe that being queer and being a child of God cannot be prioritized because those identities are inextricable.

"A gay Mormon… that's who [God] needs me to be," said Gordon. "So, for me, being a gay son of God is the most important part of my identity." Harold likewise believes that his

divine and sexual identities are of equal importance, sharing, "There's a sense in which my identity as a child of God is central, but I'm also a gay child of God and that's inseparable." In other words, God didn't just create them as sons; He created them as *gay* sons. This view of inseparability tends to be experienced by those participants who have accepted their sexuality and gender identity and are comfortable sharing it.

For those that are not comfortable in accepting these differences, identity performance and maintaining healthy perceptions and relationships can be difficult. Because of these findings, I suggest that *divine identity* serves an important role in *Mormon identity.* Mormon identity, it seems, is rooted in knowledge and action tied to the religious structure. Knowing a doctrine or concept, such as divine identity, then, superficially impacts one's behavior, especially when queerness opposes the very reason for divine creation according to the faith: to procreate with someone of a different gender and have a family.

With such a difficult state of being in mind, the next section focuses on how queer Mormons exist in a coterminous space of being individuals who further White neocolonial ideologies through their support of the Church, while at the same time being individuals who are targeted by Mormon cisheteronormativity.

Paradoxes of Ideologies

The participants exist in a paradox situated between the queer and religious ideologies that are inextricable to their respective identities. They are actively involved in a religion that perpetuates trans/homophobia, and yet they are queer casualties in a "war of words and tumult of opinions" that shake the pews and stain the pages of ancient and modern scripture (Joseph Smith History 1:10). The participants simultaneously and concomitantly occupy the space of both affecting the spread of Whiteness through Mormon promotion and being affected by the

Church's discriminatory practices. For example, there is power in the participants' cisgender or heterosexual performance that is embedded in the Mormon system of Whiteness that requires all humans to become like God, and the Mormon God is an embodied human-turned-Deity that is a heterosexual, cisgender male (Oaks, 1995). Because Mormons believe in an embodied resurrection, it is possible, and even likely, that the Mormon God is White. I am comfortable making this suggestion since White U.S. American triumphalism ravaged the lands where Mormon missionaries colonized, including Asia and the Pacific Islands (Mueller, 2017); a Mormon prophet proclaimed the only reason God allowed Blacks to survive the flood of Noah was so they could represent the devil on Earth (Journal of Discourse 22:304); and Indigenous peoples were cursed for their wickedness through "a miraculous act of God" in which He changed their skin color from light to dark (Turner, 1989, para. 11). Thus, in Mormonism, White was (is) the superior race among non-White humans—and, because the Church teaches that Heavenly Father is an embodied Deity, perhaps the Mormon God Himself is White. Not surprisingly then, White supremacy continues to thrive, though at times surreptitiously, in the Mormon system.

This assertion appears to be, in itself, a paradox of modern Mormon ideology, supported by the Church's recent success as a global Church recruiting people of color and its recent condemnation of racism in the past decades. For example, an official press release issued by the Church (2017) declares, "White supremacist attitudes are morally wrong and sinful, and we condemn them. Church members who promote or pursue a 'white culture' or white supremacy agenda are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church" (para. 3). Clearly, here, the Church opposes White supremacy. This announcement was made soon after the August 2017 Charlottesville atrocity occurred, an evil White supremacist rally in which a popular Mormon

blogger, Ayla Stewart, was scheduled to speak. She never did, but perhaps her association with the Church was enough to prompt a deafening, save-face rebuke against the White supremacist phenomena of recent years (Gaffey, 2017). Unfortunately, beyond this, through concerted efforts to deploy colorblind rhetorics and encourage collective forgetting about the awful racist doctrines and policies that still haunts the Church today, it seems Mormonism isn't quite ready to confront its own Whiteness (Riess, 2018).

To this end, while most of the participants may be able to deny some social dominance by countering cisheteronormativity, the majority have yet to engage in critically examination of their own Whiteness or maleness; as a result, they remain perpetrators of White male supremacy. McKay was one of the few who is beginning to recognize the privilege he enjoys as a white male. He shared the role of power and privilege:

> Any time that there's a group that holds the majority of power, there is a privilege for that group. So, I think that there is privilege for cis-people, and especially in the church, obviously. I don't think the Church knows how to treat and work with our transgender members. I think male privilege, it can depend on where you're at, but in nine out of ten cases, yes it exists. There's definitely male privilege and there's definitely White privilege. I think [upon living outside of Utah] my eyes have been opened to that a lot more than I had ever experienced before.

McKay recognizes the role of his own privilege as a pattern of Whiteness in the Mormon structure. He also clings to the view that privilege exists in certain contextualized moments, a fact that is crucially in understanding identity (López & Gadsen, 2016). To recognize the privilege, however, is not the same as accepting the differences or being an ally. In fact, even within the queer communities, kerfuffles arise due to intolerance.

For instance, Lorenzo recognized his own biases when sharing about cisgender privilege in his experience as a cisgender, gay White man:

> So, about cisgender privilege: to be honest, I am a gay man, so I can understand gay, but, at least up to a week ago, transgender has always just freaked me out. It's just weird and I don't get it and it's weird. So, I can totally understand how people look at other issues as well as the same, but that one in particular, that's just really weird to me. And, as I've heard some stories, I can kind of empathize to a degree, but it's still weird to me, so I'm sure I have cis privilege. Maybe I should be ashamed to admit it, but I'm still getting used to this whole [queer] thing, so, my interactions are limited to walking by somebody in the store or something. …Maybe my interactions in the LGBTQIA community will change that, but at this point those are my thoughts.

It is apparent that Lorenzo struggles with embracing transgender folks, largely due to his own privilege and lack of familiarity with transgender persons. This speaks to the hegemony at work which perpetuates taken-for-granted structures, such as cisgenderness, to be left alone. It also speaks to the LGBTQIA movement's focus on liberating White cisgender male bodies despite originating from the efforts of transgender women of color (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). While being aware of the historical dominance of White supremacy in the U.S., Lorenzo is also keen on providing insights that, globally, the dominant culture has privilege. He goes on to say that "White people are not extraordinarily demonic in that sense" because maltreatment of Others is "not restricted to us [Whites]." Lorenzo's knowledge of other cultures engaging in racism, though correct, seems to downplay the role of Whiteness in U.S. spaces. Here, he is torn between the ideologies of recognizing his privileges and the ideologies of Mormon multiculturalism.

This is contrasted with another participant, named Kimball, a White cisgender gay man who disagrees with White privilege completely:

To me, this is how it feels: I will be friends with people of any background. I am friends with people who are transgender, people that are Black, Mexican, I don't care. I don't. It's not important to me. What matters is a person's character. Not the color of their freaking skin. But when people start saying white privilege I think, so just because I'm White I have a better chance of prosperity? Or I have a better chance at living more economically sustainable life?

I know what people are saying. Like it's harder when you're caught in cycles of poverty and et cetera, et cetera. I read about this, I'm not ignorant, right? But personally, I think people use their race as an excuse to be poor or to be brought into a disadvantage. I do, I really believe that. I believe that if someone wants to get out of poverty—in the United States at least— there's opportunity everywhere. And it's there for people who want to seek it out. But honestly, yes, I believe racism exists, and it's not like something to just sneer at. But when someone says, "Oh, I got denied a job opportunity because I was Black," I'm like, that's possible, but was it that or was it because you gave a shitty job interview, or you were underqualified?

Kimball's worldview on White privilege, and Whiteness in general, is indicative of the Church's conservative rhetorics that imbue Mormon communities, especially in Utah. Because the Church is a worldwide organization, it must embrace people from all races. This ideology, as reiterated by Kimball, downplays any racial differences and instead focuses on the sameness of being God's children. It also seems to ignore the structural effects in force today, for example, the

racial wealth gap that was caused by slavery and other racist machinations (López, Erwin, Binder, & Chavez, 2018).

This is why Collins's (2009) concept of the matrix of domination, which emphasizes four domains of power—hegemonic/cultural, structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal—is crucial to understanding hegemony. While Mormon rhetoric may cede that interpersonal forms of discrimination exist, as Kimball and other participants surely do, the structural and disciplinary dominations that further bigotry (mainly the Church and its policies, doctrines, rhetorics, or commandments) are ignored or dismissed as excuses for indolence. In this way, Whiteness remains invisible and uncontested among many of the participants, who consequently remain proponents of White cisheteronormativity.

However, to perform queerness in the Mormon system is to relinquish your power and privilege—it is to move away from a space where one is in control and moving into a space of being controlled both ideologically and materially. Such an abnegation of one's cisheteronormativity can undoubtedly elicit feelings of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. These social twinges can be witnessed below in Brigham's wariness to disclose his gay identity publicly. To do so is to risk his privileged spot in several social locations embedded in the Mormon structure that ensure his power (e.g., White, cisgender, heterosexual, male). Brigham's situation--being a gay man who has been married to a woman for over twenty years and with whom he fathered several children—illustrates the intrapersonal tension of paradoxical being. This in-between space is navigated with recognition of its precarious nature. Similarly, all of the participants occupy a space of paradoxical being in that they are neither fully accepted in the Mormon communities nor neither fully accepted in the queer communities. This unfortunate reality illumes how the participants exist in a baleful void of belonginglessness.

Now, a question that remains to be answered is why Brigham feels it is important or

necessary to not disclose his sexual identity. This question applies to several of the participants

who have decided not to share their identities with anyone or with a very limited group of

people. Of note, some of the participants are openly gay or transgender with their local Church

leaders but not with extended family or even close friends. Of course, identity disclosure is

intimate and a personal decision that should be validated and respected, but this choice to share

such a delicate position highlights the importance of Mormon hierarchy in the lives of the

participants. Thus, in Brigham's case and in the case of other participants, Church leaders were

the first people to know about their same-sex attraction and feelings of being transgender. By

sharing these private features of identity with their leaders, the participants have allowed the

space of identity paradoxes to be further complicated by the Church's ideologies. As such, their

decisions to stay active in the Church are impacted by the interactions they have with the leaders

who are aware of their queer Mormon identities.

In a later subsection, the reasons why the participants choose to stay in the Church will be

examined. But here, I asked Brigham an important question regarding the intrapersonal and

interpersonal effects of his choice to stay involved. The following is Brigham's answer to being

asked if, given the chance to start over his life, he would choose the same paths or not:

> Would I do it again? Part of me would, for the kids and wife, definitely yes. But part of
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> me has to figure out what to do with the Church. I know that sounds backwards, but that's
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> what I have to do. I have to still shed some of the guilt and I still have to figure out if the
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> Church is true and things connected to that. Now, why am I thinking this way? Why can't
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> I just say [to my wife], "Honey, I love you, but let's get a divorce and just be friends"?

But then I also worry that I'm not getting any younger and I still feel the gay stuff. You know, it's like I don't want to be 85 years old and saying, "Ah, goodness." I don't know what I'm going to feel when I'm 85. Did I do everything the best I could and support the family? Did I stay on that straight and narrow [path of obedient Mormonism], but yet be missing a part of my life? Or do I go the opposite way and then feel such guilt because I messed up my marriage and kids?

Brigham's incertitude, noted not only in his message but his tremor of voice and painful intonations observable during our discussion, obviously causes intrapersonal distress that impacts his wellbeing. His decision to remain in the Church despite his testimony status also influences his decision. For example, instead of taking a step back or removing himself from the Church that is causing him so much distress, he continues to participate out of fear of familial dysfunction. To present himself as Mormon—a White, straight male—is to preclude his genuine identity performance by outlining the spaces in which he can enact his gayness. Thus, instead of his culture providing him a space "to locate [himself] in the world [that] …can provide a comforting resource to (re)stabilize subjectivities," Brigham's cultural space is the cause of his pain and identity imbroglio (St. Louis, 2009, p. 565).

It is here that I wish to highlight an irony in the Mormon system. Mormon prophets are believed to hold the spiritual gift of prophecy, which gives them the ability to forewarn the people of future dangers; as it is written in the Old Testament, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing without revealing his secrets to his servants, the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Mormons also believe the righteous members of the Church can receive their own prophecies, framed as personal revelations (2 Nephi 32:5, Book of Mormon). At the same time, the limitations that rankle Brigham and other participants from disclosing their queer identities is fear of the future:

it's the fear of how their ward members will react, how sharing their queerness might impinge on their status among their neighbors, and how it can bifurcate family members into those who support LGBTQIA communities, and those who see any inkling of queerness as anathema. Heber shares a similar tale of the distress that comes from (not) sharing who he really is:

> I have some pretty massive fears about rejection, so I think that's the biggest thing that's keeping me from coming out. I have four siblings, but I have never told any of them. My parents know, but we don't talk about it. …I think it makes them uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable thinking about talking to them about it, and I think they feel like as long as I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing [in the Church], then they don't need to worry about it.

There are two important facets to the discomfort felt by Heber's family: 1) such discomfort was once felt by many of the participants in themselves (and still is in some cases) in the form of internalized queerphobia, and 2) the lack of comfort felt by Heber's family divulge the issues of Whiteness in the Mormon structure at large.

While the Mormon Church reinforces certain beliefs, these values are often taught by parents and other family members. Interpersonal and family discussions regarding religious expectations can have benefits and negative consequences. For example, Marin (2016) found that 96% of religious queers have prayed to God at least once to make them straight, hinting at the unhealthy dynamics of human-God relationships. On the other hand, Dreyer (2013) argues that since internalized homophobia "is all about self-concept," a complete "dependence on the [Divine] could…help sexual minorities to eradicate their internalized homophobia and alter their self-concept to that of whole [healthy] people" (p. 607). This statement, of course, is parochial in that it operates within the system that causes the oppression. To quote Lorde (2007), "the

master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 110). But after all, this is one of the

grand performances the participants—and all queer Mormons—must negotiate: to revere and

humble themselves before the God that marks them as Other.

Now, the belief in a divine being has been the focal point of Mormon identity for

generations (Conley, 1990). This certainty can be juxtaposed against the uncertainty of sexual

and gender identity. To illustrate, Joseph shared how he knew he was a child of God but felt

"selfish" using the term *gay* to explain his attraction to men. This selfishness arose from the

Mormon belief in strict obedience. This dogma is commonly framed as when you do what you

want to do, you are being selfish, but when you do what the Church or God wants you to do, you

are being selfless. Such a emphatic control and obsession of one's personal sphere is

symptomatic of White individualism (Jones & Okun, 2001).

As for other issues of Whiteness in Mormonism, in the same way that many members

feel discomfort and malaise when discussing institutionalized racism predominant in Mormon

scripture and thought, Mormons may seek to stonewall conversations about sexuality and queer

discrimination in the Church today. DiAngelo (2018) examines a psychological phenomenon

which she terms "White fragility," an explanation for why White folks find it difficult to discuss

racism. Building on this idea, Brooks (2018) asserts that Mormons must actively confront their

positionality in order to successfully overcome Whiteness; as she writes:

Mormons will have to choose to acknowledge the pivotal and pervasive role of white

supremacy in the founding of LDS institutions and the growth of the Mormon movement.

White LDS people will have to choose to see the possessive investment in whiteness and

the possessive investment in rightness as a harm to spiritual wholeness and as corrosive

to the faith—individual, collective, and institutional. Among the many fruits of this work

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may be a faith that is more resilient when confronted with its own enormous and

inevitable humanness, a faith that need not be protected from its own history—a faith

capable of surviving its failures and recognizing, renouncing, and repairing its wrongs.

(p. 81)

As the author reminds us, Mormon Whiteness is embedded at all levels of the social strata within

the Church and its communities. Thus, it might be helpful to use Winnubst's (2006)

conceptualization of Whiteness—a phallic, heterosexual, cisgender mechanism of power which

targets any disruption to the group's dominance and desideratum as quickly as possible—as the

species of Whiteness rampant in Mormondom.

In light of this conceptualization, the participants maintain their status as one of the

dominant group members as long as they stay within the bounds crafted by the hierarchy. At the

same time, those confines impact their sense of self and reality. To cope with such an acerbic

tension, the participants choose to focus instead on features of their identity that they share with

others—their belief that they are all children of God. Unfortunately, not all queer Mormons are

accepted as they are—not even by themselves. This can cause several issues to their health in

various ways, which will be explored in the next and final section of analysis.

Health Issues regarding Identity Performance

In this final subsection of analysis, I explore how identity performances of queer

Mormons educe maladaptive effects. While there are undoubtedly more, I have chosen to focus

on three issues: 1) relational health, 2) mental health, and 3) spiritual health. Narratives and

experiences from the participants will be shared which highlight the reality of each of these

challenges. Their situations, which they negotiate constantly, will be contextualized with existing

research as well as rhetorical or cultural contributors. Many of these issues can be considered

side effects produced, at least in part, by Whiteness—including its perpetuation of toxic masculinity (Kelly, 2019).

While this final section is broken into three subsections, I would like to emphasize the imbrication and interconnectedness among the three issues involving identity performance. As will be made evident, the participants' concerns with building healthy relationships are connected with the difficulty in maintaining spiritual health, and overall homeostasis, including their mental health. I suggest it is not a linear process of one-way influence, but rather the issues regarding the participants' simultaneous existence as queer Mormons that impact their lives. The first of these issues that will be discussed revolves around the participants' relational health.

Relational health. Humans are social creatures and we require feelings of belongingness in order to function in healthy ways (Floyd & Hesse, 2017). Because of cisheteronormativity, queers are often marginalized or Othered for their relationships (Chevrette, 2013). Examples of this bigotry may include family members asking their gay relatives to only date someone of a different gender, coworkers consistently mis-gendering their nonbinary colleagues, or intersex individuals being taught by religious leaders that God only creates males and females so anything else is a mistake or dysfunction of mortality. All of these perpetuate cisheteronormativity by invalidating and making queer individuals inferior to their non-queer counterparts. Whether with a family member, a friend, romantic partner, work associate, or religious leader, queer and non-queer relational tensions can be distressing and harmful to one's health. In this subsection, the impact of the participants' queerness on interpersonal relationships with family members and loved ones will be explored.

While none of the participants reported being exiled or disowned from family members,

all of them adduced changes in family dynamics after disclosing their queerness. Ezra shares

how the social dynamics with his family changed after he began performing his gay identity:

> When I was living openly gay, I knew my family still loved me, but it was definitely
>
> strained, and I felt like they didn't accept me. You know? They would always invite me
>
> to stuff—it's not like they disowned me or anything; I don't have a story like that—they
>
> always made sure I was invited to everything, but they would never allow my boyfriend
>
> to come because it was just too uncomfortable. And honestly, it was probably too
>
> uncomfortable for me because I didn't want them to go through that. But I understood
>
> why they thought the way they did about my sexuality and partner, but I really disagreed
>
> with it obviously at the time, and still today, I don't necessarily think they handled
>
> everything correctly.
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> I remember when I first came out, my mom pulled me aside, talked to me like in
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> the car one day and tried to tell me that it was a phase. She was really trying to push me
>
> in the direction of saying I would grow out of it. It was hard for her. I mean, I think for
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> any group, any religion, parent, it would be hard because you know, you have a vision of
>
> your son or daughter getting married and having kids one day and when they come out to
>
> you, realize that's probably not going to happen it can be difficult for them. She also
>
> definitely let me know there's a line if you cross it, meaning they said they would kick me
>
> out if I had my boyfriends over or had sex at their home.

Luckily, Ezra's parents "have done a lot to try to understand [his] journey with [his] sexuality…

even though they…hold to their beliefs very strongly." This means that they did not disown him

and seemed to hold to a standard of no sex in the house before marriage; if he crossed that line,

he would be asked to find a new place to live. But Ezra's experiences also highlight the

communicative tendency for non-queer Mormons to minimize same-sex attraction or transgender feelings as genuine and long-term. This discourse only contributes to the larger conversations in Mormonism that work to invalidate queer identity.

Ezra also calls to our attention the importance of intergenerational effects, or the patterns and behaviors that children inherit or mimic from parents (Vangelisti, 2013). Ezra's mother learned from her parents that queerness was something evil, sinful, or at least different, and she is merely passing on that worldview to her children. When that pattern is disrupted, it creates tension in the home in terms of outlook, but also perceived perceptions of other members of the community, or in this case Church members. Ezra's mother, like many of the parents of religious queers, was concerned about how this would impact her family's official standing in the Church, and its social status within the Church's interconnected communities (Great Big Story, 2018). In the words of Sumerau and Cragun (2014):

> Since [Mormon] familial classification schemes leave no room for homosexuality, … [it can be viewed] as oppositional to the family …suggesting that only heterosexual-based families could serve the purposes of God, and that the heterosexual family was the only appropriate context for sexual relations. (p. 339)

The invalidation and trivialization of queerness by family members (and others) speaks to the Whiteness that invisibly holds together the Mormon structure. Much like how Whiteness is pleased when difference is erased through sham facades of racial inclusion—or in Mormon terms, the rhetoric that race is not important because everyone is a child of God—this false blindness also extends to the tendency to disregard the importance of queer identity in the Church.

This White anti-queer rhetoric may manifest itself in a parent's attempt to convince queer family members to downplay their attraction or identity by suggesting it is a condition of mortality and not eternal. Family members or others may also seek to disrupt social partnerships any queer members may want to build with non-member queers by criticizing the queer communities as evil, or at the very least, spaces void of the Holy Spirit (Sumerau & Cragun, 2014). Thus, Mormon Whiteness impacts the relational destinies of its queer members by regulating the dynamics of relationality itself. At its most staunch levels, Mormon Whiteness also calls for devout parents of queer children (especially those who are nonbinary or transgender) to put their loyalty to the Church's ideologies and expectations before unconditional love towards their children.

While the above narratives have provided examples of relational health in regard to family dynamics, Mormon queerness has significant impacts on the participants' romantic lives. Church rhetoric preaches the importance of family and childrearing for heterosexual couples, and mandates complete celibacy from homosexual relations (Hite, 2013). This cisheteronormative pronatalist rhetoric has direct impacts on the relations of many of the participants. For example, Lorenzo realized his girlfriend of five months needed to know the truth about his identity and orientation. Though he has been attracted to men, he only recently began validating his homosexuality. Lorenzo called dating his girlfriend "an experiment" because he was not certain about how authentically he could date a woman. As he explains:

> I'd been in brief relationships in the past, but never really anything long term, and she
> knew about my orientation and my attraction to men, but we were willing to kind of see
> where it went, and, over the course of the last few weeks ... I mean, the last month or so, I
> finally came to the determination like, "This isn't working." And before, I was really

positive that a mixed orientation marriage would work for me, and now I'm kind of iffy

on it. But it wasn't going to work with her, and I could tell, and so, I ended that last ...

about a week ago, ended it a week ago.

I think it's harder for her just because the fact that she's the straight one, so she's

more attached, you know? So, it wasn't quite as difficult for me as I feel like it should be.

I feel bad. I guess I feel bad for not feeling bad.

Lorenzo's recent break-up illustrates the interpersonal and emotional impacts his queerness has

on his relational health. The Mormon system—including singles wards (congregations consisting

only of non-married young adults)—is crafted with the goal of increasing Church membership

through bloodline loyalty.[5] As a result, Lorenzo and other participants have dated (or married)

people to whom they are not necessarily attracted. They do this in an effort to be obedient to the

Church. Such problematic obedience is a manifestation of the hegemonic control of Whiteness

within the Mormon system.

But perhaps Whiteness as obedience is more powerfully manifest in parent-child

relationships. AI would then be remiss to not discuss the impacts of Mormon parent and queer

child dyadic exchanges. In an aforementioned Church press release (2006) with Dallin H. Oaks,

the high-ranking official was asked by a public relations reporter how a Mormon parent should

react to a queer child's desire to live authentically. The apostle responded:

It seems to me that a Latter-day Saint parent has a responsibility in love and gentleness to

affirm the teaching of the Lord through His prophets that the course of action he is about

to embark upon is sinful. While affirming our continued love for him, and affirming that

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[5] I argue the Church's rhetoric and emphasis on (endogamous) heterosexual marriage is not only
cisheterosexist but also pronatalist and allosexist.

the family continues to have its arms open to him, I think it would be well to review with

him something like the following, which is a statement of the First Presidency in 1991:

"The Lord's law of moral conduct is abstinence outside of lawful marriage and fidelity

within marriage. Sexual relations are proper only between husband and wife,

appropriately expressed within the bonds of marriage. Any other sexual conduct,

including fornication, adultery, and homosexual and lesbian behavior is sinful. Those

who persist in such practices or influence others to do so are subject to Church

discipline."

> …Finally, it may drag you down so far that you can't come back. Don't go that
> way. But if you choose to go that way, we will always try to help you and get you back
> on the path of growth.

Oaks highlights the importance of showing love to one's queer child but emphasizes that love

falls short of complete acceptance and affirmation. In fact, that final sentence, in which he

instructs parents to never give up trying to convert their child, reads to me as an obstinate

directive to never stop convincing their child that they are wrong, sinful, out of line, or Other. It

is merely Whiteness disguised as love. Miller (2019) exposes "the 'love' the Christian right

[conservatives] supposedly has for queer people…for what it is: erasure and violence" (p. 111).

The brilliance of the framing, though, makes it seem as though their mulish communication is

what any parent would do to an astray child, but in reality, this merely attempts to mask the

Church's anti-queer pillory under the façade of being a good parent.

Such rhetoric is only part of a larger whole of what Roberts (2018) theorizes as

"(lie)alectics", or the Mormon hierarchy's attempt "to appear non-homophobic while

maintaining homophobic church doctrine" (p. vi). The two-faced nature of the rhetorics also

seems to produce a sort of incivility that is cloaked as civility which breeds in the fertile grounds

of Mormon Whiteness. As LeMaster and Mapes (2019) illuminate, "the discursive constitution

of 'civility' …produces and sustains the materiality of racialized [Othering]…through the

privileging of White discourses of normative gender and sexuality" (p. 64). This insight shines

light on the rhetorical tools Church leaders use to perpetuate Whiteness as a means to discourage

queer family relations in superficially civil manners. Because of the continual rhetorical

production of pro-queer presentiments, I worry there is no space allowed for the devout Mormon

family and their queer relatives. Without safe spaces in the home or community, the wellbeing of

LGBTQIA Mormons is a risk of urgent concern.

 Mental health. While I make no claims to be a trained mental health specialist of any sort,

I do believe that communication plays an important role in one's mental health. As was reviewed

in chapter two, the majority of the extant research on queer Mormons has been conducted by

mental health professionals. The present subsection adds to the archives by providing some

qualitative insights to the body of quantitative data already collected, a collection of research

which overwhelmingly found that LGBTQIA members of the Church are at risk for a myriad of

mental health challenges (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2015). In my experience

living in Mormonland, mental health is a salient concern, but it's a topic that is so stigmatized I

rarely encountered positive discourse on it. For a while, Mormon rhetoric taught that mental

health concerns, particularly mood disorders such as depression, were symptoms of a sinful life

(Oaks, 1991).

 Perhaps this cultural stigma can be traced to a cardinal Mormon scripture that teaches

"wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10). This scriptural rhetoric is often taught as a

warning for members to obey the Church's rules and commandments or else they will experience

unhappiness as a consequence for their rebellion. This discourse was something that I grew up with, being told that numerous times by family members and church leaders alike. I argue that there began to be a shift when apostle Jeffrey R. Holland (2013) gave a now-beloved sermon that made it clear the devil or disobedience is not always to blame for one's experience with mental health issues. And while Utah is still plagued with depression and suicide, mental health issues are becoming less stigmatized (Riess, 2019).

Unfortunately, there still seems to be a strong prevalence of stigmatizing queerness in Utah (Reynolds et al., 2018). This might be related to the belief that homosexuality was widely considered a mental illness until the 1970s, and transgender identity is still often delegitimized as a symptom of gender dysphoria or a similar mental disorder in U.S.-American conservative circles broadly (Haynes, 2019). For example, my participant McKay expressed the interconnectedness of stigma regarding queer identity and mental health:

> There needs to be more community resources... in general, but specifically for LGBTQIA youth that are around mental health. I think there's still a little bit of a stigma in some ways with talking about mental illness. Even myself, I can talk about past problems, but I really struggle with talking about current problems that I'm going through. So, I think de-stigmatizing both being LGBTQIA+ and having mental illness, and not necessarily them being related, but both separately, would be really beneficial for society as a whole, especially the queer community.

McKay's narrative paints the picture of a culture that ostracizes and Others anyone who has mental health issues, or who is queer. The impact of the cultural expectations regarding communication of mental health challenges is strong enough to keep him from disclosing his current issues. For whatever reason, the cushion of time plays a crucial role in developing a

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space where he can feel safe discussing his journey with mental health as a White queer Mormon man. With this rhetorical backdrop setting the stage and informing us on the communities, homes, and other places in which the participants exist, it is little wonder that their identity performances influence their mental health. Balancing the conflicting identities of Mormon and queer can be difficult to manage and often incur social costs; as Brigham said, "If you're going to stay in the Church, you pay a price and you give up a part of yourself."

Giving up a part of one's self is a cornerstone of queer theory's liminality, or the focus on in-betweenness of being. Disidentification, or "a rhetorically practiced form of identity that co-opts dominant constructs to resist" allows for marginalized folks to thrive in such liminal spaces (Asante, 2020, p. 166). Unfortunately, the rhetorics and culture of Whiteness in Mormonism combat queer disidentification. For instance, disidentification is frequently undermined through conservative ideologies which ask (or coerce) Others to deemphasize certain parts of their existence (e.g., statements in Mormonism such as "you are more than your sexuality" or conservative claims that "it doesn't matter what race you are, we are all children of God"). Relinquishing the right to be one's self has tremendous impacts and can spar with disidentification. In the words of Lorde (1984), marginalized people are "constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of [themselves] and present [it] as the meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying the other parts of the self" (p. 120). These sorts of identity performances have costs, as Brigham says, and the price one will pay depends on the person. For example, some participants have less trouble negotiating or performing their dialectical identities. For others, like Monson, they "struggle with [it] on a daily basis."

This identity performance of struggle is not just an internal or intrapersonal process; rather, it is a very social journey. This analysis shows that the underpinnings of identity

performance are connected to the common need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Brigham

confided, "The anxiety, guilt, and pain that I feel over being gay...and active LDS is almost too

much to bear." Such a harrowing statement hints at the difficulty of existing in Mormon spaces

as a queer. His remark also provokes the subtle cries for help queer Mormons may communicate.

The emotional and psychosocial pains Brigham experienced were shared by all of the

participants, though the intensity and duration varied. In such bleak times, it is important to

remember the possibility for a better world that queer theory offers; there is always hope

(Muñoz, 1999). However, open and honest emotional communication, even when negative,

should never be minimalized.

As a transition to the next subsection, which explores spiritual health, I provide an

analysis of a statement given by Kimball, in which he offers his advice on the suffering he

experiences as a queer member of the Church:

When I feel lonely because of what I've chosen with my sexuality and I feel deprived

romantically and sexually do I truly know that I can have an experience, at least a smaller

one, that will reassure me where Jesus is saying to me personally, "I know that you're

struggling but I am here for you and here is something to help you get by to help you feel

joyful."

Like people will say, "Oh, you're staying in the Church? You are going to be

lonely; your life is going to miserable and sexually frustrated. …You're going to be

deprived and sad and depressed, your mental health is going to decline." Now, I'm not

denying that that doesn't happen because it does. But I believe that Jesus meant what He

said: we're gonna have an abundant life [in reference to John 10:10 in the New

Testament]. It's not like we have to die and have a life of suffering, full of total celibacy

and aloneness. You know what I mean? That's not the Jesus that I know. It doesn't make

sense to me that He would say on one hand, my teachings are true and real, but you're

going to be miserable living them.

But basically, it comes down to cultivating a close relationship with Christ and

trusting that He will give me what I need and want to have a fulfilled, joyful, abundant

life—not something that's drudgery or whatever people want to call it. I love being gay

and a part of the Church. Yeah, it's depressing at times and it's freaking hard and it sucks

sometimes, but overall, it's worth it because I get the best of both worlds: I can celebrate

my sexuality and celebrate my relationship with Jesus. And he's the Man that I love more

than any other guy.

As is evident here, Kimball clearly believes in the power of Jesus Christ to aid him with

emotional and mental maladies. He also believes that Christ does not expect his followers to be

miserable being his disciples, while acknowledging the neuroticism that can arise from being a

queer member of the Church. His sentiment also sparks the age-old philosophical notion of

theodicy, or the reasoning behind why a benevolent God would allow His creations to experience

pain. Kimball chooses to work through his personal challenges because of his interpersonal-

Divine relationship with Jesus. This narrative plainly illustrates the importance of maintaining

spiritual health as a metaphorical analgesic to social and mental health concerns. The next

subsection explores how the participants succeed in (or struggle with) preserving their spiritual

health.

Spiritual health. Taking care of ourselves socially and mentally is important in

maintaining homeostasis, but sometimes our spiritual health, or maintaining a beneficial

connection with the Divine—whatever that Divine entity may be—goes unattended (Ghaderi,

Tabatabaei, Nedjat, Javadi, & Larijani, 2018). This statement is true in the study of human health itself, in which Western health scholars have paid little attention to the effects of spirituality on the human body and mind (Vader, 2006). While there are reports of global trends that document humans moving away from traditional religious adherence, there also seems to be an increase in being spiritual (Lipka & Gecewicz, 2017).

At times, it seems that some of the participants' spiritual experiences contradict religious frameworks, ideologies, policies, and even current interpretations of doctrines. This is the case with Joseph, a 22-year-old raised in the Church and now a returned missionary, who is beginning to reconcile his faith with his queerness. He shares one experience with how a spiritual experience he had in the temple—the apex of Mormon sacredness—seemingly challenges current anti-queer rhetoric taught by the Church. Joseph explains:

> I was studying at the temple and trying to ponder what the heck is going on with my sexuality. I have gained pieces of personal revelation that seemed very blasphemous, honestly, a lot of the time. And, for instance, when I was in a better mental state, because I have a lot of anxiety after my mission, … I asked the Lord what He thought about the word *gay*. And the response was, it means what I had taken the word to mean. And I felt that the Lord was proud of my progress, in coming out, and fighting the internalized homophobia.
>
> But I also felt He said that the word itself isn't necessarily operative in the next life. But that the attraction would be part of ... And this is best I can put words to it, is that my attraction would become a part of it, an important part of a greater whole. And I have no idea what that means. And you're like, "Okay, so if what's happening is that everyone's going to be gay in the next life, what's that mean for me right now? Or how does that

connect to anything that we've been taught, or any of the rest of my testimony, or the

Family Proclamation?"[6]

And I don't know, but I know that this has been something that has brought me a

lot of additional truths, that I would not have expected and could not have conceived

knowing about it if I hadn't been born this way, I guess. That being said, cognitive

dissonance destroys people and ... this has led to PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]

and suicide, and all of the other things that haunt this space of being LGBTQIA and

Latter-day Saint.

Joseph's experience underscores the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical toll that being a

queer Mormon can have on one's health. He speaks of a stress disorder epidemic among

LGBTQIA members of the Church and mentions how it haunts them. His assertion does not

require much encouragement to entertain; after all, how traumatizing would it be for you to be

raised in a family, in a community, in a Church that teaches that you are different and wrong and

evil, and yet expects you to stay and actively participate? But imagination is not necessary here;

as Simmons (2017) found, 86% of the 278 LGBTQIA Mormons who participated in her study

met qualifying criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD in relation to their religious experiences.

Equally concerning in this realm of spiritual health is how Joseph's narrative emphasizes

the most precious tool in Mormon theology: human beings can receive personal revelatory

communication from God Himself, and thus anyone can be enlightened on the truths of the

Universe by its Creator. Joseph asserts, using Mormon logic, that the structural rhetoric

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[6] *The Proclamation,* as it is colloquially called, is a modern-day scripture that reaffirms the Church's position on a number of topics regarding gender and sexuality, including the eternal nature of binary gender, same-sex marriage as antithetical to God's design, requirements for traditional gender roles within marriage, and the duty of married couples to have children.

regarding sexuality is wrong, and because of that, he has been able to receive more truths directly from his Heavenly Father. Thus, while Joseph discusses afflictions that are emotional and psychological, they must also be understood as social and spiritual issues. It is not easy to intrapersonally negotiate whether your inspiration from God is really divine, especially when it may directly challenge what the Church's leaders preach as God's will.

To help assuage some of these pains, most of the participants seek to develop relationships with other queer Mormons, as well as non-queer members in their local congregations. Relying on ward members and/or other Mormons in their communities can ease some of the suffering, but these social connections can also be the catalyst for difficult identity performances. Monson highlighted the importance of non-queer congregation members to be "supportive and helping [queer members] live and not feeling complete ashamed." When support fades, and when the participants are unable to negotiate their identities in ways supported by those they trust, serious mental health concerns emerge. From the analysis, issues that are caused by performing and negotiating these religious-spiritual-queer identities can be discursively linked to the epidemic of Mormon LGBTQIA suicides. With all solemnness, I must report that all of the participants in my study have experienced suicidal ideation, engaged in parasuicide, or have attempted suicide.

I asked the participants for their ideas about what can be done to mitigate the suicide crisis. Many of them, like McKay, spoke about their personal connection with mental health and queerness, and spoke to the need of more resources available. Recalling McKay's narrative from the earlier subsection, his insights speak to the interconnected nature of mental and social health. As he said, being queer and experiencing mental illness are features of identity that are stigmatized in Mormon culture. Thus, he suggests that having resources available that dismiss

myths and misinformation can be beneficial. But, according to McKay's own narrative, such stigma is difficult to break through—to the point in which he is reticent to share his current mental health state with most people.

This internalized stigma is not experienced only by McKay. For example, Fielding shared how Church rhetoric has persisted to not only impact their intrapersonal outlook, even after coming out as transgender, but also relationships with non-queers in the Church:

There are probably other things that keep us queer members divided from non-queer members, but I think stigma is the biggest one. I can tell you what I felt as a cisgender, a non-queer man for twenty-two years: every interaction than I had with queer members of the Church, or just queer people in general, was always colored by this thought in the back of my mind that their lifestyle, everything they're doing, it's a sin. It's not right. And as long as I still have that thought in the back of my mind there's still a wall there and there's still a block of acceptance. And it's like, that's, that's a tough thing to ask the Church to do, to declare queer people and their lifestyle as not a sin anymore.

This example illustrates how Mormon Whiteness must be complicated in the framework of colonization of minds, bodies, and lands. Even still today, Fielding has difficulty accepting their peers in the LGBTQIA community, including themself. The resistance of accepting queers as equals can be mapped from the Church hierarchy and traced all the way down to the members who praise God in pews every Sunday.

While devout members ensure that Church standards (e.g., White cisheteronormativity) remain enforced in their meetings and communities, local leaders play a pivotal role in gatekeeping anti-queer rhetoric. This is illustrated through an experience Nelson had with his local male leader, known as a stake president. A stake president is a male leader who oversees

and oversees a handful of wards. They can be understood as a supervisor of bishops.

   After keeping his transgender identity to himself for thirty-six years, Nelson faced intense suicidal thoughts after he disclosed his identity to his wife and stake president. Upon confiding in the stake president, the leader threatened to take away Nelson's temple recommend, a card of ecclesiastical endorsement that one must have in order to enter a Mormon temple. In order to stay in good standing, Mormons must keep their temple recommend current by having interviews with local male leaders who examine their worthiness by obedience to commandments. Nelson's experience unfolds:

> I shared my story with the stake president. I said, "I've felt this way since I was five and I prayed a lot about how to handle this," and my wife was saying the same. She was like, "we really prayed a lot. We really do feel like he's coping, and this is appropriate and that it's okay." Anyway, he was like, yeah, I need to take away your temple recommend. Keep in mind, I never stepped outside of my room [to cross dress]. … So that just crushed me. That was as close to suicide as I've ever been after that. Because I thought, *how do I get one answer [from God] and how does [the stake president] get another answer? And now he's casting judgment on me? He's known me for exactly an hour, and he's taken away this [temple recommend].* I was just crushed. ...I just started spiraling, really, really, spiraling into depression and having suicidal thoughts. Like, there's this tree on my way home from work that I thought I could just drive right into it.

It is clear that from Nelson's experiences that revoking a temple recommend threatens the individual's salvation, which can have severe psychological, emotional, social, and spiritual effects. But it is also important to highlight the agency of the leader in this instance, and his choice to take away Nelson's temple recommend without any official policy to guide his

decision. There is, however, a church-wide policy regarding "transsexual operations" which states:

> Church leaders counsel against elective transsexual operations. If a member is contemplating such an operation, a presiding officer informs him of this counsel and advises him that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline. Bishops refer questions on specific cases to the stake president. … A member who has undergone an elective transsexual operation may not receive a temple recommend. …Members who have undergone an elective transsexual operation may not receive the priesthood.
>
> (*Church Handbook 1*, 2010, pp. 98, 26, 238)

These statements, found in the Church Handbook 1, published solely for leaders of the Church (like stake presidents), outline religious repercussions for queer Mormons who have surgery to conform their gender with their biological sex.

Unfortunately, it appears the stake president in this case considered Nelson's cross-dressing—in the privacy of his own home—as the equivalent of having a bodily surgery. Thus, we see that in contemporary Mormon culture, the temple recommend is weaponized as a tool of White cisheteronormativity by opinionated leaders. Wilson (2018) asserts that not only have temple recommends been weaponized, but worthiness itself has been; temple recommend holders "are being monitored and infantilized in ways virtually unknown to other adults" via panoptic, religious surveillance (para. 17). Thus, the temple recommend card is weaponized because Mormons believe that the only way to enter Heaven is by learning rituals, obeying commandments, and being faithful to the covenants (promises to God) made in the temple, and Nelson's identity performances done in the privacy of his home are punishable. The Mormon system is deeply rooted in promoting feelings of guilt or shame when expectations are not met

(Lyon, 2013). This is a major reason Nelson felt like he could trust his leader to help his spirituality improve and thus disclosed a very personal matter to a stranger who wore a badge of religious authority.

However, there is an important step to understand the complexity of these maladies which requires the complication of Mormon identity broadly. Temple attendance is required to be a good Mormon, but a temple is just a building for performing rituals. The real concern for LGBTQIA Mormon wellbeing arises from their testimony of the Church's truthfulness, including the sacredness of temple rituals, which are called ordinances. Therefore, it is not necessarily the behavior of attending temple sessions, but the belief that the ordinances done inside the temple are truth and allow members into Heaven. In other words, the negotiation of Mormon identity and queerness, and all the pain and effort that goes into the performance, is caused *because* of the negotiation process itself. Perhaps this is why it is rare to find LGBTQIA Mormons who remain active in the Church (Dehlin, Galligher, & Breshears, 2015). In fact, George Albert said, "I have never, ever met a gay Mormon that didn't want to kill themselves at some point." Unfortunately, George Albert's experience was shared by all of the participants who have experienced suicidal ideation, committed parasuicide, or attempted suicide. He continues to explain the harrowing truth to the deadly impacts of gay-Mormon identity negotiation:

People don't understand that ...when you're a gay Mormon, you don't kill yourself because you don't believe it's true. You don't kill yourself because you don't have a testimony. You kill yourself because you do. Because you know that what you're being taught is true. You know that this church is true, and you feel that you have no place in [God's] plan… and that any purpose of you being on this earth is gone.

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Thus, the negotiation process is the culprit, because if participants were not Mormon, they would not experience religious turmoil over the queerness, and if they were not queer, they would not experience turmoil for being Mormon. It highlights the feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness all too often experienced by queer Mormons, feelings that often lead to the thought that suicide is the only option.

This terrible trend that George Albert shares lies at the core of the purpose of Mormonism, or I suppose more correctly, at the core of what a Mormon's purpose is in this world: to be faithful to the Church and raise a cisheterosexual family to do the same. It seems if the participants can convince themselves to do this, they are able to maintain the support of the Church—at least superficially—and thus it would behoove them to not perform their queerness, just in case of any stigma or damnation from intolerant Church members or leaders. If the participants feel like they cannot have a cisheterosexual marriage, then they must choose celibacy, which, they are well aware, requires a life full of loneliness and heartache. Either way, the dejecting narratives and experiences from the participants make it clear that queer Mormons must, as the participant Brigham said, "pay a price" in order to perform their identities, even up to taking their own life.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop [the] story.

—Orson Welles, *The Big Brass Ring*

In this final chapter, I recapitulate the purpose and goals of this thesis. Then, I share how my positionality relates to, and impacts, the research as I engage in a process of critical self-reflexivity. The four themes are expounded upon and situated within rhetorical contexts and theoretical contributions are discussed. The limitations of the thesis are acknowledged. The thesis closes with offering possible future directions and next steps following this research, including policymaking and implementing the theoretical and analytical findings in praxis.

Review. In the first chapter, I provided an overview of the Mormon Church and its histories of Whiteness and cisheteronormativity. In the second chapter, a literature review of extant studies done on LGBTQIA members of the Church was conducted, and in part, explanations for why the current thesis adds to these archives. In chapter three, the methodology—qualitative interviews conducted with transgender, bisexual, and gay active Mormons—was previewed, along with an explanation of the use of the critical lenses of queer theory and Whiteness. In the fourth chapter, I identified the four themes that arose from the analysis, namely the pattern of some queer Mormons to engage in non-identity perceptions and performances, the participants' positions of precarity as participating in a religious organization

that discriminates against them, the master status of divine identity, and various health issues which can arise from performing the disparate identities of Mormonhood and queerness.

Overall, through the experiences and narratives collected from the 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the purpose of this thesis has been to understand and critique the impacts Mormon rhetoric and culture have on the identity performances of queer members of the Church. The information gathered from my interviews with the participants offers new insights into the intricate worlds of religious queers and reveals the intrapersonal turmoil caused by conflicting expectations for these two very different features of their identity. The experiences of the participants are similar to what O'Brien (2004) discovered over 15 years ago: the "integrative struggle… experienced by lesbian and gay Christians… [is] a *raison d'être*" (p. 182). *Raison d'être* is a French phrase meaning "reason for being." This assertion suggests that queer Christians' whole existence is rooted in the belief that they are who they're meant to be, and for Mormons, existence is believed to have begun before this life, in a pre-Earth realm, and will transcend death into the great beyond.

Here, I'll elaborate on the significance of the findings as they connect to the research questions. The first research question sought to answer why queer Mormons stay involved in a Church that historically and presently discriminates against them, while the goal of the second research question was to identify communicative patterns of identity performances by the participants with regard to their queerness and Mormon relationships. The final research question aimed to explore the ideological and rhetorical mechanisms present in Mormon culture and social systems that impact their agency. I found that many of the answers that arose from the research questions were interconnected. Thus, instead of recapitulating the findings under the

purview of each research question, I return to the significance of the four major themes as complex, messy, and inextricable to one another.

To begin then, it appears that the participants' choices to stay involved in the Church, is in part, due to their testimony that they are divine children of God. Mormonism teaches that human beings are the literal children of God, and that like any good parent, God cares deeply for us (Uchtdorf, 2011). Coming from such a noble birthright undoubtedly generates feelings of pride for being God's chosen people—a sometimes problematic identity dripping with Whiteness. One sermon given by Beck (2006) stated:

> When you know who you are and what you should be doing with your life, you don't want to hide your light. …For instance, you would not want to "hide your light" by wearing clothing that diminishes your royal potential. You would not use improper language or stories or mar your body with tattoos or other procedures debasing for a [child] of royal birth. You would not cheapen your birthright by taking into your body any substance that is harmful or addictive. Neither would you view or participate in any behavior which is immoral and lowers your noble stature …If you will keep the Lord's statutes and commandments and hearken to His voice, He has promised that He will make you high above the nations in name and honor and praise. (para. 17-18)

Because Mormons believe they are literal children of God, they must obey strict commandments; for example, those restrictions listed in the sermon. Unfortunately, in these examples, homosexual relationships and transgender expression would be considered immoral and thus something that threatens the participants' divine identity.

This is where the participants choose to negotiate and perform their queerness under the purview of their divine identity. This explains, in part, why the participants continue to stay

active in a Church that openly labels them as Others: they have a testimony that they are children of God who loves them and has a plan for them; although they may not be able to understand why He would create them with queerness, they believe everything will be made right in the Heavens. Therefore, while it is a pleasant thought to believe that humans are supervised under the tender care of an empathetic God, it also complicates the persistence of evil, and perhaps more important to the present thesis, it also complicates one's understanding of themselves as a queer child of the universe's Creator. This, in turn, complicates their standing in Mormonism as an organization that engages in the White neocolonialization of lands, minds, and bodies. Thus, we see that the participants reasons to stay are also connected to ideological mechanisms of community/family and honoring a loving God, and at the same, this requires the identity performance of liminality—of an in-betweenness of fully Mormon and fully queer.

The first set of findings focuses on some of the participants' embrace of their queerness as non-identity, or that their queer being is not a feature of selfhood. Mormon rhetoric historically taught that identifying as gay meant that one automatically assumed a lifestyle contrary to the conservatism and strict commandments of the Church. As for members who exist outside the gender binary, like the transgender participants in the present study, a recent Mormon press release reemphasized that God created males and females only, and that the Church considers biological sex equal to gender. This rhetoric invalidates transgender and nonbinary members and places them in limbo. However, of note, the Church has no official policies regarding intersex folks—another group of queers whose mere birth challenges the binary supremacy of Mormon thought. The erasure of intersexuality from Mormon discourse is so potent, Prince (2019) calls it "the sexuality orphan within Mormonism" that "poses an irreconcilable dilemma" to the Church (pp. 284, 286). While none of the participants of this

thesis identify as intersex, I hope that future research (which will be discussed later) will such individuals, who are born outside of the sex and gender binary. In the case of non-identity for the gay, transgender, or bisexual participants who elect such a performance, the choice of labeling how they identify—or do not—is up to them. Some choose to discount or downplay their gayness to attraction only, or their transgenderness to solely the effects of a mental disturbance. In contrast, all of the participants identify as a child of God, and to all but one of them, that is the most important part of who they are.

For example, Prince (2019) highlights the caustic conjunction of the Mormon fight against LGBTQIA rights, opining that when the Church argued against legalizing same-sex marriage, "[t]he same language used to justify racism was now being used to justify religion-based homophobia" (p. 243). Prince continues by citing rhetoric produced by the Church asserting the consequences if same-sex marriage were allowed, and then explaining its irony:

"Essentially, religious beliefs in traditional sexual morality could come to be equated with racism[,]" [the Church wrote]. The writers conveyed no sense of irony in making the comparison to race, which for decades was the basis of discriminatory speech and action justified by deeply held religious beliefs that Blacks, in particular, were inferior in the eyes of God, and thus, could be treated as inferior by Whites. (p. 243)

As we have seen, the Church uses God as the ultimate authority—and a scapegoat—for providing reasons why racism was okay and even instituted by God. Within those hierarchies of racial privilege crafted in the Mormon system, some relics exist today (Mueller, 2017). Consequently, rhetorics of Whiteness seep into the interpersonal exchanges in the pews of the Church's chapels to ensure that White cisheteronormativity is maintained. Now, I would be misleading if I did not note how Mormonism is not the only religious organization that

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promulgates White colonialism. For centuries, Christian institutions in Europe and the U.S. taught that "[t]he mission of the White race was to 'civilize and Christianize' the heathen, the savages, the less fortunate—all lesser beings in God's creation" (Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 1999, p. 16).

While so-called God-given rhetorics regarding White supremacy have mostly simmered in the latest generations, Whiteness is still alive and well in religious institutions such as Mormonism. This is not to say that all Mormons overtly mistreat queer members or neighbors of color; in fact, the opposite may be closer to the truth. However, when a devout member disregards the Church's past racism and current cisheteronormativity—perhaps by saying something like, "Well, it's God's decision on who is cursed or sinful, not ours,"—or when Mormons refuse to talk about social disparity or inequity including racism or cisheteronormativity, they perpetuate those bigotries and Whiteness prevails unscathed. Of course, seeking to embrace the positive, it is undoubtedly a goal of many Mormons, regardless of their queer status or race, to cultivate congregations of inclusive love, acceptance, and non-judgment (e.g., Mormons Building Bridges, Mama Dragons, and Affirmation are a few Mormon-based groups that preach love for LGBTQIA members and fight against discrimination).

Efforts should be made to be inclusive of everyone who is benevolently seeking to be understood, including those who choose not to label themselves, but these efforts should also be made to be inclusive in ways that are not cooptive but done with a genuine goal of building communities of parity. In this way, instead of villainizing members of the queer communities for not embracing their identities, we can seek to understand why. For example, perhaps those participants who choose not to apply labels, and thus perform queerness as non-identity, such as Nelson who occasionally uses the term transgender, but prefers to explain himself as

experiencing gender dysphoria, and Heber who denies the label gay, and considers himself to "experience same-gender attraction"—are resisting homo/transnormativity by challenging the "privileg[ed] set of hierarchies, social norms, and expectations that cause the oppressed to oppress one another" (Flores, 2017, para. 1). This means that participants who do not consider their queerness as features of identity, but rather pieces of their human experiences, should also be treated with benevolence and understanding.

Because the participants are transgender, gay, or pan/bisexual, they are often not fully accepted as equals among non-queer members or leaders. At the same time, Church doctrine also creates gaps in families, friends, and significant others who accept and attempt to live up to Mormon standards of White cisheteronormativity. The mere participation in the Church means, to some extent, that the participants are perpetuating the very system that works to discriminate against anyone who seeks to challenge its bricolage of colonial projects—including themselves. On the other hand, because they are queer and Others, they also exist in the paradoxes churned by the queer and religious ideologies with which they identify.

It is here that the participants' awareness of their privileges and disadvantages in the Church come to light. The majority of the participants downplay their Whiteness and the privileges it affords them while also seeking acceptance and escape from the discrimination that labels them as Others. Some feel that narratives of the Church operating as a system of neocolonialism are ludicrous and the products of liberal maligning. But at a deeper level, what these patterns unmuffle is a chorus of individuals—with many privileges and few—who are unwilling to disrupt the status quo. The findings uncover a disturbing fealty performed by minds and bodies that are oppressed at the hands of White cisheteronormativity to carry out their work

with little to no resistance. It speaks to the power of what humans will do when they believe they are choosing the right and following the commandments of their God.

Because this is the case, not only are the participants vying for belonging among their non-queer ward family members and leaders, they are also continuing to develop a relationship with God. At times, the participants feel like their queerness does impact their holiness, at other times it does not, and many times, such a balance involves the perceptions and judgements made by others in various social groups including family members, church leaders and members, and friends or significant others. Such a predicament only adds to the discursive and identity performances the participants must learn to integrate or balance. Most participants entertain the idea of having to leave the Church eventually, whether by choice, or by force (i.e., excommunication).

Unfortunately, while all of the participants already experience great amounts of distress performing their identities, former queer Mormons who have left the Church still report feelings of distress and loss of community. According to Cranney (2017),

> [T]here are often in-group cultural barriers to identifying as both Mormon… and LGB due to the historical tensions that have existed between these two populations…. [Though for some] the paradoxical LGB Mormon category may be associated with better mental health, …religious services attendance may not cause better mental health due to the potential for experiencing homonegative treatment and scripts. (p. 739)

Therefore, I fear that the identity performances of Mormon and queer may always carry with them emotional and psychosocial baggage of possible maladies. Further, this phenomenon of the silent suffering that often accompanies the participants' identity performances can be a symptom of Whiteness.

Much like the dialectic queer-religious positionings and experiences of the participants, Mormon masculinity itself is rooted in paradox. Ruchti (2007) argues that Mormon men, through their strained history of constant interactions with non-Mormons, have developed a normative masculine performance that "emblematizes the ideal American masculinity [i.e., White masculinity] but does so from the position of a marginalized other" (p. 138). Mormons were/are marginalized because of their status as religious minorities seeking a place in the U.S. space of Christian Protestant dominance, but also privileged in that they may perform their masculinity in a way that symbolizes the ultimate American, a transformation possible because of Whiteness (Harris & Bringhurst, 2015). With this in focus, a major contribution of this thesis is unveiling new insights into the operationalization of Mormon Whiteness.

Theoretical contributions. Whiteness is crucial to understanding Mormon identity, which is why the thesis has sought to understand it. While various interpretations exist of what constitutes Whiteness and how it operates, "at least one feature is discernible," writes Kincheloe (1999): "Whiteness cannot escape the materiality of its history, its effects on the everyday lives of those who fall outside its conceptual net as well as on white people themselves" (p. 3). Using rhetoric from the present day and also the past, it has been my goal to indeed show how the Church cannot escape from its White history, and how it impacts Mormon communities today.

For example, the privileges afforded because of Mormon Whiteness allow Church members to frame themselves—individually and collectively—as God's (newly) chosen people; because they are God's chosen, they are endowed with special Divine gifts. Perhaps the most salient example is Mormon men's sole right to hold the priesthood. As discussed earlier, during much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the right of being a priesthood holder was withheld from individuals of African descent. Today, through rites, faithful Mormon men of all races are

ordained to the priesthood and are subsequently "inseparably connected with the powers of heaven" (Doctrine & Covenants 121:36).

To more fully understand the given to Whiteness and to Mormons being a peculiar people, it is important to study the rhetoric of Brigham Young and others who historically reserved the priesthood power for not only men, but non-Black men. A journal entry written by an early Mormon leader, L. John Nuttal (1879), captured the emotion of Mormon Whiteness after he anointed Elijah Abel, a Black man, to the priesthood:

> [When] I had my hands upon his head I never had such unpleasant feelings in my life, and I said I never would again Anoint another person who had Negro blood in him unless I was commanded by the Prophet to do so. ... In [later] years ... I became acquainted with Joseph [Smith] myself … [and] I received from Joseph ...the ...instructions …[that] I could baptize [enslaved Blacks] by the consent of their Masters, but not to confer the Priesthood upon them. (p. 50)

Therefore, access to the priesthood acted as a mechanism that protected Mormon White specialness. In an effort to protect their place as the Lord's anointed and chosen, the Church's cisheteronormativity produces a sort of wrath against the evils of the world. I see similarities in this cultural value of masculine piety as is explained in DiAngelo's (2016) concept of White wrath, a coercive tendency for White folks to collude with people of color by having them assure Whites that they are good people and not racist. Defensiveness or emotional displays of indignant sadness erases any semblance of the White individual's onus and fulfills "a vicious cycle" in which people of color uphold the racial order by not challenging the inappropriate comments made by the good-hearted White person (p. 153). As other communication scholars have done by applying similar concepts to expand the literal, I would argue here a "White wrath"

in Mormonland could be conceptualized as a "Mormon wrath," meaning that those who are not Mormons—or Mormons who are not what they should be (e.g., members who are progressive, non-White, or queer)—are violating the social constructs of true Mormonness, which is rooted in cisheteronormative Whiteness, and are therefore Othered in a (passive-)aggressive process.

Not only has this White Mormon wrath produced a historical and contemporary racist component to Mormonhood, but it has also crafted rhetorics of cisheteronormativity that impact the relationality of Mormons, queer or not. For example, because of the priesthood's eternal nature, Basquiat (2001) argues that the Mormon gender roles and doctrinal values which place men (as priesthood holder) as the ultimate leaders in the home are eternal, and thus women are required to submit to men, even in the afterlife. Unfortunately, sexist structures are really cisheteronormative structures (LeMaster, 2017), particularly when we recall Winnubst's (2006) conceptualization of Whiteness as phallic and straight. Through rhetoric and discourse, Mormon leaders have constructed White heterosexual masculinity as "natural and normal, and other things (homosexuality [and gender nonconformity]) as problematic" (Cragun, Williams, & Sumerau, 2015, p. 294). The Whiteness is so powerful that it has become entrenched in Utah, where the land—just as the minds and bodies of its queer members—has been colonized to rid itself (themselves) of the non-Mormon and non-normative Mormon ideologies and expectations.

In this process, Whiteness intertwines with the cisheteronormativity that is the foundation of Mormonism. Because this is the case, in this thesis I used queer theory to identify these structures and reinterpret, or *queer,* the meanings implicit and explicit in the Church's rhetoric and cultural values within interpersonal dynamics and identity performances. Through the queer theory lens, it became apparent that the definition of *queer* as a feature of identity, which comes equipped with ideological underpinnings and expectations (Eguchi & Asante, 2016), means that

those ideologies can sometimes be rooted in homo/transnormativity. For instance, we would not

expect a man who experiences no sexual attraction to a woman to marry a woman—but that is

what some of my participants have done. They have faith that if they follow the Church's

commandment to marry a woman, they, and their marriage, will be divinely blessed for it. While

some of the participants seem to thrive in this challenge to normativity, others experience

excruciating dissonance. This end is summarized by Asante's (2017) insight that "Queer [folks]

have to navigate the meta-narratives of … religious intolerance on the one hand while

simultaneously constructing their own identities" (pp. 14-15). In the process of internally

creating their queer identities, the participants are also externally negotiating their divine and

religious identities through a spiritual and social process. They exist in a world that is built

through delicate interactions of identity formation and performance as transgender, gay, and

bisexual Mormons who live in the Church—and all of its community, rhetoric, rules, and culture.

 Of course, the diversity in how one chooses to perform their identity is what makes

queerness an untapped spring of possibility. Though there arose patterns of similarities in my

participants' comments, as exemplified by Harold's explanation that "this is how you navigate

the world," the findings as a whole revealed a wide range of ways in which the participants

navigate the very different worlds of being queer and Mormon. As Muñoz (1999) reminds us,

queer theory's power is in possibilities. In this possibility is a wonderful world full of healthy

navigations between religious and queer spaces, Mormon homes where parents embrace their

queer children with complete love and acceptance, a Mormonism in which LGBTQIA members

feel a freedom to perform their identities that is upliftingly genuine, and a life in which they have

the ability to enter whatever relationship they would like with another consenting adult,

regardless of their identity or social location in the Mormon strata.

Critical self-reflexivity. Beginning around the age of ten, my mom started to ask me something along the lines of "Are you gay?" While I'm uncertain why she felt that was a pertinent question to ask me, I assume it had to do with my identity performances that were usually effeminate. But when she would ask me that, maybe once every few years since my prepubescence, I was ashamed. I was angry. At first, my reaction was more innocent and child-like, as my knowledge of what gayness truly meant was derived from school-yard bullies using the epithet to label anything or anyone as stupid, weak, or unwanted. And of course, I didn't want to be any of those things, so I repressed any inkling of my queerness, except for the occasional joke where I would pretend to be interested in men or want to wear women's clothing or paint my fingernails.

When going to high school with queer students, I would also seem to distance myself from them and surround myself with female friends. I seemed to plunge myself further and further from ever wanting to explore those feelings I had squandered in my early years that something was missing and that I wasn't being my real self. Church meetings, some of which promoted harsh (ultra)conservative views of homosexuality that were homophobic and hate-filled, were normalized. The temerity and surety that many of the adults in my congregation felt about the Church's veracity—including their correct views dealing with queer issues—was equally intoxicating to the point that I easily absorbed the belief that the Church was true and that meekness and being teachable only existed outside of the gospel topics (for the truth could not be debated once Church leaders had given their admonitions). It is unfortunate that, in an atmosphere of such deluded arrogance on the part of the Church, I was still, at times at least, able to confront my own fear and hatred of myself for so many reasons, including my yearning for queerness. All this time, my Whiteness seemed to go unchecked, though I saw myself as

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sympathetic and curious about non-White people and cultures. Such a curiosity was genuine, though not completely altruistic or free from cooption.

I feel that providing this background information is helpful, to both my readers and myself, in coming to a deeper understanding of my own biases that were unavoidably operating while I produced this thesis. It is the first time I have, in any consequential manner, analyzed the reality of White cisheteronormativity in general, let alone in the Mormon institution. It has been eye-opening for me to learn the history of the Church in these regards and to be inspired to unveil how those past enactments impact today's world for the participants. Being critically self-reflexive has allowed me to recognize the importance of boundaries in academic work, and in life. To this point, Yuval-Davis (2011) profoundly observes how "boundaries cannot really be avoided once we start questioning who cares for whom and what are the emotional and the power relations which are involved in this interaction" (p. 7). The power innate in my relations with the Church as one being raised devoutly in it (and the relationships with my many friends and family members who are still devout), while at the same time coming to terms with my queerness and seeking to understand it more and more with each participant interview, etches; with each of these interactions, I seemed to simultaneously build and blur boundaries between the new and the old, and between the past, the present and the future.

Therefore, it was painful at times to conduct this research as feelings of disgust, hatred, depression, loneliness, and pure loss of impetus were sometimes strong enough to the point where I had to stop completely and rest or cry. It is a difficult thing to realize that sometimes destruction is crucial to creation (Fisher, 1974). At some stages of the thesis I became a *weltschmerz*-filled curmudgeon, who decided upon entering a doctoral program, my study path would no longer be so intertwined with who I am. Dr. Eguchi pointed out that such a choice

would be a privilege that many students and scholars—especially those of color or who are otherwise situated in precarity—cannot enjoy. I recognize now, through this process, that I would be negligent if I stopped here. This thesis has helped me realize that this path is one of great potential to understanding myself, others, and the influence of the Divine and those humans who claim they speak on Their behalf. I only rose up against the surrender of too-personal-for-sharing-pain through creative bursts of knowing that the voices of the participants need to be heard for anything the change, and for whatever reason, I was entrusted to hold their stories. Needless to say, it is a work close to my heart and a project that has tugged and ripped my heartstrings.

Some readers, perhaps even some of the participants and my own family members, might view this thesis as mere prattle or, even worse, as anti-Mormon propaganda that should be disregarded as a bereaved student's biased attack on the Church. This would likely be accompanied by a sentiment I've heard many times: doesn't the author have anything better to do than inveigh about the Church? Or, shall we take it a step further by echoing the fallacious logic I've read and heard countless times? That is, anti-Mormon literature only proves that the Church is true because no other religion faces such calumny. The reality, however, in my case at least, is simple: I cannot stay silent anymore. For too long, I perpetuated a system of White cisheteronormativity by tacitly and explicitly supporting the Church's discriminatory policies and doctrines. For too long, I was emotionless in the face of social injustice and satisfied with a seraphic ignorance of the evils committed against people (myself included) who deserve love and equal treatment. I suppose this means I am now engaging in a sort of religious rebellion, and while there was a time when I would never do anything to harm the Church, I must do so now. Because in my mind, to not speak up about the harm is to actively cause the harm. In the words

of Freire (1985), "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (p. 122). The role of power, as the pedagogue insists, cannot be ignored in any relationship; thus, the power of communication in forming relationships, guiding choices, and designing identity performances was at the root of this thesis.

The power of White cisheteronormativity has a very real impact on me personally, just like the participants, and hundreds (maybe thousands?) of queer Mormons, and that is why I wanted to conduct this thesis in the first place. I wanted to understand the power of belief, the power of loyalty, and the reasons that people who are mistreated and Othered stay in the organization that hurts them. I wanted to study the discursive structures of belonging and exclusion within the Mormon system and uncover those rhetorics that have impacts on real people's lives. I wanted to know this in hopes of understanding my own participation in the system that convinced me that my queerness was evil, but my light skin was godly. I wanted to know if other queer Mormon peers dealt with the tensions I did—mostly internal—in an effort to blend in and be normal. Unfortunately, such self-invalidation and self-hatred seems to be common in queer communities. As Leon (2020) perceptively penned:

> Queer people don't grow up as ourselves, we grow up playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimize humiliation & prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us & which parts we've created to protect us.

Identity performances are critical for self-preservation when one grows up LGBTQIA in cultures and communities that are unwelcoming to queer individuals. Dedicating more than a year to study the topic has allowed me to barely scratch the surface. It has been an academic pursuit as

much as a personal endeavor to pick apart the unhealthy mechanisms and traits to uncover the healthier, more authentic me.

Unsurprisingly then, as I mentioned before, the thesis was an emotionally and spiritually raucous journey. It has allowed me to begin to understand the structures and patterns of scapegoats and saviors, pleasure and pain, race and religion. The process has helped me to take steps back to consider how my faith can either build beautiful worlds or destroy them. It has allowed me to analyze myself with self-awareness, especially of the fact that my Whiteness has impacts I take for granted and that I must use my privilege to help others enjoy privileges.

The process has shown me that while empathy is crucial to a good life, it should not be used to justify hate or bigotry. Having learned this important lesson, I leave this thesis with a sullen heart that has much to evaluate within myself, my relationships, and my God. As Eguchi (2019) stated, "The queer politics of failure enable queers …to revisit forgotten possibilities of the past and to reimagine uncertain possibilities of the future" (p. 4). There are times when it is difficult to have hope to believe in a better future of equity and inclusion—and a future in which I have learned how to better support friends of color using my Whiteness as a benefit to them—but I must cling to that hope of a brighter future for LGBTQIA folks everywhere, a future in which radical love permeates queer religious lives.

I suppose this leaves me to elaborate on my positionality and self-reflexivity in regard to my relationship with the Church now. As a person born into the faith, who was raised in a home, neighborhood, and regional community that was overwhelmingly Mormon, it was difficult to escape its influence. It still is today. I find myself in a predicament similar to many of the participants—torn between theological teachings that they find beautiful and empowering whilst being utterly hurt by the anti-queer rhetorics consistently taught by leaders, reinforced through

policies, and supported by members. With that being said, I do not identify as Mormon anymore and rarely attend meetings. I full-heartedly renounce any current or past doctrine, policy, or scripture that supports religious supremacy, (neo)colonialism, or the mistreatment of any human based on their race, queerness, gender/sex, or ability. The words of a prominent Mormon feminist, Toscano (2004), speak to me regarding this assertion: "We are [Divine] so long as we do the work of [the Divine], which is to empower the powerless and to relieve the pain of any who suffer" (p. 21).

I have no answer to why I have not formally resigned from the Church. Perhaps, I am lazy and would rather avoid the red tape, and perhaps, doing so would admit to the Church that they are a bona fide organization, whereas to me, spirituality cannot be contained or dictated in the walls of office buildings, chapels, or temples. Conversely, I am aware that producing this research may cause the Church to not want me anymore and seek discipline for my critiques. I am not bothered if this were to happen, for I feel I have spoken the truth. My spirituality now consists of appeals to the belief in a beneficent God (one more loving and accepting than the Mormon God, or even the Judeo-Christian God). My joy in learning about other faiths may align with some sort of agnostic universalism, though I feel such a label is unhelpful. I am in a place where I must negotiate and dis/uncover my spiritual identity and that begins with my connection to the Divine, which, at this time (and perhaps forever), I am still exploring.

Limitations. Perhaps the most difficult part of the analysis—and this is a genuine concern and limitation arising from my positionality—was celebrating the positive and good things done by the Church. The thesis is, by my own admission, tendentious that the Mormon structure historically and still today discriminates against Others and that such prejudice is wrong. However, the Church also provides hope and community for millions of people, and that is a

good thing. I wish here to also recognize the limitation implicit in my positionality as a burgeoning student-scholar. While I have done my best to learn and understand the concepts crucial to this thesis, I am new to academia and have much to learn. For this reason, too, researching and writing this thesis has been a humbling experience for me, one that has forced me to remember that the more I learn and the more I understand, there is still more for me to learn and understand. Whiteness has emerged as the concept I most need to continue learning about in depth so that I can uncover the discriminatory structures of White supremacy. In so doing, I can learn about my own privileges and understand how institutions benefit from hegemony, so that I can redouble my own efforts to aid those who are oppressed.

Beyond addressing my own positionality as a limitation (which I suppose exists for all researchers, regardless of their approach or tradition), this thesis can be improved in two other ways. The first is by interviewing more diverse participants. While I had no intention of only interviewing White Mormons, most of whom are able-bodied and gay cisgender men, it nonetheless happened. The majority of scholastic queer investigations have, whether intentionally or not, centered around White male bodies; even more unfortunate is that very few of those studies have critically analyzed the impacts of Whiteness in their data (Eguchi & Calafell, 2020). While the present study has only White participants, their Whiteness—and the Whiteness embedded in the Mormon structure—was analyzed. It was also unintentional that all but three of the participants identify as cisgender males and out of the three transgender participants only one identifies as a transgender woman. Given the Church's patriarchal system, it is hypothesized that women, as with queer of color members, would have different experiences than men and often different privileges. This means that while it is hoped that some of the findings can be transferable to other contexts, this thesis should not be extrapolated to provide

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insights into experiences of queer Mormons of color or queer Mormon females. In the future, perhaps an intersectional lens including ability, age, gender, and race could be used in an effort to seek any intracategorical identity differences among LGBTQIA Mormons.

The second limitation relies on the methods used. I would have loved to conduct the interviews in person. This would have allowed me to meet with the participants in more intimate spaces and, ideally, would have allowed feelings of comfort to increase prior to interviews. While I was able to conduct Facetime calls with several of the participants, most of them were conducted over the phone. While phone interviews have their benefits, including convenience and less privacy invasion (which is a germane concern given that some of the participants have not publicly disclosed their queer identity), telecommunication precluded me from being more present and sharing the same space with them. Though I took notes of nonverbal cues that I was able to descry during the calls, not being in-person undoubtedly impinged my ability to notice more important nonverbals.

Future directions. I think that this work would be an incredible waste of time, energy, and labor if it simply stopped here. I am grateful for the scholars who came before me, and who have given us a peek into the lives of queer Mormons; I pray and hope there are many more to come. The information, insights, and data collected in this study, though, can do much more than collect digital dust on the University's thesis and dissertation database. Genuine critical work should always offer solutions to the problems it condemns. And while I genuinely believe that sharing the participants' stories is a powerful tool in bringing change, it is not enough for an entire transformation. As long as LGBTQIA individuals seek to stay involved in the Mormon system, there need to be plans and models implemented for advocacy within the Church that provides church members with resources and community.

For this reason, a major future direction of this work is to engage in crafting policies that can benefit the queer Mormon communities by developing social infrastructure that is aimed at increasing equity and genuine love at the institutional level. Such a plan would include advocacy groups to be welcomed and implanted into Mormon congregations, the refutation and denunciation of any rhetoric used to dehumanize or mistreat LGBTQIA individuals, and reparations for communities and individuals harmed by the Church's White cisheteronormativity. As Miller (2019) notes, it might behoove some Christians to undergo some kind of training or therapy—to counter conversion therapy promoted by Christianity—to understand that queers do not need to change themselves, but rather hateful people need to change, and that includes people who believe erasure or control is love. After all, "love is patient, love is kind, …[and] it does not dishonor others" (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). Thus, one of the worthiest goals of any future LGBTQIA-Mormon studies is to understand how queer and non-queer Mormons conceptualize and operationalize *love* in an effort to explore how the social construct impacts relationships with themselves, others, and God.

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Appendix A

Resources for LGBTQIA Mormons and Allies

Mormon Organizations and Resources

- Affirmation | https://affirmation.org/
- Encircle | https://encircletogether.org/
- Family Acceptance Project | https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/
- Far Between | http://farbetweenmovie.com/
- Lift and Love | www.liftandlove.org/
- Listen, Learn, Love | www.listenlearnandlove.org/
- LDS Beacon | http://ldsbeacon.org/default.asp
- LDS Family Fellowship | www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org/
- Mormon and Gay | https://mormonandgay.churchofjesuschrist.org/
- Mormons Building Bridges | http://mormonsbuildingbridges.org/
- Northstar LDS | www.northstarlds.org/
- The Hearth | www.ldshearth.org/

More Organizations and Resources

- Center for Disease Control | www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm
- Crisis Text Line | https://www.crisistextline.org/
- Funders for LGBTQ Issues | https://lgbtfunders.org/
- GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) | https://www.glsen.org/
- It Gets Better Project | https://itgetsbetter.org/
- PFLAG | https://pflag.org/
- Safe Zone Project | https://thesafezoneproject.com/resources/
- Social and Emotional Wellbeing Initiative | www.sewi.org/
- Suicide Prevention Hotline | 1-800-273-8255
- The Gay Center | https://gaycenter.org/resources/
- The Trevor Project | www.thetrevorproject.org/

Interview Guide

Family, Community, and Self

1. Tell me about yourself.
    a. How do you identify in terms of sexuality, sex, and gender?
        i. What about culture? Race?
2. Tell me about what it was like growing up as a member of a religious family.
    a. Was the Church a big part of your life growing up?
        i. Were most people in your community who you interacted with members?
        ii. Did you get baptized at 8, (and priesthood at 12, if male)?
    b. How would you describe your experience of living the Mormon lifestyle?
3. Are you religious? How? (Please explain what being religious means to you.)
    a. Is your family religious? Explain.
        i. And how does your religiosity and/or your family's religiosity affect your relationship?
4. How does your family show affection?
    a. Did that change after you came out? If so, how?
5. When did you realize you were queer?
    a. Have you come out?
        i. How was that experience?
        ii. (If they haven't disclosed, ask why).
    b. Why did you feel it necessary to disclose that?
        i. Who did you tell first?
        ii. Did you tell your family?
            1. How did they respond?
        iii. Have you / do you ever feel shame for your sexuality?
6. What's your advice for parents / siblings / family members with queer relatives?
7. Do you want a family of your own someday?
    a. Do you plan to be celibate? Why or why not?
8. Did you grow up in Utah?

a. How was it growing up in Utah?

9. Tell me about Mormon culture in your community.

   a. Could you watch all media?

   b. Could you hang out with friends or date people who were not members?

   c. Do you think non-members were treated different in your community by members?

10. Do you think there is a difference being a queer Mormon who lives in Utah versus somewhere else?

11. Could you give me some examples?

12. How can we help the current LGBTQ suicide crisis?

13. Are you involved in any queer communities? If so, tell me about some of your experiences.

14. Have you been to Loveloud Concert?

   a. What was your experience like there?

Church Involvement

15. How are you involved in the Church?

   a. Do you attend meetings/services? Have a calling? (A calling is a voluntary leadership or service position on serves in their local / regional congregation).

16. Why do you think some people are more religious than others?

17. Why do you choose to be in the Church?

18. Did you ever meet with a church leader about being queer?

   a. What was that like?

19. Did you go on a mission?

   a. How did you share your call to be a missionary known as a letter opening? (A letter opening is when the Church sends a letter to a missionary candidate. They tend to be a big deal and opened with friends and family around. The letter tells the candidate for the first time when they will begin missionary service and where they will serve).

   b. Did your queerness ever impact your mission?

20. Tell me about your relationship with God.

   a. Do you pray?

b. Have you ever prayed to Heavenly Mother? (She is God's as in Heavenly Father's wife. Some people pray to her though it is not common practice).

c. If yes: why, and how was it?

d. If no: why not?

21. Have you ever had a priesthood blessing? (As per the New Testament, Mormons give blessings of comfort or healing to someone in need. I argue it is categorically different than a regular prayer). What was it like?

a. Have you ever given a priesthood blessing? What was it like? (If male).

i. Is there one that stays in your mind, either positively or negatively?

b. What about a patriarchal blessing?

22. If LGBTQ individuals were in Jesus's community, how do you think he treated them?

Identity, Privilege, Perceptions, and Spirituality

23. How do you define/describe yourself? In other words, what is the most important aspect of your identity?

a. What are your thoughts on our divine identity, as in, we are children of God?

24. (How) do you balance being a Mormon and queer?

25. Has there been a time where you struggled with being queer?

a. If so, could you give me some examples?

b. Have you ever prayed to God to take away your *queerness? (*The term will be used according to their answer to question 1a).

26. Have you been discriminated against for your identity?

a. If yes: tell me about that. How was it? Why do you think it happened?

b. If no: why do you think that is?

27. To you, what is privilege?

i. Are you familiar with the notion of "white privilege"? If so, what does it mean to you? Do you believe white privilege exists?

1. How often do you think about or talk about (your) race?

ii. Do you believe male privilege exists?

iii. Do you believe cisgender privilege exists?

1. How often do you think about your gender?

      iv. What part of your identity do you think about the most? (For example, your race, your gender, sexuality, nationality, class, ability).

    b. How do you feel about the Church's former exclusion policy which kept children of same-gender couples from being baptized or blessed until adulthood?

      i. How would you compare or contrast that policy to the former priesthood ban of Black individuals?

      ii. How do you feel about the recent revelation that revoked that policy?

      iii. Do you think that Mormons should forget about the old policy?

        1. Why or why not?

        2. Should they forget about the priesthood ban of Black individuals? Why or why not?

    c. How do you feel when someone talks about oppression? This could include being oppressed for being a person of color, or queer, or LDS.

28. Are there times or situations when you feel like you can be your true self? Tell me about them. Are there times or situations when you feel like you can't be your true self? Tell me about them.

    a. What are some things that keep you from being your true self?

    b. How did you overcome obstacles of being true to yourself?

29. How can we build a healthy environment for queer members of the Church?

    a. Why?

    b. What do you think keeps non-queer / queer members divided?

    c. How can allies and community members help build compassion and peace?

Conclusions

30. What do you want church members to know about these issues or your experience?

    a. What about anyone else?

31. Is there anything else you want to share?

Demographics

32. Please choose a nickname or pseudonym to which you would like to be referred.

33. Please share the following features of your identity:

    Age, race/ethnicity, nationality, class, education, political alignments, and (dis)ability.