The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project: The Folklorization of Queer Theory

John Priegnitz
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/gradreports

Part of the Cultural History Commons, Folklore Commons, Oral History Commons, Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, Social History Commons, Social Justice Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Creative Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Plan B and other Reports, Spring 1920 to Spring 2023 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.
The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project: The Folklorization of Queer Theory

by

John Edward Priegnitz II

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Folklore Studies

Approved:

Lisa Gabbert, Ph.D.
Major Professor

Lynne S. McNeill, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Randy Williams, MA
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

2023
ABSTRACT

The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project: The Folklorization of Queer Theory

by

John E. Priegnitz II, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Lisa Gabbert, Ph.D.
Department: English

Following the passing of a friend who witnessed firsthand the transformation of Salt Lake City’s Queer community from the 1950s to 2020, I created the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project to document the queer experience within the Intermountain West. Since beginning the project in 2020, I have documented several diverse stories that intersect class, race, sexuality, gender, faith, and politics. By documenting the queer experience, a marginalized community will have their voices heard and preserved for the enlightenment of future generations. This presentation provides an overview of my project and its preliminary findings.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project began after my first semester as a graduate student at Utah State University’s Folklore Studies program in the Spring Semester of 2021. I had completed Randy Williams’ seminar on oral history and fieldwork, and wanted to give back to the community that I called home since being stationed in Utah in 2005. I was especially inspired by the recent passing at that time of my friend Joe Redburn who would spend hours sharing stories with me about the queer folklore and history of Salt Lake City and the surrounding region. For these reasons, I dedicate this thesis and oral history project to him and to everyone else whose stories I will never be able to document and preserve. Because of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and systematic prejudice the world was robbed of hundreds of thousands of gay men and their wisdom. It is my hope that this oral history project will give voice to the voiceless and become a source of inspiration for generations to come. My heart and thanks go out to the informants who shared their stories with me: Luke Burton and Terry McKeown, Doyle Clayburn, Gene Gieber, Terry Gillman, Michael Aaron Green, Kye Hallows, Hunter Harden, Scott Harwell and Tony Shirley, Courtney Moser, Father Jason Samuel, Michael Sanders, Camille Sleight, Ben Edgar Williams, and Roy Zhang. I would also like to thank the faculty of Utah State University’s Folklore Studies program, The College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Utah State Universities Library’s Special Collections and Archives. My thanks go out especially to Dr. Afsane Rezaeisahraei who encouraged me to submit my first paper proposal to the American Folklore Society and made me believe that what I had to say was of merit. Further, this project would not exist without the kind words and support from Randy Williams when this initially started as a
side-project. I would also like to thank Dr. Lynne McNeill and Dr. Jeannie B. Thomas for acting as a springboard for ideas concerning this and other projects. Finally, this thesis would not be in the state that it is in without hours of encouragement and support from Dr. Lisa Gabbert who acted as a confidant, mentor, colleague, and friend. I sit upon the shoulders of giants and hope I will always remain a credit to their legacy. The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project started and continues to be a labor of love. Thank you.

John Edward Priegnitz II
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Kind of Stories are Being Told</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Following the passing of a friend who witnessed firsthand the gradual transformation of acceptance in Salt Lake City’s Queer community from the 1950s to 2020, I was moved to create the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project to document the queer experience within the Intermountain West. Since beginning the project in 2021, I have documented seventeen stories that intersect class, race, gender, faith, sexuality, and politics. By documenting the queer experience with my oral history project and depositing these stories at Utah State University Libraries Special Collections and Archives, I am filling a gap by creating a space where this marginalized community will have their voices heard and preserved for the enlightenment of future generations accessible as a digital collection.

The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project is not a passive project as it requires me, and eventually others, to be active in the field to collect queer oral histories throughout the vast region of the Intermountain West. Discovering and documenting the queer experience of the region is not a library-based project. It is necessary then to conduct fieldwork. Further, the scope of this oral history project is immense. For this project to be successful other folklorists and oral historians ought to continue the work that has been started. Fortunately, as a gay man and therefore a community insider, finding informants who want to be interviewed has made the start of this oral history less challenging. I have known many of my initial informants for over a decade. Further, my initial informants have been gracious enough to provide me leads within the community (i.e., snowball sampling) to continue my work for this vital project.

While the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project is still in its beginning stages, I hope this oral history collection continues to grow and has a legacy.
The stories being shared evolve and change with each generation. For example, while older informants speak of trauma and survival, younger informants are having conversations of visibility and representation in everyday life. These oral histories provide evidence of important historical and cultural shifts taking place within the Intermountain West.

Queer oral history and fieldwork has not received the attention it deserves within the overall discipline. To be sure, credit must be given to the works of Joseph P. Goodwin and Mickey Weems who have laid the groundwork on how to begin examining Queer folklore in North America during the latter 20th Century and early 2000s. For instance, Goodwin’s More Man Than You’ll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America published in 1989 was a groundbreaking ethnography that critically examined the folkways of gay men living in the Midwestern United States. Weems later furthered Queer folkloristics with his participant-observer ethnography in 2008 with The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit where he meticulously documented the customs of gay men who participated in circuit club dance parties. Despite this, much is still being discussed on methodology, ethics, and best practices for collecting these oral histories. My project is influenced by other scholars such as Karen Krahulik, Jason Ruiz, and Eric C. Wat. Scholars like these have paved the way on how to engage in ethical and meaningful LGBTQ+ oral history fieldwork.

While Goodwin’s work focused on regionalism and Weems’ specific to a Queer subculture that he was community insider of, both are foundational to Queer folkloristics. the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project adds to the scholarship of oral history and fieldwork by incorporating both folklore scholars’ methodology where I
focused on a specific region and a community that is my own. The result of which depict a community and its stories that are intimate, heartbreaking, and candid.

Not only will this project contribute to a better understanding of queer history through the lens of oral history interviews, but it will also contribute to the wider knowledge of LGBTQ+ folklore found throughout the Intermountain West. The queer community of the region is a complicated and sometimes contradictory group composing of diverse intersectionalities of race, religion, socio-economic status, politics, identity, and personal expression. As diverse as the community is, it remains cohesive because of shared “outsider” status, history, and language. The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project will document and record these attributes that create community cohesion within the region.

This project started as a personal need for me to record firsthand oral histories from Queer elders who experienced the struggle and trauma of the Gay Liberation movement that began in 1969. I consider these Queer elders who are now in their 70s and 80s as survivors especially as many from their generation were taken (and consequently, their stories stolen) during the HIV/AIDS epidemic during the 80s and 90s. These stories not only provide richness and depth to the region, but they give the queer community a sense of heritage, belonging, and pride as will be shown through the narratives being shared from my informants. The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project is filling a gap and giving a home for queer voices to be preserved. This project is necessary and vital. Because the Intermountain West is a vast region, it is my hope that this will be a community collaborative effort where fellow folklorists, oral historians, and community scholars conduct oral history interviews.
LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2012, Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez compiled *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*. This anthology is to my knowledge the first oral history reader that specifically focuses on queer oral history fieldwork. Within the introduction, both Boyd and Ramirez acknowledge that conducting queer oral history projects is a political project. However, it is more complicated than that. They write, “Because queer oral histories are intense interactions, as the oral history collaboration proceeds the contract between narrator and researcher often evolves into something more: a bond, friendship, or political commitment. …in the social space of queer oral history, something transformative seems to occur as new knowledge is produced” (Boyd and Ramirez 2012, 2). The organization of this anthology speaks to this oral history project as being political in nature. For example, the anthology is divided into parts that cover themes of silence, sex, friendship, and politics. The queer experience and story are often personal and traumatic, and my findings within the Intermountain West is no exception. However, the knowledge produced from these intimately personal accounts provides the listener greater context for regional history and folklore. The inclusion of voices that have been ignored, silenced, and suppressed creates a better understanding of historical events that predate the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the aftermath of Proposition 8, and the fight for marriage equality.

While *Bodies of Evidence* is to my knowledge the first oral history reader that is specific to queer oral history fieldwork, it is not the first for ethnography focused on the LGBTQ+ community. In 2008, folklorist Mickey Weems published *The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit*. He states in his preface, “The Fierce
Tribe is an ethnography based on information gathered from members of the Circuit community and my own lived experience as a U.S. Marine, a participant-observer studying African Brazilian religion, a scholar versed in multiple academic disciplines, Circuiteer, a Straight man for the last thirty-eight years of my life, and a Gay man for the last twelve.” (2008, xi). Further, Weems’ ethnography is brutally honest as he documents recreational drug use that is pervasive within the Circuit community and the struggles of what he calls “Body Fascism” that exasperate a culture already reeling from body image issues. It should be noted Weems focuses on an incredibly specific sub-culture within the Gay community that does not speak to the lived experience for a majority of gay men. However, his approach and methodology to his project is not unlike mine. Part of the success for this oral history project is the fact that I am a community insider and participant-observer.

Queer oral history is a project of personal intimacy. The subject of sex and sexuality cannot be avoided – nor should it be. While it cannot be avoided, there are instances where narrators’ comfort in sharing the topic of sex and sexuality will vary. Sometimes the narrator will attempt to hint the oral historian their desire to move the conversation toward that direction with coded language. For example, oral historian Karen Krahulik discusses in “Remembering Provincetown” how she regrets not paying better attention to what was being said and not said while interviewing an informant. “After hearing the now familiar butch coming of age story about being a tomboy, and listening to Beata regale me with stories about the glorious day of Broadway musical sing-alongs, I started to wonder if I was missing something about Beata’s sexual preferences and community alignments. My interviewing style at the time… was to ask
nonthreatening questions that would open up rather than close down conversations” (Krahulik 2012, 54). In retrospect, my methodology for “playing it safe” with informants was not unlike Krahulik’s approach. However, as the majority of informants I interviewed were gay men (and I myself am a gay man), the topic of sex and sexuality were openly discussed. I suspect gender, sexuality, and being a community insider played a role in fomenting such candid conversations that would otherwise be considered taboo to discuss with mixed company. Simply put, there was no mixed company because of my insider status. The oral historian collecting stories is walking a figurative tight rope balancing a desire to obtain an accurate and detailed narrative while also making sure the interview questions are not going to alienate themselves from their informants. A combination of active listening, ethics, and discernment of reading the situation in real-time is then required for effective oral history fieldwork. For me, no two oral history interviews I have conducted have been the same and quick thinking is required. However, to ease the tension of active listening, ethics, and reading the room my approach to conducting interviews is to treat them as conversations.

Oral historians Nan Alamilla Boyd and Jason Ruiz have both observed that the degree of comfort in talking about sex and sexuality is gendered (2012, 103, 119). Both noted that gay men were more comfortable discussing sex and sexuality than lesbians were. In both of their respective oral history projects they attempted to press their female informants to elicit more information and were met with reluctance and evasive answers. The reluctance and evasive responses are not solely due to gender. On the contrary, Madeline D. Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* demonstrates that women are just as comfortable
discussing sex and sexuality as their male counterparts. The reluctance and evasive responses that Boyd and Ruiz experience from their informants are then a combination of socio-economic background, personal comfort, and building an adequate rapport between fieldworker and narrator. Additionally, Boyd and Ruiz being queer community insiders themselves had little effect in persuading their informants to be more open about their sexual experiences. From my experience, the topic of sex and sexuality is something that is invariably brought up with no prompting in most of my interviews. However, I have only interviewed queer men so far, and as pointed out by Boyd and Ruiz, men have been more willing to discuss sex and sexuality.

Not all queer experiences are the same. It would stand to reason then that a gay man growing up in San Francisco at the same time as a gay man growing up in Price, Utah can and will be vastly different. There are still common themes, language, and rites of passage that both men share with one another. For example, a common trope of coming-out narratives that I have heard (and personally experienced) is about going to a gay bar for the first time where informants described to me of them either sitting in their parked car too terrified to enter the venue, or they drove around the bar multiple times before either going home or gathering enough courage to enter. Another example that is common involves a man driving a pickup truck who screams out “Faggot!” to gay men walking alongside the road. In a way, both experiences are a form of trauma-bonding and constitute a type of rite of passage for Queer people. Folklorist, Joseph P. Goodwin, helps identify these aspects of queer folklore through the community’s abundant use of campy humor and wordplay in More Man Than You’ll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America (1989). Goodwin cites the extensive travel that gay men do to help
spread this folklore (1989, 17). To be sure, gay men (and collectively queer people) seldom remain in their hometowns and will go to great lengths to “make a fresh start” in larger and more tolerant urban centers if it can be helped. So while travel may displace a folk narrative, the trope of the coming-out story incorporates relatable themes of trauma. These themes/narratives of trauma, as Goodwin observes, are often framed as humorous and campy stories. While he is partially correct, I want to include the role the influential role the Internet and mass media plays in transmitting queer folklore. As vast as the Intermountain West is and for a variety of factors (isolation and limited access to media), the queer experience within our region varies from zip-code to zip-code. Yet it remains cohesive because of shared “outsider” status, history, and language. The Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project will document and record these attributes that create community cohesion within the region. For example, Salt Lake City acts as the cultural center and hub for the LGBTQ+ community throughout the region, and therefore much of the folklore is transmitted from this urban location.

There are many lessons to be learned from earlier scholars who have engaged in queer oral history projects. The most important lesson, however, is that of building a sincere and meaningful relationship with informants. I have a personal advantage as I have been active in Salt Lake City’s gay community for over seventeen years. Most of the people who I am initially interviewing are not just informants, they are people who I consider extended members of my family.
METHODOLOGY

Reaching out to gay men has not been a challenge. Much like how Mickey Weems conducted his ethnography on gay circuit parties, I am a community insider who functions as a participant observer (2008). This insider status has given me an advantage with starting the project. Despite this I have experienced with some potential informants a reluctance on their part to share their story because they feel their lives are inconsequential. This reluctance from potential informants is not unique to the queer community. I find with a few encouraging words I can persuade and disabuse the informants of any self-doubt. Their story is just as valuable as anyone else’s. I have specifically made project questions general as I wanted the interviewees to have the ability to make our conversation and their storytelling their own with me actively listening and facilitating with follow-up questions. These are the project questions:

1: What is your name and date of birth?
2: Where did you grow up and how long have you lived in the Intermountain West?
3: Did you grow up in a religious family?
4: When did you first realize you were not straight and when did you “come out?” How difficult was that? What did that mean to you?
5: What was the culture like?
6: What support systems have you found in this area?
7: Did you date? Where did you go to find dates?
8: Did you have to hide your identity professionally?
9: Do you think things have gotten better?
10: What advice would you give to younger people?
11: Is there something(s) that we have not discussed that you would like to add?

While I had instances of reluctant informants, I also have had informants who were keenly aware of the importance and nature of the project. This was expressed through bringing an assortment of memory objects and photo albums, and sometimes exaggeration of the roles individuals played within the community in the past. This was
expected and I made the choice to let the informants tell their story the way they wanted it to be told.

As stated before, I am profoundly thankful to my friends who generously offered their to share the intimate details of their lives. Because of these interviews I was able to begin laying the foundation for this oral history project. While this has been positive, I realized quickly the project was becoming dominated by the voices of gay men. Even as a community insider some voices are easier to reach than others while conducting fieldwork.

So, what kind of voices can I not reach? We have a significant queer Latinx community within the Intermountain West. However, due to language barriers I was not able to document their stories. I was also not able to reach out to the hearing impaired or those with disabilities. Finally, I was not able to reach out to queer people who are still closeted. While the last group can be reached eventually, I will need to rely on other oral historians and folklorists who are proficient is Spanish and ASL to document the lived experiences of the queer Latinx and hearing-impaired communities.

Additionally, finding lesbian and transgendered informants wanting to be interviewed has been frustrating. This problem is not unique to my project as I have learned that other queer oral historians have run into similar issues. I overcame this by being as patient and accommodating as possible. However, I suspect gender played an important factor, and by virtue of this project intimate stories are being shared. It may be more suitable to have a folklorist who is also a woman conduct these interviews. My goal is to maintain the integrity of the stories, and if an informant feels more comfortable
opening to another woman, then so be it. What matters the most is making sure the informants are comfortable with sharing their story.

Finally, for the purposes of outreach and after going through the Internal Review Board, Utah State University and I have created informative brochures that will be distributed to Pride Centers, bars, and libraries throughout the region. An advertisement was placed in *QSaltLake Magazine* and local press and radio programs have expressed interest in learning more about the project. I hope that as awareness for this project grows, interest and the desire to participate will also grow. In the meantime, the seventeen interviews I have conducted have been transcribed by a second-party transcriptionist and vetted by the informants before being part of the digital collection.

While I am laying the foundation for the project, I would like to see it continue to grow and focus on community lore and events. For example, I would love to see a section of the collection within the project that documents how the Intermountain West grappled with the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 80s and 90s, documentation of advocacy for marriage equality, as well as vernacular expressions of faith from the Queer Community who wish to remain affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. These stories are fundamental to not only queer history and lore, but also for the regional history. There is plenty of room for this project to continue growing.
WHAT KIND OF STORIES ARE BEING TOLD

The current pool of informants is diverse coming from varied socio-economic and geographical backgrounds. The informants who I talked with ranged from being retired commissioned officers in the United States Army, academics, small business owners, adult entertainers, and everything in-between. Not all the informants grew up in the Intermountain West. Some, like me, are transplants who find themselves living in the region by happy chance. However, the preliminary findings from the interviews that I have already conducted show common themes of faith, politics, and sexuality emerging from the LGBTQ+ community found within the Wasatch Front.

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (colloquially referred to as LDS or Mormon) is the predominant religion of the region, not all my informants came from an LDS background. For example, Michael Sanders grew up Roman Catholic in Philadelphia while Tony Shirley who grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona ascribes to his tribe’s spiritual practices. This serves as a reminder that just because someone who lives in the Intermountain West does not automatically default them to the predominant regional faith. Regardless of growing up in the LDS Church or not, the topic of Mormons and its cultural and political influence within the Intermountain West was invariably brought up in each interview whether prompted or not. Everyone had something to say.

The informants who did grow up LDS spoke of either trauma or ambivalence when it came to their relationship with the Church. In Courtney Moser’s interview he shares his experience serving a mission to Japan as a young adult and later undergoing self-induced electroshock therapy to “cure” his homosexuality under the direction and
sponsorship of the LDS Church. Kye Hallows speaks of his experience growing up in an active church-going family where his father was a member of his congregation’s bishopric. Informants like Michael Aaron and Scott Harwell acknowledge growing up Mormon but did not dwell on this experience during the interview. Instead, Michael chose to focus on his political activism while Scott focused on his coming to terms with this sexuality and outlook for the future.

Further, vernacular expressions of the LDS religion need to be documented. While most of the informants acknowledged Affirmation, a group (not officially recognized by the LDS Church) for LGBTQ+ people who wish to continue practice their LDS faith, none of them participated firsthand. Affirmation is not unlike Dignity/Philadelphia as observed by Leonard Primiano in his essay, “The Gay God of the City” where LGBTQ+ Roman Catholics formed an “ethnic parish” to celebrate the Mass and other Catholic events (2022, 105). This documentation is currently beyond the initial scope of the oral history project. However, as it continues to expand the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Days Saints faith as a vernacular and cultural expression within the LGBTQ+ community throughout the region should not be ignored.

Politics was brought up in each interview conducted. This is in part a result of homosexuality and the queer community being politicized in both local and national politics for so long. The mere act of being openly gay/queer has become a political act in and of itself. Michael Aaron’s story is heavily political, and he goes to great lengths to share the political lore and history of the LGBTQ+ community within the Intermountain West from the 1980s to the present day. Michael’s story reveals a complicated history of
Utah Democrats reluctance and animosity embracing the queer community and advocating for equal rights and protections.

Kye Hallows story, while not necessarily political, is centered on entrepreneurship and creating a safe space for queer youth within his record shop in Ogden, Utah. He wants to help mentor and inspire others within the community to become small business owners as well and make a difference within the community.

Sex and sexuality were brought up in nearly all the interviews. This is inevitable as heteronormative society has reduced queer identity to sex and sexuality for centuries. The informants share stories of sexual awakenings, cruising, hooking up, romance, and passionate love affairs. Queer oral history is not for the puritanical and faint of heart. While at face value, sex and sexuality are heavy topics, the informants often frame their sexual narratives with humor. I think this is in part to diffuse any tension taking place between myself and the narrator. I also think it speaks to the universality of the subject matter. Sex and sexuality are part of the human experience.

Some of these stories, while vitally important, are difficult to listen to. Trauma is often relitigated and serves as a potent reminder that queer oral history is not for puritanicals. For example, Doyle Clayburn’s story of how his childhood friend was murdered by his own family during a fishing trip to Cody, Wyoming after being caught fooling around with Doyle is a story that I will never forget. Here is what Doyle had to say about the incident:

[12:03]
DC: Now, we can talk about my friends at –
JP: Oh, yeah right.
DC: Twelve years old, if you’d like? We can start there.
JP: Sure.
DC: I had a friend (a really close friend), who we grew up – our families
both moved into their homes, they were new homes, when we were five. His family were devout Catholic, my family was devout Mormon. He went to parochial schools, and I went to the public school. But we spent all of our other time, normal friendship playing, and very close. Our families were very close to each other (he had other siblings). He was the oldest. And when we were about 12 he was going to start going to the junior high, where I was. And we had a little bit of a sexual experimentation –

JP: [Laughs]
DC: Of just looking at each other naked –
JP: Uh-huh?
DC: And all of my life I knew that I was always – I don’t remember when I wasn’t interested in men’s crotches. So, the Mormon church was a good place for me to be, because I could watch all those young men and men walking around in suits, and watch their crotches. And so, it was just something that I was always obsessed with. So, when my friend and I got together, was the first opportunity I had to actually touch another person. And so, we were fooling around, and then his mother came out – we were in their garage, but we saw her before she – I’m pretty sure that she didn’t see. She could tell there was something going on, but we were already back dressed and stuff by the time she actually got there. But I’m sure she knew there was something going on. The next morning, they left on their vacation. And he never came back.

JP: Huh?
DC: They went fishing up in Cody, Wyoming, and they were staying in cabins, and he was fishing out with his father and his grandfather. And he was walking from his father to his grandfather, along the river, and they never found him.

JP: [Gasps]
DC: Ever. So, being the faithful Mormon I was, guess whose fault that was? Yep.
So, at 12, I had – because of my sexual desires, had killed my best friend, because that was Jesus.

Doyle’s story stirred memories of my own trauma of being a gay teenager living in Oklahoma City in the early 2000s. I had a boyfriend who, after being found out by his family, was swiftly sent away to a Christian camp to undergo reparative therapy. I never saw him again. Despite how challenging and difficult these stories are to hear they need to be documented and heard. They need to be heard so tragedies such as these never happen again.
It is worth noting that the majority of informants all had traumatic stories to share. Not only did they all have traumatic personal experience narratives, but they all disguised their trauma with the ambivalence of laughter. This is not unlike what was observed by Jeannie B. Thomas in her work, *Featherless Chickens, Laughing Women, and Serious Stories* (1997). Another example that comes to mind is Courtney Moser telling me the time he was being pursued by a truck filled with young men in downtown Logan after cruising at a popular location to find anonymous sexual partners. The story itself is captivating, and there is no doubt that Courtney’s life was in danger. Despite this, Courtney’s narrative of the event is colored with laughter and humor. I have found myself doing the same thing where I disguise my own trauma with the ambivalence of laughter. However, the ambivalence of laughter functions to manage the trauma.

Another theme that was prevalent with the informants were their hopes and anxieties for the future. To be sure, several informants put a high premium on community building and advocacy for social justice. Gene Gieber’s story is especially potent regarding this. Gene is the owner of Club Try-Angles and he opened the bar in 2002 for the purpose of providing a safe community space. Here is what Gene had to say about opening Club Try-Angles:

[06:00]
JP: So, the next question – I mean, it doesn’t really apply to you, because it’s going to be about your identity – well, you being openly gay and being professional, but do you want to talk about the buildup of like what led you to create Club Try-Angles? Like what inspired you to do that?
GG: It’s called unemployment.
JP: Unemployment [laughs], okay.
GG: What had happened is I was working for this consulting company, it had massive layoffs, and I had survived them all before, but I got laid off. And about the time the Deer Hunter – well it was after the Deer Hunter had burned down, and they were trying to build the new one. And some of the people involved in the new Deer Hunter was trying to get me to invest
the money. And through advice, I says, “You know what? If you invest the money, and I’m not an active part of it, that money is going to be gone and you’ll be with nothing.” So, I thought, “Gosh, being your own boss; I could just start my own bar – but it would have to be a gay bar, because I don’t know how to deal with the straight crowd,” and stuff like that. And so, Steve Baxter from the old Deer Hunter, who was involved with the new one, wanted out because he realized it was going nowhere. So, he and I took off looking for places to go. He wanted to become a partner, but never did; he could never pay the debt he owed me from the Deer Hunter [laughs]. But that’s a long, other story. But so, I says, “Well, I guess I’m going to do this.” And we found this building. And I’m not going to lie, I sort of stole the name, with a little difference, from a bar I enjoyed in Kentucky.

JP: [Gasps]
GG: And so, we called it Club Try-Angles, and put the dash in, and such. I thought “try any angle to get a man,” you know?

[Laughter]
So, it turned out to – I mean, when we first decided, “Okay, we’re going to do this,” and we got the property to rent it, and we decided we were going to get it open. And I, using Publisher, built some business cards and was handing out to some people, “Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Well, we got things going and moved pretty quick, and got the bar open by the opening night was July 18th, 2002. And it was my intent, when I went to the DABC, I says, “I feel like when the Deer Hunter went away, it caused a void in preferred places to go in the community. And I want to be kind of a community hub to take those voids.” And it’s worked. People asked me, when I opened it, they says, “So, do you like running a gay bar?” I says, “Doesn’t matter if I like it or not, I’m going to do it until I die.” And guess what? I had no idea how close to the truth it’s been.

[Laughter]
JP: Well do you like it?
GG: I do. I love the people, I like the community that I’m dealing with; I’ve made some friends that I would not otherwise ever know.

While Gene masks his motivation for opening the bar through sarcasm and pragmatism, the motivation is clear: he wanted to create a safe space for the community. Since the bar’s founding, Club Try-Angles has been a venue for charity functions for organizations such as the Salt Lake Men’s Choir. It has also been a place that hosts drag performances, brunch, wedding receptions, and wakes. This is an example that invokes what J. Tyler Chadwell-English and Simon J. Bronner call, “Queeritas.” According to them, “the
concept of Queeritas is based upon anthropologist Victor Turner’s theory of communitas, which defines a social form that alternates with, or opposes, so-called normal structure.” (2018, 943). From a heteronormative perspective a bar, and especially a gay bar, is a drinking establishment where sordid and degenerate behavior takes place. However, through Queeritas the gay bar is elevated to something more than just a drinking establishment. It becomes a gathering place for the community and functions as a supplement if not an outright replacement for a family that is more receptive.

In a similar vein, Kye Hallows was also moved to create a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community with his record store, Lavender Vinyl. Kye opened the shop to not only share his love for music played on vinyl records, but to also inspire young people who aspire to one day become small business owners. This is what Kye had to say about his business:

[26:00]
KH: I want queer individuals in my community. I want diversity in my community. I want to support business owners of different backgrounds and life experiences. Because when those all come together, that’s what makes our community so badass.
JP: Not only that, but I mean, it gives the younger members of our community like role models to look up to.
KH: Yeah.
JP: Does that frighten you ever: you’re a role model?
KH: Yeah.
JP: [Laughs]
KH: Yeah, it frightens the shit out of me, because I just call myself a dirty kid: I’m just kind of like –I’m just bobbing around, doing my thing. And yeah, it’s weird. I’m 30 years old, I feel like I’m 17. I don’t feel like I should be anyone’s role model. But at the same time, like I do have a platform that’s taller than some of the other platforms that others are on. And so, to me – I have to be as loud as I can on that platform.
JP: Do you think of it as like an obligation?
KH: No, I don’t think of it as an obligation. I mean, to me the word “obligation” is automatically negative: in my mind, it associates as negative. And I don’t know how you think of it, but I’m just saying, to me, when I hear the word “obligation,” it has a negative connotation to me.
And so, I don’t feel any negativity about what I’m doing. And so, no: I don’t think of it as an obligation. I do feel like I – I don’t know, I guess I feel like I do want to give back. I want to give back to my community; I want to blaze forward, strongly because so many other people did that before me, and I wouldn’t be here if they didn’t.

JP: So, if it’s not an obligation, what would call it then? Paying it forward?
KH: Paying it forward.
JP: Or paying it backward? Or maybe both?
KH: Paying it backward.
JP: [Laughs]
KH: Contributing – yeah, just contributing to the common good of humanity [laughs]. Not even just my community – not just the queer community; just like being a good human, and creating space for other humans to blossom.
JP: I like that. It’s much better than obligation.
KH: Yeah.

While I may have felt what Kye was doing with his small business as fulfilling an obligation to giving back to the community, he had a different point of view. As a community insider, and someone who also faced firsthand the challenges of growing up as a gay man in a conservative part of the United States I feel compelled to ease the burdens toward young people who are in similar positions. However, Kye Hallow’s framing what he is doing with Lavender Vinyl is just as valid and keeps in the spirit of Queeritas. Queeritas, and how it takes shape, is as diverse as the LGBTQ+ community and is pragmatic.

Because of the last three questions (Do you think things have gotten better? What advice would you give to younger people? Is there something(s) that we have not discussed that you would like to add?) I feel I unintentionally made the informants wax philosophical. However, their responses were salient. For example, throughout the interview I conducted with Hunter Harden he put a heavy emphasis on mental health and wellness and shared his struggles with depression and anxiety. Here is Hunter’s response when I asked him what advice he would give to younger people:
[1:00:05]
JP: Hunter, what advice would you give to younger people? Actually, what advice would you give to – before we go to like the general about younger people – but what advice would you give to your younger self?
HH: Ah! Don’t give me a Ru Paul question, you’re going to make me cry.
JP: I’m sorry.
[Laughter]
HH: Are you going to put up a little picture of me right here, and be like, “What would you tell your younger self?” [Laughs]
JP: Oh, I’m sorry [laughs].
HH: No. Okay, I know exactly what I would tell myself. I would: “Stop hating yourself. Give yourself time to grow. And everything is going to work out.”
JP: And for the rest of the younger people?
HH: Give yourself time to grow; give yourself time to learn. And give the people around you, that aren’t LGBTQ, to give them time to understand who you are, and understand your journey. Because for as long as it took you to come out, and come to terms with yourself, you’ve got to give the people in your life enough time to come to terms with it themselves, as well. Whether it takes years (which I hope not), or whether it just takes like a couple of days for you to see eye-to-eye. But I would just say, “Give yourself time.”

Hunter’s response, much like many of the other informants, is trauma informed. While the informants generally agreed that the culture within the Intermountain West is getting better for the LGBTQ+ community, there is still much work to be done both within and outside community. For example, consider Terry Gillman’s response to the same line of questioning:

[20:00]
JP: Do you think things have gotten better? And that’s kind of a broad question [chuckles] so, you can go any direction you want with that.
TG: That is a very broad question. You know, it immediately made me think of Martin Luther King, and the arc of justice – or, “The arc of time aims towards justice,” I think is what the quote is. You know, I think having been in the community for 30 years, and either been a witness to it or been active in it, I think that that quote is absolutely dead on. I think that things have gotten better in our daily lives. I think politically, we’re still – I mean, if you were to take a metaphor of our community walking on a lake during the winter time, when it’s frozen over–
JP: Yeah.
TG: You know, I think that we’re still walking on that thin ice, where we
can slip through very easily, and drown. So, I think vigilance is where we need to be aimed. And I think that a lot of the younger people who are enjoying the more freedom, the more-free society that they live in, you know, I think that maybe this generation (or the next) will have to struggle again.

JP: I hope not.
TG: I hope not too, but –
JP: [Laughs]

Well, since we’re to the younger generations – what advice would you give to young people, young queer people, in particular?

TG: One of the things that Harvey Milk said was that, “You’ve got to come out to everybody.” You know, and if you were to update that quote from the late ‘70s, to now, is you’ve got to be authentic. I think that anybody who draws breath on this planet needs to be authentically themselves. Because it’s the only way to find voices that match your own. You know, to see the representation in the world that you need to see, you have to be able to live that representation.

While Terry’s response is cautious, it is also optimistic. Again, it is trauma-informed given his lived experience as an activist, but Terry’s outlook for the future is optimistic. Incidentally, both Hunter’s and Terry’s interview took place following the Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe versus Wade, the 1973 landmark decision that decriminalized abortion in the United States. Since its overturning, the LGBTQ+ community has become collectively anxious (from observing the informants) over the future of marriage equality in the United States. Terry’s metaphor for walking on thin ice is palpable.

Moving forward, I suspect other themes will emerge, some will shift, and others evolve. This will be especially true as others continue to advance the project by moving beyond recording the stories of gay and queer men and hear the perspectives of lesbian, trans and queer women, and nonbinary people. These stories are important, and the more narratives collected the greater the context and appreciation for the LGBTQ+ community within the Intermountain West will be understood.
CONCLUSION

Why does Queer Folklore matter? What makes it unique and special? Folklore, at its foundation, are the traditions, customs, and stories passed on informally, typically via word-of-mouth. The folklore shared within the LGBTQ+ community functions as a vehicle to inform both newcomers and longtime members of safety and survival, struggles and triumphs, and hopes for better tomorrows. Queer Folklore also functions as a mirror to society colored in camp and offers biting social commentary. Queer Folklore invariably draws upon popular and local culture and fashions it to its needs. For example, the Queer Folklore and humor found within the Utah is often centered around the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints that lampoons both the institution and the members. The Queer community has a legacy of taking those who oppress and wish them harm and transforming them into campy caricatures. There is no shortage of drag queens who name themselves, “Molly Mormon,” nor is there a shortage of couples dressing as LDS missionaries during Halloween. Finally, I would be remiss to not mention being a “Friend of Dorothy.” Even after eighty years, this phrase derived from The Wizard of Oz still has currency within the community because it is, at its heart, a queer fairytale where a young outcast from the American hinterlands is whisked away greeted by other misfits who make their way to a big city to have their fondest desires come true.

Additionally, Queer folklore in the Intermountain West has a material aspect that should not be ignored. Again, there is a strong influence from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints where I observed in a number of informants home décor that included glass grapes (a common feature in older LDS households who reside in the region), and framed excommunication letters. These choices of decoration and material
culture are examples of kitsch, camp, and defiance. It would be advantageous to explore these further as the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project continues to expand.

Despite the camp and humor of the LGBTQ+ Community, Queer Folklore matters because it informs a community that better tomorrows are possible. It is my hope that the Intermountain West LGBTQ+ Oral History Project will continue to inspire, inform, and call a community to action to achieve this goal. Better tomorrows can be achieved, and they start with today. To better tomorrows.
REFERENCES


Weems, Mickey. *The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit*. 