

Dissent in Zion: Outsider Practices in Utah

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ABSTRACT: Most communities in Utah are predominately Mormon, and Mormon practices and beliefs strongly influence practices in everyday society and culture. Yet, there also many non-Mormons who live in Utah. Through analyzing the independent documentary film *The Beaver Kid* and autoethnography of the author's own experience growing up in Utah as a non-Mormon, this essay explores the influence that Mormon practices and beliefs have on "outsiders" in the communities. Concepts from practice theory such as doxa, orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and communities of practice are used to understand how outsiders resist the dominant social norms, while also being influenced to abide by them.

KEYWORDS: Utah, Mormons and Non-Mormons, practice theory, autoethnography

The *Beaver Kid*, the first film of the *Beaver Trilogy* (Harris 2001), opens in a parking lot. A shot from a handheld video camera wildly spins across the ground before stabilizing and finding a focus. A thin, young man with airy blonde hair, bell bottoms, and a black sweatshirt with thick red and yellow stripes holds a camera. He snaps photographs of Salt Lake City's Channel 2 Sky 2 News Helicopter. An impromptu interview begins between the man filming the scene and the young man. At first the words are inaudible. A microphone is handed over. A documentary begins.

Without much prompting apart from being on camera, the young man, who says his handle is Groovin' Gary, breaks into a stream of impressions – John Wayne, Sylvester Stallone, Barry Manilow. He is unwilling to do his best impression, Olivia Newton John, because he does not have his backup. The camera excites him. He keeps talking about how great it would be to "make the tube." He's "hamming it up"

for "TV land." He wants to tell his mom he "got on the set." He bursts into haa-haas frequently. Trent Harris, the film's director, questions the young man about where he is from: Beaver, Utah. Gary describes himself as "Beaver Little Rich" and says that Beaver is "just kind of a town where you drag Main at night and go to school in the daytime." He says he knows a lot of people who "are really great people." He is twenty-one so he is beyond the age of going to school and has moved on to working for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Groovin' Gary has something about him that is endearing and captivating and makes you want to know more. Starlee Kine (2002) who put together the *This American Life* radio act "Action! Action! Action!" about the *Beaver Trilogy* asks, "Don't you love this kid? You love him but you don't know why you love him." She loves that someone thought up a character that is so excited to be taking pictures of a news helicopter, and she was shocked and pleased to learn

he was a real person – not a character. I am drawn to Groovin’ Gary for different reasons. In him, I see something of myself, or, at least, I see a kid who grew up in similar conditions and a similar place to me. The film was not intended to be an anthropological film and most would not consider it to be explicitly so, but it has elements that provoke anthropological questions. I see a young man who I want to know more about and wonder about the social and cultural setting of where he came from and how he really fit in there. Where is Beaver and what is this place with really great people? I wonder if they see Groovin’ Gary as really great – especially as the film continues into its latter half. I wonder if, perhaps, Gary’s impersonations and love of American celebrities and desire to be on TV are an expression of wanting more than Beaver offers.

In this essay, I contemplate these inquiries by exploring my own experience growing up in Utah to provide context for the social and cultural setting that likely has similarities to that which Gary experienced in Beaver. I situate myself within the framework of Utahan, predominately Mormon, culture and society as an outsider and suggest that Groovin’ Gary may similarly have felt like an outsider. My usage of the term *outsider* refers to someone who feels detached from the socio-cultural norms within a community, including prevailing religious and political outlooks. This includes ‘strangers’ who actually come from different locales with different socio-cultural practices (see Simmel 1950; Hage 2006), but my usage also refers to those from the same locale as insiders. What distinguishes one as an outsider is feeling distanced, even separated, from the norms seen as ‘our way of doing things’ by insiders. Drawing upon practice theory, I extend my analysis to contemplate how actions were taken by me to define my own position, as an outsider, within Utahan culture and suggest that this is what Groovin’ Gary is grappling with in his desire to impersonate others and find a place for himself “on the tube.” Defining one’s position and identity is often a struggle in Utah where social and institutional pressures, strongly influenced by the Mormon Church, create a strong impetus to act and behave in certain ways which can conflict with individual inclinations. Based on my experience

and my analysis of Groovin’ Gary’s performance in *The Beaver Kid*, I argue that the majority of Utahans act and behave within expected Mormon norms, but there is a strong current of non-Mormons and fringe Mormons that test these norms, typically in rather mundane ways but occasionally in poignant performances. Historical, sociological, and anthropological research suggests that the practices of this minority, bolstered by wider American society, have influenced society and culture in Utah. Yet, Mormonism’s influence remains strong and can powerfully overwhelm those who seek to test what is possible.

I first provide a brief history of the development of Utah’s Mormon social and cultural structure. This leads into summarizing practice theory, which theoretically situates my analysis and arguments. Throughout the rest of the essay, I interweave my own experiences growing up in Utah with an examination of what Groovin’ Gary might have experienced in his life, referring to concepts from practice theory to consider how our practices might be generalizable to those of other outsiders in Utah.

Historical Development of Utah’s Mormon Social and Cultural Structure

The opening scene of *The Beaver Trilogy* does not have any moment that really stands out that suggests Groovin’ Gary is very much different from any other young man or that Utah is all that different than any other place in the United States. Gary is eccentric and outgoing, but his actions are not shockingly out of the ordinary – he could be any kid in America. At face value, most communities in Utah similarly fit into the American cultural landscape without standing out in stark contrast. In fact, based on what I have heard living outside of Utah, many people might be shocked by how *normal* Utah is; I have never known a polygamist and do not know anyone who has. Communities are filled with houses and apartment buildings and schools along streets in rectilinear grids. City centers have older brick buildings occupied by long standing local businesses and sometimes an old movie theater. Spreading out on main streets from the city center, department stores, fast-food eateries, and gas stations operate. One difference people might note is the high number of churches, not churches from different

denominations but churches that all look very much the same: big and broad with a lot of roof rising to an apex, topped with a white block and pyramid steeple.

The people living and working in the buildings go about their days like many other Americans. They work in the wide variety of jobs necessary to make communities function. They drive cars, play sports, watch movies, and go to school. The influence and pervasiveness of Mormon doctrine and beliefs throughout Utah communities is not evident at first glimpse and likely one would have to integrate into a community – like an anthropologist – to recognize Mormonism’s reach, as I was from birth. Here, I situate that influence by providing a brief historical summary of how Utah was settled by Brigham Young and his followers and grew to be a Mormon Zion.

Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon Church) in 1830 in New York State. He published the Book of Mormon, which he said was a translation through divine revelation of golden plates that he had received from the angel Moroni. This book is canonical scripture for Mormons and claims “to be the record of the ancient inhabitants of the New World” (Vogt 1955:1164). Converts to the new religion soon clashed with non-Mormons about their beliefs, polygamous practices, and communal living style. From 1830 to 1846, followers of the faith moved several times from New York to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois. In 1844, problems with gentiles flared out of control, and Smith was jailed by authorities for his polygamous marital practice and then was murdered by a mob in Nauvoo, Illinois. After a short period of inner turmoil within the church ranks and jockeying for power, Brigham Young took over leadership of the majority of LDS members and sought a homeland free of strife.¹

In 1847-1848, Mormon pioneers led by Young settled near the Great Salt Lake and began to establish communities along the Wasatch Front mountain range in northern Utah. They began developing

the land as farmland and soon prospered in the desert. Young worked quickly to settle other areas of the “intermontane region” of the United States and had missions established from Arizona and New Mexico to Idaho and Montana (Vogt 1955:1165). The region grew steadily in population as the Mormon doctrine of “Gathering” encouraged new converts to take up Mormon ideals and faith and migrate to the Utah territory – an earthly Zion – to be in the same community as other believers. Missionizing efforts in Europe were particularly successful and many converts came to Utah from Great Britain and Scandinavia (Eliason 1997:178). The “Gathering” persisted until the 1920s when Mormon leadership revised the doctrine to encourage converts to live a Mormon lifestyle in their existing residence – Zion as an ideal – rather than migrating to Utah where the desert environment struggled to support further population increase (Phillips and Cragun 2013:79–80).

By the 1930s, the Mormon population in most of Utah had become a dominant majority and has continued to be so until the present.² Rick Phillips and Roger Cragun (2013) write that the LDS faith and lifestyle in what they call the “Mormon Culture Region” (MCR) is substantially different than other LDS communities throughout the world in that Mormons in the MCR attend church more often, are more densely concentrated throughout entire communities, and have more men who hold Melchizedek priesthood.^{3,4} They argue that two reasons for this heightened faith are (1) the prevalence of extended kin networks in Utah where Mormon family members beyond the nuclear family support church participation and (2) the overall majority of Mormons creates a social

2 Goshute, Navajo, Paiute, Shoshone, and Ute peoples lived in Utah long before Mormons arrived. Mormons were the first European-descended people to permanently settle in the territory.

3 Social geographers tend to include most of Utah as well as predominantly Mormon areas in southeastern Idaho; the Star Valley, Wyoming; and other Mormon communities like Mesa, Arizona in the Mormon Culture Region. General agreement exists that the core of the Mormon Culture Region is along the Wasatch Front in northern Utah (Phillips and Cragun 2013:79).

4 All Mormon males are eligible to participate in the LDS lay clergy as priests. Women cannot hold priesthood. There are two priesthood orders: the lower Aaronic Priesthood and the higher Melchizedek Priesthood. The Aaronic Priesthood is open to “worthy” boys aged 12 to 18, and the Melchizedek Priesthood is open to “worthy” men aged 18 and over (Phillips and Cragun 2013, 92–93). Ecclesiastical leaders determine whether one is “worthy” through talks – like confessions – and judging one’s involvement in church activities.

1 Smaller groups of followers supported other leaders and started splinter LDS groups that were mostly consolidated in 1860 into the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (today known as the Community of Christ). The Community of Christ continues to have a following of about 250,000 and is headquartered in Independence, Missouri (Eliason 1997, 195).

situation where “many secular institutions and social arrangements have a distinctly Mormon complexion” (Phillips and Cragun 2013:85).

Based on my own experience growing up in Utah, I believe Phillips and Cragun’s assertions are fair. Mormons are deeply interested in their genealogy and know their relatives within a community, including second- and third-cousins. Most family members tend to be Mormon and they work together to ensure faithful commitment to the church. The Mormon influence on secular institutions and aspects of life is also very prevalent in Utah; I will focus on this in much greater detail later, but first I introduce the practice theory from which I endeavour to understand the social and cultural situation in Utah.

Theoretical Framework: Practice Theory

Practice theory is a theoretical framework that attempts to understand the relationship between the social structure’s influence on individuals and individual agency’s influence on the social structure. This relationship, in the Utahan context, is the focus of this essay. I see Mormon institutions – guided by ecclesiastical leadership – as the dominant social and cultural structure in Utah and am interested in how that structure influences individuals, especially those who are not Mormon or who are “Jack Mormons.”⁵ At the same time, I am also keenly interested in how individuals act to influence the dominant social structure in Utah.

In practice theory, practices are the social actions of social agents. Social agents can include both individuals and groups of individuals. Practices are diverse and range from linguistic expressions to artistic expressions to bodily movements to political displays and more. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of *habitus* suggests that practices are a “set of dispositions to act (e.g. speak, walk, read, or eat) in particular ways which are inculcated in each individual through implicit and explicit socialization” (Bucholtz 1999:205). In this sense, the social structure significantly influences the practices of individuals and even shapes

their bodily dispositions – what Bourdieu refers to as *hexis*. Other practice theorists, like Michel de Certeau (1984), argue for more individual agency in social practices and seek to understand how practices “serve the specific social needs of individuals” (Bucholtz 1999:206). Sherry Ortner’s (1996) feminist approach to practice theory has highlighted female agents as a central focus and found more of a middle ground between structure and agency that investigates how “domination itself [is] always riven with ambiguities, contradictions, and lacunae” and “social reproduction is never total, always imperfect, and vulnerable to pressures and instabilities inherent in any situation of unequal power” (Ortner 2006:7). My examination of Utahan culture finds that the relationship between the social and cultural structure and individual motivation is more complex than a simplistic understanding and that while individual’s may influence society through their practices, especially when supported by other individuals or larger entities, acting against the grain of the social and cultural status quo can be quite challenging.

Joseph Rouse’s (2007) review of practice theory shows that the theoretical uses of “practice” have been varied and diverse to the extent that some usages seem to contradict others, as suggested in the previous paragraph. Rouse’s essay means to provide a logical coherence to practice theory by articulating “thematic rationales” that support practice theory’s usefulness in the social sciences. In what follows, I remain focused primarily on three of Rouse’s rationales to make practice theory useful in my analysis of Utahan society and culture. These include (1) an examination of practices, rules, and norms; (2) reconciling social structure with individual agency; and (3) focusing on bodily skills and disciplines.⁶ Now, I will recount some of my own experiences growing up in Utah and how I was shaped by and reacted against the dominant, mainstream Mormon social structure.

5 “Jack Mormon” is a term used in Utah to describe a Mormon who refutes aspects of the LDS Church (often non-practicing members); it contrasts with “Molly Mormon,” a term used to describe an ardent believer and practitioner.

6 Rouse (2007) also includes thematic rationales focusing on “language and tacit knowledge,” “social science and social life,” and “practices and the autonomy of the social” in his essay. I do not focus on these rationales in this essay due to limitations in my ability to provide them adequate content based on my method of recollecting my past experiences and analyzing a short documentary film.

The Shaping of a Child

I was born on a blizzardy day in December to a non-Mormon family who had recently moved to Logan, Utah from eastern Washington. My dad and mom were first-time parents who, in their early thirties, were older than most Mormon first-timers who commonly have kids in their early twenties. They were likely acutely aware of the differences between them and the majority of people in Logan. It took me a lot longer to notice.

Cultural and religious difference between oneself and others is not really something a kid thinks about at a young age. It was not something I really thought about either. I went to an elementary school, affectionately called “The Crayon School” because of crayon shaped pillars at the school’s entrance. The school is located in an area of Logan that has a population with a lower socioeconomic standing than other parts of the city. Most of my classmates and friends were of European descent, but many were also from minority groups: Latino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Samoan, and Tongan. Differences between us were largely unheeded. My friends were kids like me who liked doing things like playing sports and testing teachers’ patience. Now and then, though, I became aware that most people I knew were Mormon and I was not.

Playing basketball with a friend, we decided to cultivate our trash talking prowess but promised to self-bleep out actual swear words. I said the f-word vehemently in one of my rants and was met with a stunned face. My friend said that was the worst cuss word of all and God would be upset. God again had reason for disapproval when my parents went out of town, and I stayed with my friend’s family. They took me to church on Sunday. My first time. I sat through the sermon in fear that if I got up to relieve myself, God would smite me. I peed my pants. Luckily, my friend’s dad took me home before Sunday school so I did not have to sit embarrassed through it. Other realizations of difference were not so overtly religious in tone. In third grade, Bill Clinton was running against George Bush for the American presidency. To learn about voting, my class staged a mock vote. We built a voting booth with a ballot box and each took turns casting our vote. I remember being the only

person who voted for Clinton; reflecting back, there were probably others with my political inclinations, but my experience seems to have made me selectively forget them. The majority of Bush supporters knew the way I had voted and ridiculed me for it. These moments punctuate a growing realization of not being quite the same as everyone else, a realization that would be full blown later in my life. For the most part though, my daily activities fit with the majority of my peers.

Reflecting on how my early childhood experiences might correlate with Groovin’ Gary’s own life is speculative. The film simply does not provide insight into Gary’s background or upbringing. Still, assuming that he grew up in Beaver, there are similarities and differences that I can presume. Beaver, like Logan, is a dominantly Mormon community and would have had a similar education system as it is part of Utah. It is much smaller (pop. 1,453 in 1970) than Logan (pop. 33,022 in 1990) and would have had differences based on the time periods when we grew up (US Census Bureau 1970:15; US Census Bureau 1990:2).⁷ Gary likely went to a small school. Beaver is primarily a farming community, and Gary may have been involved in farming activities from an early age. Hard work and helping out family and community have always been strong Mormon ideals. Mormon influence was probably strong throughout the entire community, instilling Mormon values and beliefs throughout daily life. It is unknown whether Gary is LDS or not, but, if so, he likely attended church almost every Sunday and learned Mormon doctrine at a young age. I suspect, like many children, he was not attuned to difference and felt pretty similar to other kids.

Early childhood is a time of socialization in which an individual’s practices are shaped by families and larger structures like the education system. In Utah, children learn behaviours, values, and actions similar to other areas of the United States like kindness, sharing, cooperation, and fairness. Math, reading, writing, social studies, art, and other subjects are taught at schools. A sense of competitiveness may be instilled through participation in sports. Beyond

⁷ Gary grew up in the 1960s and 70s (the film takes place in 1979). I grew up in the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s.

this, the Mormon religion has a great influence on all children. Mormon children practice values and beliefs everyday with their families and attend church and Sunday school. Boy Scouts, 4H, and other extracurricular activities are held at Mormon churches led by lay members. Even non-Mormons are influenced by Mormon values. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2004) show that non-Mormon religious denominations in Utah demonstrate more religious commitment and support than their congregations in other parts of the United States; this heightened activity surely influences youth participation in religious activity. As a non-Mormon in a non-religious family, God was not something discussed at my house, but I clearly believed in God to some degree and worried about how my own actions would be judged – not being Mormon was potentially a problem. My practices were tempered by Mormon beliefs and my peers (or their parents) would let me know when I was not behaving in appropriately Mormon ways.

Bourdieu (1977) theorizes three social dispositions that contribute to the construction of social and individual habitus: *doxa*, *orthodoxy*, and *heterodoxy*. In *doxa*, one's vision of reality is so well constructed that it appears to be natural, as if no other possible realities exist or could exist.

The instruments of knowledge of the social world are in this case (objectively) political instruments which contribute to the reproduction of the social world by producing immediate adherence to the world, seen as self-evident and undisputed, of which they are the product and of which they reproduce the structures in a transformed form. [Bourdieu 1977:164]

Doxa is strong in childhood. While one is open to a wide range of knowledge about the world, most children do not really dispute what is taught. In Utah, the above statement could be reworded to “religious instruments” instead of “political instruments.” The Mormon instruments actively work to reproduce the social world and indoctrinate children in that world. As the next section suggests, though, *doxa* often shifts into *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* as one gets older.

Adolescence

As I grew older and transitioned into middle school and then high school, a divide grew between me and most of my peers. It was not an apparent segregation in which I became physically separated from others. I still interacted with and hung out with my peers – Mormon and non-Mormon. It was more of a meta-physical divide. Mormon instruments began working much more actively to instill a sense of social norms and expectations in the adolescent population. Rouse (2007:507) points out, “if practices are temporally extended patterns of activity by multiple agents (perhaps encompassing more than one generation of practitioners), the question of how this pattern is sustained, transmitted, and imposed on subsequent performances has to be a primary theoretical concern.”

In Logan, one mechanism that sustains the transmission of practices was quite evident in high school. Most everyone I knew had a “release period” during the day when they were released from school and went to a building on the corner of the school grounds, an LDS Seminary building. The seminary program was started in 1912 at Granite High School in Salt Lake City and is now part of most secondary schools in Utah as well as “public colleges and universities throughout the West” (Esplin and Randall 2014:22–23). In seminary, my peers learned Mormon scriptures and life lessons about how to behave such as the Word of Wisdom: the “law of health revealed by the Lord for the physical and spiritual benefit of His children” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints 2015), which encourages Mormons to abstain from certain substances (alcohol, tobacco, caffeine) and consume others (vegetables, fruits, meats). They also learned the Law of Chastity: “A guiding principle for all Mormon behaviour, the Law of Chastity influences everything from a Saint’s clothing, language, and appearance to prohibitions on masturbation, pornography, and all sexual conduct outside of marriage – including homosexuality” (Peterfeso 2011:38–39).

Rouse (2007:514) says that practice theorists place emphasis on “bodily agency, intentionality, expressiveness, and affective response.” These

aspects of practice emphasize individual agency. Teenagers are often experimenting in new and profound ways with their bodies and minds and express themselves in many mediums: clothing, music, art, speech, sports, and more. Then again, Rouse (2007:514), drawing on Foucault, emphasizes that the body is often “the primary target of social normalization and the exercise of power.” The Word of Wisdom and the Law of Chastity are just two doctrines emphasized by the Mormon Church to normalize members’ embodied practices. They are emphasized and instilled weekly at church and daily in seminary. Lessons are driven home too and promulgated socially. For example, dating in high school occurred in group dates and ‘steady relationships’ were looked down upon; this helped safeguard the Law of Chastity. I abided to this as much as anyone, despite not having any overarching impetus to do so. Yet, there was plenty that I wanted to do and express and experiment with that went against social and cultural norms, and I really began to question the beliefs and (restricted) actions of Mormons.

A striking disjuncture that confirmed the distance I felt from my peers occurred in what I (somewhat) jokingly refer to as ‘The Inquisition.’ Seminary teachers told their students that they needed to stop listening to music with profanity. Going even further, they created a list of popular albums that were forbidden; students were cajoled to bring in these albums and destroy them. Some of my best friends – people whose taste in music I respected – were willingly purging their collections of albums like Nirvana’s *Nevermind* (1991) and the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* (1991). It was nuts to me! How could people like something one day and the next day decide it was sinful just because they had been told by a Seminary teacher it was so? ‘The Inquisition’ is a particularly salient example of how people were conforming to social norms and practices: Mormons were meant to listen to unprofane music. I was entirely aware of the expectations of good behaviour and the connotations of not adhering to that behaviour. For the

first time in my life, I consciously realized I did not want to adhere.

I was not alone in my consciousness of wanting to refute Mormon social norms. Mary Bucholtz (1999) offers the theoretical concepts of *positive identity practices* and *negative identity practices* in her application of practice theory to high school culture, specifically nerd girl culture. Positive identity practices are actions that associate one with a *community of practice* while negative identity practices are actions that disassociate someone from a community of practice. The community of practice is a framework emerging from practice theory that focuses on “a group of people orientated to the same [social] practice[s], though not necessarily in the same way” focusing on “difference and conflict, not uniformity and consensus, as the ordinary state of affairs” (Bucholtz 1999:210). By destroying ‘profane’ music and restricting their diet and language, many of my peers were positively identifying themselves with the mainstream Mormon community. I began to search for practices in which I could negatively identify with that community. Many of those practices positively identified me with other communities. Music was one outlet. While others destroyed their albums, I proudly listened to them and wore shirts from banned bands. I grew my hair long – something looked down upon by Mormons who prefer clean-cut appearance. Others did the same. Alternative styles became symbolic of resistance to Mormonism – many of my peers adopted punk or goth clothing and lifestyles. As soon as I turned eighteen, I went with a friend to get tattoos. We wanted symbols on our bodies that distinguished us as not Mormon. Just a tattoo was enough, nothing belligerently anti-Mormon, although resistance and outright rejection of Mormonism became increasingly important for some Jack Mormons – that same friend later tattooed a Darwin-fish on his forearm to express his apostasy and atheistic worldview. While distinct non-Mormon and fringe Mormon communities of practice existed (e.g. Punk, Goth, Straight Edge), boundaries

were fluid and identifying with others across community lines was common.⁸

Practices that positively identified one as non-Mormon or fringe Mormon were for the most part simply about establishing an identity. Dressing in alternative clothing and speaking with disdain towards Molly Mormons might be irreverent towards Mormon norms, but these actions did little to significantly affect the mainstream Mormon social and cultural system. Most practices were not really all that rebellious nor aimed at social change. Any changes that my actions may have influenced were unexpected and unintended. At most, I might have influenced friends who were questioning Mormon ideals to explore distancing themselves from the Church: many people I knew did reject Mormonism; others became more involved with their faith after questioning it. My actions simply helped me fit somewhere on the cultural fringe – a fringe that exists in relation with the dominant structure.

Outsider practices in Utah often draw on wider American culture, particularly film and music. I mimicked my rock idols; Groovin' Gary impersonated movie celebrities. Mormons in Utah take great pride in American ideals, especially since the early 20th century and World War I, and have selectively portrayed their history in line with key American motifs such as their pioneering trek to settle the intermountain West (Arrington and Bitton quoted in Esplin and Randall 2014:29; Eliason 1997). Appeals to alternative American culture might push the conservative buttons of Utahans a bit but are not repressed institutionally beyond encouraging the majority of insiders to resist such practices.

Bourdieu (1977:168–169) presents *orthodoxy* and *heterodoxy* as two other social dispositions that can contribute to the construction of *habitus*. They occur in relationship to one another. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy exist

when the unquestioned social reality of doxa is questioned. Orthodoxy is “straight, or rather *straightened*, opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of innocence of doxa.” Heterodoxy is the realization that choice exists between accepting the status quo and not accepting it: the choice of “*haireisis*, heresy.” As one grows up in Utah, the unquestioned reasons for why one must abide mainstream Mormon social norms are questioned. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy became real possibilities. Seminary school and social pressure from the majority work to maintain orthodoxy; meanwhile, many non-Mormons and fringe Mormons are more in a heterodoxy state and practice heresies against the social norm. Most practices are not culture shaking events; they still exist within the realm of possibilities; however, sometimes practices push the limits of the Mormon social structure.

Groovin' Gary's Performance

At times, practices become *performances* and conscientiously challenge or reify the social and cultural system. By performance, I mean a social practice intended to be seen and reacted to by others. Groovin' Gary makes a challenging performance in *The Beaver Kid* that disrupts Mormon social norms much more than my antics described in the previous section.

After the opening interview, the film cuts from Groovin' Gary driving his car out of the news parking lot to a close-up of a handwritten letter. Harris, the director, reads the letter in a voice over. Gary apologizes for any inconvenience he may have caused Harris with his calls and writing, but he has put so much work into organizing a talent assembly. He would just love it if Harris could attend. We see shots of Harris making the 200 mile drive from Salt Lake City to Beaver. The voice over ends: “P.S. I will be putting on my makeup at the Open Mortuary at 8:00 am. You may want to get some shots.” The Open Mortuary is shown in a short shot, and then we see Gary with a bib-like towel wrapped around his neck sitting in a chair inside of the mortuary.

A young woman named Sharron, presumably a mortician, is applying makeup to Gary. As she works,

⁸ Straight Edge refers to people who dress and act like punks but who reject drinking and doing drugs. Many fringe Mormons exhibit a resistance to stylistic norms in their clothing, body art, and music tastes while also accepting the Word of Wisdom through their dietary choices.

Gary justifies his identity. At first, it seems his words are mostly for the camera and Harris. “I’m still an ammo man. I’m doing outrageous things, but I... I enjoy being a guy. I really do.” Sharron says he has to convince the audience. He answers, “I have to convince the audience that *I have not* gone crazy. It’s just for fun.” As the scene continues, the conversation becomes more intimate with Sharron, as if it is just the two of them talking. They discuss the upcoming performance. Gary says his ability to change his voice “was a gift from God,” and Sharron affirms his impressions are excellent. Gary expresses some doubts, “I have a hard time expressing myself. Maybe I’m just nervous. I don’t know.” He keeps talking about how much he enjoys Beaver and “the really nice people.” He and Sharron mention several people by name and discuss who will be at the performance. He enjoys making people laugh and wants to get a smile from them. Gary says a lot of people backed out: “they was probably disgusted with me.” When the make-up is finished, Gary changes “into his threads” – a leather jacket, black denim jeans, knee-length leather boots, and a red and purple scarf. He tells the camera that he hopes the viewer does not think he is “really whacked out” and tells Sharron he is just a guy who loves Olivia Newton John. For a moment, Gary looks introspective and contemplative about what he is saying and doing. Harris asks if he is going to put his wig on, and Gary answers, “You bet.” His confidence return as he dons the blonde wig.

In the mortuary, Gary exhibits trepidation about his cross-dressing. While strong opinion exists about gender identities and sexuality throughout the United States, the expected norms in Utah are extremely evident. Homosexuality is abhorred by most Mormons and is forbidden by the Law of Chastity. Similarly, gender switching and transgender behaviour is looked down on and even reviled. In my own upbringing, resisting these norms was never really something I had to deal with in a deeply personal way. I identify as a heterosexual male and fit mainstream expectations. I stood up for LGBTQ rights in a few arguments, but my own behaviours were never challenged. My peers in Utah whose sexuality and gender did not agree with the Mormon norm experienced challenges much greater than I

ever did. Gary’s own sexuality and gender identity are not fully disclosed in the film. Kine (2002) does not interpret Gary’s actions as clearly transgender or homosexual behaviour. I, however, find his repeated justifications of maleness (“I’m a man, not a girl”) might be for himself as much as the audience. Gary’s decision to put together a talent show and perform in drag challenges social norms.

The talent show occurs in the auditorium of Beaver High School. A mustachioed emcee in a brown leather blazer introduces early acts. Two tall girls with perms and matching outfits sing “The Happiest Girl in the USA” while their mother accompanies them on piano. A freshman does a country version of “Let Me Be There.” A dance team in blue and white sequined dresses do a routine. A girl wearing a bonnet does a comedy act talking as two people, shifting her lips from one side of her face to other as she switches characters. The performances are homely and innocent.

Then, before Gary’s act, the camera turns to reveal the auditorium from the stage. It is mostly empty. The few people who are there applaud and whistle. Many of them are recognizable as earlier performers. The emcee announces the next performer: ‘Olivia Newton Dawn.’ Piano, drum, and guitar music begins to play. Gary comes on stage dressed in drag and sings “Please Don’t Keep Me Waiting” (John 1978). She looks directly into the camera and widely opens her eyes. As she sings, she closes her eyes and gets into the beat. She frequently turns to the camera. The performance ends bizarrely and comically with someone in a creepy old man mask coming on stage and grabbing Olivia. She says “There you are you handsome man you!... Good lookin’ tiger ain’t he... Whoa help! Ahh! I’m not that heavy am I? Ahh?” The man picks her up and stumbles as they leave the stage.

The lack of people at the performance may reveal a resistance to Gary’s performance by those who were not in attendance. Yet, Gary, in organizing a talent show at the local high school and dressing and performing as Olivia Newton Dawn, has created a venue for a performance that challenges expectations. His performance is very different than the other performances, which far more resemble the types of talent acts I saw growing up. Jill Peterfeso (2011),

in her analysis of the *Mormon Vagina Monologues*, draws upon the concept of the *utopian performance*. She says, “Utopian performativity has been described as “a manifestation of a ‘doing’ that is on the horizon. Even more than other performances, the utopian performative is infused with hope, with a future potentiality, with a process of and toward change yet unrealized” (Peterfeso 2011:48). Peterfeso (2011:49) argues that the *Mormon Vagina Monologues* performance in Salt Lake City in 2001 was a utopian performance in that women’s “seximonies [i.e. testimonies] revealed, both directly and indirectly, patriarchy remains a system in which LDS women are enmeshed.” Groovin’ Gary’s performance itself is not quite utopian; singing “Please Don’t Keep Me Waiting” does not really express a process towards change unrealized. Nonetheless, Gary’s very putting together of the show and creating a time and place for that performance to happen does have a utopian aspect to it. Gary likely tested norms in *Beaver*, and, even though not many people attended the performance, he achieved creating a moment for someone in drag to perform – he even got a film crew to film it.

Conclusion

Neither Gary’s talent show nor my identity forming actions really represents outright activism against the Mormon social and cultural structure in Utah. It is actually difficult to rebel against a structure when that structure is pretty good. Living in Utah has its benefits. People are very nice as Gary says over and over throughout the film, and, even if you want to practice a bit more risqué life than that lived by strict Mormons, that risqué life is acceptable to a degree. Any change generated by outsider practices is slow and not entirely expected. Still, change influenced by non-Mormon practices, often supported by wider American trends, has occurred throughout Utah’s history: for example, polygamy stopped being practiced by LDS in 1890, private Mormon academies were shut down and public schools (with Seminaries) are highly supported, and drinking laws have become less and less stringent.⁹ At times, individual and groups whose lifestyles are repressed

by Mormonism find moments to make utopian performances. Gary, to a degree, did so. Challenging utopian performances have had their successes: for example, same-sex marriage became permanently legal in Utah in 2014 (Romboy 2014). Critiquing social and cultural norms through performance can be an incredible act of individual agency, but it can also be extremely challenging and the pressure can have negative consequences.

Beaver Trilogy includes two other films that are dramatic recreations of the documentary, starring Sean Penn and Crispin Glover in Groovin’ Gary’s role. One quite drastic difference from the original is that both end with a critical phone call. The Gary character calls the director, who plays a central role in both films, and pleads with him to not broadcast the film; the director answers roughly, saying he put a lot of hard work into the film and has to show it. After the conversation, the Gary character hangs up the phone and holds a gun to his head, considering suicide. In the Sean Penn film, the phone rings and a girl on the other end of the line tells him how great the performance was. In the Crispin Glover film, he decides against suicide, dresses up as Olivia Newton Dawn, and rides out of town on a motorcycle.

Why were these endings added to the film? Kine (2002) interviewed Harris in *This American Life*. He reveals that after filming the documentary, he did get a phone call from Gary. Gary did not want the film on television any more. Harris feels he was not as sensitive as he could have been to Gary. He found out later that Gary had been involved in an accident with a gun. Gary survived and recovered, even calling Harris after the accident to apologize for his actions. Harris never did air his footage until 2001 at the Sundance Film Festival, twenty-two years after the film was made. Gary actually attended the screening, still worried that people would think he was a nut, but the audience loved him. He signed autographs and became a film star for one night.

This story about the *The Beaver Kid* shows just how powerful social and cultural norms can be. Groovin’ Gary’s individually motivated performance challenged the social structure, but the social structure challenged Gary throughout the whole process. If Gary’s gun accident was related to the making

⁹ Some non-mainstream Mormon sects like the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints still practice polygamy.

of the film and his performance, it shows just how challenging the social structure can be to individuals trying to test limits. As someone who identifies with the fringe of Utahan culture, I can attest to how hard it can be internally to achieve the positive identity practices that keep you on that fringe. Those practices, combined with many other people making similar practices, might transform and shift the social and cultural structure slowly over time, but the social structure can quickly influence individuals in what they choose and choose not to practice.

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