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Book Review

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Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos by Taylor G. Petrey. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2024. 214 pages. \$99 Cloth, \$27.95 Paper, \$21.95 eBook.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS Church, has long been decidedly un- and anti-queer. Taylor G. Petrey's innovative book, *Queering Kinship in the Mormon Cosmos*, is a welcome and unexpected attempt to queer Mormonism. He aims not to tell the “truth” about whether and how Mormonism is queer, nor to reconcile Mormonism with queerness, nor to redeem or reclaim it for queers, but rather to demonstrate queer potentialities inherent within the tradition's central theological claims—to “undertake an act of queering” (3) Mormonism. Petrey engages with Mormonism not because it is special or unique in some way, but because the tradition is “useful to think with” (131) as an example of how scholars might “queer” any religious tradition or system of thought. As the title indicates, Mormon theologies and practices of kinship are both the sites and the instruments of Petrey's queer interventions.

The first chapter lays out the theoretical backdrop of the book. Petrey opposes the ways kinship and sexuality have been imagined as binarily opposed categories both in debates over the motivating premises of Mormon kinship experiments and in queer theory. Mormon studies scholars have long debated whether the religion's most radical kinship experiment, polygamy, was motivated by sexuality or kinship. At the same time, in collapsing the distance between the human and the divine, Mormonism imagines a God in sexual and kin relationships. Queer theorists have also long debated which—sexuality or kinship—has the most potential for queer liberation. Those supporting sexuality have often reduced kinship to the “normative politics of the state” (18)

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while proponents of kinship have “desexualized queerness” (17). Petrey aims to move our analyses of both Mormonism and queer liberation beyond this binary, showing that a “lust for kinship” (21) is and should be central to the radicalism of both traditions.

Petrey then applies this claim, alongside other insights of queer theory, to five topical chapters that each focus on a unique element of the Latter-day Saint tradition: the nature of the Godhead, Heavenly Mother and celestial reproductivity, gender fluidity and kinship in the creation of the earth, Mormon materialism, and polygamy. Through these topics, Petrey applies a queer lens to the big existential questions religions attempt to answer: what is the nature of God, what is the nature of creation, what sort of beings have been created by it, what substance are those creatures made of, and how shall they relate to each other? In some of these chapters, Petrey often finds room aplenty for queerness, but others strain against the tradition.

Petrey’s second chapter about the nature of God and divine kinship finds plenty of queer space in the ways the three male figures of the godhead “are bound by covenant in love” in same-sex kin relationships (which LDS and non-LDS theologians have often compared to marriage). He also identifies multiple ways all three characters—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—subvert maleness, for example through such metaphors as being “born of the spirit,” a maternal Jesus, or a God with passions. Thus, the LDS Godhead embodies queer love, queer kinship, and queer masculinity, showing both same-sex kinship and gender fluidity.

Petrey’s third chapter tries to find queer space in LDS theology (or lack thereof) about Heavenly Mother and eternal spiritual reproductivity. He examines both mainstream and LDS feminist thinking about Mother in Heaven to posit a queerer understanding of motherhood. For me, the chapter struggled mightily, not because of Petrey’s weakness, but because of the tradition itself. It appears that even for as expansive a thinker as Petrey, motherhood is all that is available in Mormonism to think with. The best Petrey can do in this vein is to posit “ways of thinking about motherhood that resist biological essentialism and reproductive imperatives” (52), showing less the queer potentialities within Mother in Heaven than the depth of Mormonism’s attachment to maternal femininity. The tradition can imagine only a mother-Goddess, never a Goddess unmodified.

Petrey’s fourth and fifth chapters offer more potential, though, the first dealing with the creation of the earth and the second with Mormon material-

ism. Through a close reading of multiple iterations of the creation story in LDS tradition, Petrey illuminates hidden pathways that re-envision LDS accounts of sexual difference. Here, he once again infuses the process by which sexual difference came to be with ambiguity and fluidity. Perhaps Petrey's most radical claim is that Adam and Eve's (hetero)sex "is not reproductive but relational." The value of sexuality is that "it creates unity from division" (87), and unity and relationality need no gender difference to matter.

Petrey finds perhaps the most potential for queering Mormonism in the chapter on Mormon materialism. In it, he shows how Mormon theology has infused physical substance with eternal spiritual and divine meaning. For Mormon thinkers, physical matter is both earthly and eternal, not static but capacious, not to be transcended but to be perfected. God has a body that matters, and human bodies exist to be sacralized. In this view, material bodies are not immutable facts but rather mythological and malleable creations; they are subjects and tools of spiritual transformation. Sexuality, too, is not to be disavowed but perfected, as God has perfected it. The reproductive aim of celestial sex may entail heterosexuality, but its kinship aim may be much more expansive. For Petrey, the pleasures of perfected sex include both coming and "kinning." Especially for kinning, more (of the right kind of) sex is better. Hence, Petrey's book finishes with an exploration of plural marriage.

If we are to take seriously the relationship of context to theology, as Petrey's work demands that we do, then whatever queerness or sex positivity people may find in Mormon materialism was nonetheless "developed and used to defend and justify the hierarchical, patriarchal practice of polygamy by emphasizing reproduction" (130). At the same time, polygamy was historically paired with a theology of adoption that expanded definitions of family beyond biological kin. Among early Mormons at least, sex was not enough to secure kinship ties, and was irrelevant to them in the case of adoption. Rather, kinship was a matter of ritual, not biology. For Petrey, kinship as ritual provides resources by which we might expand the boundaries of kinship beyond the family and its forms beyond the reproductive household, even while its origins are mired in hierarchy and patriarchy. Polygamy, though fraught, also productively troubles kinship, making it "fluid, porous, and multi-positional" (151).

Despite the queer theological potential Petrey outlines, he acknowledges that the prospects the mainstream church might accommodate queerness are slim. But this is not Petrey's aim. While his work focuses on a Mormon theological tradition, it also maintains connection to broader biblical hermeneu-

tics, queer religion, and feminist theological traditions that demonstrate the relevance of Petrey's work much more broadly. The book is a demonstration that, as queer theorists have long argued, queerness is everywhere, lurking in the margins of even the most heteronormative of thought systems. His work operates as a thought experiment in "the subversion and resignification of dominant narratives and the revaluation of the marginal in queer approaches," a model that might apply to any religious tradition (159). Readers looking for the potential for a kinder, queerer church won't be satisfied. But those looking for queerer theological options within a Mormon tradition will find them. At the very least, whether they like it or not, most readers will find the Mormon theological tradition essentially and productively queered.