

### 3. The Epistemology of the (Televised, Polygamous) Closet

#### THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MEDIATED MORMONISM AND THE PROMISES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Most Utah women in polygamous marriages are indistinguishable from other women. They take jobs or work from home to help support their families. They don't wear prairie dresses or put their hair in braids or a bun, the style consistent among FLDS women.

In black dress pants and a white blouse with a charcoal-colored jacket, Heidi Foster looks like any other 36-year-old suburban Salt Lake City mom, albeit with 10 children in her home. The youngsters' father is an occasional visitor who acknowledges another woman as his only legal wife.

—Fox News, “Many Polygamists Blend into Modern Society”

The well-kept yellow house sat on the corner of a tidy cul-de-sac called South Bonner Circle surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence. From the outside it seemed like a typical suburban home, offering few clues of the secrets that were contained inside. A passerby might catch a glimpse of children in the windows, but for the most part, the Young family kept to themselves. Their neighbors had no idea that the family were prominent members of the Kingston clan, the most powerful polygamist cult in America—and one of the most dangerous.

—Jesse Hyde, “Inside ‘The Order,’ One Mormon Cult’s Secret Empire”

“We aren't the polygamists you think you know,” says Kody Brown, father and patriarch of the Brown family and male star of the reality series *Sister Wives* (2010–present). And who are the polygamists we think we know? The holy-haired and prairie-dress-wearing women and aged prophets we see on the news or, as Brady Udall (1998) describes it, “wide-eyed woolly-bearded zealots” and “ruddy-faced women with high collars buttoned up to their

chins.” These vestigial folk haunt the edges of film and television fare such as *Big Love* (2006–11), *Follow the Prophet* (2009), *Polygamy USA* (2013), and the *19th Wife* (novel 2009, TV movie 2010). According to these mediated texts, polygamists live in small, dusty locations (both actual and fictional) like Colorado City or Juniper Creek, way beyond the edges of civilization. They keep to themselves as they populate their compounds with hundreds of big-eyed children, scores of downcast women wearing big bangs and long braids and even longer pastel dresses, and a handful of wild-eyed patriarchs who command their circle of wives and children with an iron fist (and usually a rifle). These are the people, we are reassured in our mediated stories, who are made safe by their exceptionalism, their difference plainly legible on their unadorned, even homely, bodies.

By contrast, the first thing we need to understand about progressive polygamists—as those who live the lifestyle often describe themselves—is that they stand in pointed contrast to those they recognize in the stereotype of the old-world, isolationist, and evil polygamists, a version of orthodox fundamentalism that I discuss at greater length in chapter 4. Orthodox polygamy produced modern polygamy but is no longer commensurate with it. In this telling, what marks modern and contemporary very distinctly fissure, since there are many present-tense instances of non-modern polygamy, as those aforementioned people in dusty compounds more than attest. Unlike his all-knowing, godlike, isolationist counterpart of conventional polygamy, the progressive male polygamist is plugged in, upwardly mobile, eager to provide college educations for his many children, plagued by self-doubt, and in need of marriage therapy and perhaps performance-enhancing pharmaceuticals like Viagra. He is unsure about how to lead. His wives wear makeup and can support themselves financially, they have opinions and disagree with him openly, they make fun of him for not following directions or for his forgetfulness, they chide him for his attempts to dominate. Their children can be high-strung and difficult, boy/girl crazy or resistant, by turns showing their love or turning a cold shoulder to the five parents who raised them. *Like any other American family.*

In this distinction, modern polygamists must contend with a serious image issue, since popular misunderstandings about them perpetuate a bigotry and intolerance they consider to be unfair. But because their lifestyle, as they term it, is illegal, they also struggle with potential arrest and incarceration for being public about their beliefs, lives, and loves. Modern polygamy thus draws upon the most basic features of modernity itself—individual choice, rights to personhood, strategic mediation, and the power

of the image—to reshape public opinion about private behaviors. Judith Stacey notes that soon after *Big Love* started airing in 2006, “the clearing-house website for polygamy advocacy groups credit[ed] media interest in *Big Love* with reporting ‘around the world’ their conviction that ‘polygamy rights is the next civil rights battle’” (2011, 116). Since that time, other mediated fare, such as *Sister Wives*, equally contribute to, if not a civil rights battle, then a rebranding of FLDS polygamy. And both *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* have inspired a rash of polygamy dating websites, including *Sister Wives*, polygamy subthemed groups in POF (PlentyOfFish), 4thefamily.com, and Polygamy.com. While not all of forms of mediated polygamy are by and about Mormons, Mormonism remains a theme that all sites address.<sup>1</sup>

Building new semiotic associations for progressive polygamy is front and center on the agenda. In the opening minutes of the first episode of *Sister Wives*, for instance, the television text bends over backward to present the Browns in a way that is personal and relatable. In addition to smiles of welcome and direct address to the camera, each of Kody’s three wives (Meri, Janelle, and Christine) introduces herself, her home or living area, and her children, their names and ages in titles at the base of the screen (fourth wife, Robyn, joins the cast/family by the end of Season 1). The slow and almost painstaking introduction to the family and the text onscreen reinforces the kinder and gentler brand of polygamy the Browns are meant to represent, while establishing each wife’s role as the domestic nucleus of Kody’s nuclear family palimpsest. As each uniquely spelled child’s name—Aspyn, Mykelti, Paedon, Gwendlyn, Ysabel—flashes across the screen in connection to that child’s birth mother, the message is both overtly and covertly uttered: Kody is no Warren Jeffs, the infamous leader of the FLDS, who in 2012 was convicted for arranging marriages between adult men and underage girls, as well as sexual misconduct including rape and incest. Indeed, at a public forum in 2010 held at Tufts University that was also folded into a *Sister Wives* episode, Robyn notes in tears: “We don’t believe in child brides. We don’t believe in forcing marriages. . . . I was so upset, I just wanted to go rescue every girl. I think [Warren Jeffs] deserves to rot in hell. I really do.”<sup>2</sup>

Bad polygamy exists, the Browns concede. But so does good. And in that difference and that oversimplified dichotomy, modern polygamy looks a lot like normal. But normalcy, as we all know, is complicated. In this case, as the quote from a Fox News segment that begins this chapter makes perfectly clear, the perceived normalcy of modern polygamy, its sheer unmarkedness, makes this version of polygamy even more ominous for its lack of being

obvious. Many of those people practicing polygamy, it warns, are not visually distinctive, and thus, they can be anyone, anywhere, at any time. Heidi Foster looks like any other thirty-six-year-old suburban Salt Lake City mom. And if a normal mom lives a secret life, then what does that say about normalcy? Can a sister wife be an all-American mom? Can a fundamentalist Mormon man with four score and seven wives and children be an American everyman? Or is there something about a secret life that, itself, makes one American? Is the great code of Americanness defined as much by what we don't say, we won't say, as what we do?

Mediated stories about progressive polygamous families regard multiple wives and extended families as the quintessence of a contemporary American ideology of entrepreneurial spiritualism, aspirational ambition, management efficiency, and image awareness. As I discuss throughout this book, one of the governing principles of self-understanding within the Mormon Church (both mainstream and fundamentalist) has been its separation (as opposed to exile) from Gentile society. Indeed, this theme of Mormon difference and differentiation is often reinforced across the archive of mediated Mormonism. For purposes of shorthand, Joanna Brooks (2012, 15) puts it best: she was a “root beer among the Cokes,” she writes.<sup>3</sup> It was a “sparkling difference” she relished but also a difference she, and many other like-minded Mormons, relied on to help establish her identity.

Yet what happens in an economy of visibility that predicates its *raison d'être* on an appeal to sameness rather than difference? In many ways, modern polygamy stories turn on the conceit that these are families just like ours (however singularly “ours” is understood), normal families pushed to an extreme that dips into and requires the public relations power of celebrity to confer social justice through mediation. Throughout the course of *Sister Wives*, for example, whenever the discussions get serious, the Browns keep coming back to this refrain: they are using reality TV to counter demeaning and cruel stereotypes about polygamy. Justice through visibility is also a central claim of *Big Love*, and the “freedom to be himself” stands as the primary reason why the lead character, Bill Henrickson (played by Bill Paxton), runs for a state senator position, thus outing himself and his family in a bid for social justice and political power.

Like most narratives about extremes, those characters/subjects/citizens who are able to survive and even thrive in the context of immense sacrifice and challenge earn new privileges and exalted status as model figures. For even as modern polygamy stories underscore the financial, emotional, temporal, and

logistical demands of nuclear families comprising twenty to thirty people, and even as they push on a politics of oppression that seeks to give voice to the oppressed, they suggest that the ability to cope with and cultivate the temporal fluctuations and fluid kinship models that this lifestyle entails not only marks but successfully creates the kind of neoliberal savvy necessary for prosperity and celebrity in the global marketplace. In short, modern polygamy serves as the ideal proving ground for twenty-first-century success American style, where flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity to change tactics as situations arise yield dividends both divine and earthly. But as I note in chapter 1, this is not your grandfather's neoliberalism. Indeed, these stories about living "the principle of plural marriage," as it is called within F/LDS Mormonism, directly enforce a logic of spiritual neoliberalism keyed to a promised dividend of an afterlife where the man who has married the most women and begotten the most children might look forward to his own divinity.

I take up these ideas of separation and difference, of similitude and citizenship, of flexibility and community promulgated through a gospel of modern polygamy in this chapter, factoring them very specifically through the gendered identities of the male patriarchs and the female sister wives as well as the sexual politics of polyamory. Doing so reveals a fascinating strain of queer and feminist discourses about social and sexual behaviors, the rights of consenting adults, kinship by choice, conscientious lawbreaking, and model citizenship. Specifically, I hone in on three primary texts in different genres that offer complex portraits of modern polygamy: the TLC reality series *Sister Wives* (2010–present), the HBO serial drama *Big Love* (2006–11), and the novel *The Lonely Polygamist* (Udall 2011), arguing that each offers a glimpse into a seemingly normal American family, dedicated to ethical living and pushed to social extremes. It is along these edges that resources for futurity are found.

In varying ways, a composite portrait of modern polygamy positions it as quintessentially progressive, American, and normal, in pointed contrast to the foreign polygamies of the Middle East, Asia, or Africa or atavistic polygamies lived in contemporary times by premodern peoples, primarily the Warren Jeffs types of fundamentalist Mormonism. Modern polygamy stories also suggest an added benefit that accrues to plural families—in their commitment to community, they transcend the atomization that is so often taken as concomitant with modernity, suturing the wounds of modern living with the threads of consent, care, and kinship. This genre of polygamy stories thus indicates that the complex structural dynamics of polygamous families' homes and lives create individuals who can thrive in a neoliberal

milieu where good choices matter more than governments and where the capacity to make media work for you yields currencies that are monetary, cultural, and also spiritual.

#### Of Modern Families, Modern Love, and Modern Problems

In this family, you were never free, you couldn't do anything on your own, because there was always somebody who had a dentist's appointment or volleyball practice or Deanna would have one of her epileptic seizures and there went everybody's Labor Day picnic down the tubes. It was like they were all connected by the same invisible string . . . and when one person wanted to do a certain thing or go a certain way, they yanked on all the others, and then another person tried to go in another direction, and so on, and pretty soon they were all tangled up, tied to each other, tripping and flailing, thrashing around like a bunch of monkeys caught in a net.—Brady Udall, *The Lonely Polygamist*

Here's the setup for Brady Udall's novel *The Lonely Polygamist*. Golden Richards is anything but a golden boy—the son of a deadbeat wildcatting dad, bent on discovering oil, who leaves Golden and his mother in small-town Louisiana when Golden is three. Golden, we are told, “grew too fast, his pants at perpetual high water, his shoes pinching his toes. He was a boy at odds with his own body: top-heavy, always stumbling, reeling suddenly like someone on the deck of a storm-tossed ship, breaking things, knocking pictures off the walls and whimpering apologies while his mother shrieked her dismay” (Udall 2011, 43). Golden somehow manages to mature and to migrate, moving from Louisiana to the Southwest, where Mormonism soon claims him. The story offers a Mormon Bildungsroman, showing how a hapless, miserable, isolated little boy can convert to the structures of FLDS (though still without faith) and become the husband to five women and the father to twenty-eight children. Yet this transformation in circumstance hardly translates to a transformation of character, and Golden ends the novel as he began it—as a woebegone, awkward, often incompetent, broke, confused, and suffering man, imbricated in family systems beyond his comprehension and control. The narrative is both sympathetic to his plight and merciless in depicting his misery, suggesting that in the midst of his hectic, insanely populated life, Golden longs for connection, understanding, and appreciation. And thus, for a brief time—and in the midst of sleeping with five separate wives—he toys with the idea of taking a Guatemalan mistress.

For my purposes, what matters most about this portrayal is the degree to which *The Lonely Polygamist* has been heralded as a novel about “the

quintessential American family” (Alameddine 2011), and Golden has been taken as the personification of an American everyman figure that “makes us recognize the polygamist (and sister wife) in all of us. Golden Richard’s [sic] struggles and desires are no different from ours, he just has them in multiples of four” (Houston 2011). As I have noted, Golden is more than woe-begone in his role as patriarch and everyman figure. But this, in itself, does not exempt him from a position of being what S. Paige Baty (1995, 8–9) has termed a “representative character,” who “embodies and expresses achievement, success, failure, genius, struggle, triumph,” or, in other words, a string of often contradictory affective states and outcomes that make aspirational goals clear, even if manifested through flawed characters, who sometimes violate the hierarchy of achievement those goals are meant to represent.

The serial drama *Big Love* plays by the same rules, only holier. Bill Henrickson is husband to three wives (a fourth is sealed to him but leaves the marriage after a day) and father to eight children. He is also a successful but often challenged businessman (owner of building supply stores and a casino). Unlike Golden, Bill’s everyman qualities stem not from a sense of existential alienation but from his desire to do good and to be good in the context of his growing business success and more-than-growing ego, both of which require stroking, the narrative implies, so that Bill might be a good provider and potential prophet. Bill grew up in fictional Juniper Creek, a polygamous old-world compound seemingly near Salt Lake City but far enough away that the narrative device of getting back and forth between the city and compound (or being stranded in one place or the other) factors into a good deal of the five-season series. This trope of the old (polygamous) world being nearby but still removed leans on the devices of modern media for connection: cars, mobile telephones, even self-help tapes that characters listen to during the long and tedious drives are critical links between the old world and the new. Mediation about modern polygamy shifts back and forth between these positions of the marginal and the mainstream with remarkable speed. In this movement, it is the interstitial getting there, the long slow passage through the open roads of the West, that is both inessential and inescapable to the larger plots these stories unfold.

Like many young men who grow up in polygamy, Bill is expelled from the compound by his father, abandoned in the city and left to fend for himself at the age of fourteen, an occurrence so common in FLDS culture that there is a lost-boys genre within mediated Mormonism. In Bill, we have the ingredients for a true American self-made man, who forges his way without the aid or hindrance of his father or family. After some years living on the streets of

Salt Lake and stealing to stay alive, Bill meets and then marries Barb (Jeanne Tripplehorn), a mainstream Mormon woman, who helps him solidify his new adult masculinity. They live a conventional mainstream LDS life, until a cancer crisis for Barb requires the family return to the compound for help. Bill and Barb take Nicki (Chloë Sevigny) into their home, first as a nurse and then, as authorized by Bill's prophecy, as a second wife. Some years later, Bill also has a prophecy about the babysitter, Margene (Ginnifer Goodwin), and she enters the family as a third wife (we later find out that Margene is sixteen when Bill marries her). The Henricksons, we are made to understand, live the principle of plural marriage in accord with their religious beliefs, yet it is also clear that religiously motivated polygamy is driven by the patriarch's prophecy, not explicitly by plurality consensus. *Big Love* thus nicely illustrates how male egotism masked as (and coterminous with) male prophecy fuels the patriarchal machine, which often engages in the hegemonic practice of compelling women's "free will" and "consent" to authorize its workings of power. *Big Love's* creators, Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, themselves a married couple, have noted that their ambition as gay men in mediating a story about Mormon polygamy was twofold: they wanted to show what a complicated, messy, and ultimately successful marriage looked like in all of its many permutations, and they wanted to provoke a larger conversation on the meanings of marriage. "We're dramatizing these people in a way that really does go toward asking, what is a good marriage? What is not a good marriage?" (Lee 2011).

*Sister Wives* similarly offers commentary on the state of contemporary marriage through a reality television version of modern polygamy. Like Bill Henrickson in *Big Love*, Kody Brown considers himself to be called by God to the principle of plural marriage, and his vision shapes how his wives and children experience the configuration of their domestic world. Unlike Bill, however, Kody was not raised in a plural family but rather in the mainstream Mormon Church. After he returned home from his mission at age twenty-one, Kody converted to a splinter group of the fundamentalist Latter-day Saints, called the Apostolic United Brethren, aka the Work, the Priesthood, the Group, or the Allred Group (his parents had been excommunicated from the mainstream LDS Church due to their interest in living the principle while Kody served his mission). Perhaps riding the coattails of the media and popular enthusiasm for *Big Love* and all things Mormon, *Sister Wives* began airing in 2010 and continues strong as of this writing. Since the reality show depicts real people living an illegal lifestyle, it generated a good deal of scrutiny, scandal, and celebrity for the Browns when it first began airing. It also

drew the attention of state and federal authorities, and by the show's second season (spring 2011), the Utah-based family had fled the state for the more welcoming nearby city of Las Vegas, cameras documenting their secret passage. Subsequent seasons have featured the Browns as they attempt to bring their holy lifestyle to Sin City and as they try to establish a financial livelihood in the context of their reality celebrity.

*Sister Wives* often plays as a parable in modern loving and living, showing marriage in all of its messy glory. The producers focus on the domestic tensions that lie at the heart of all marriages, in this case multiplied by a factor of four but also intensified by worldwide celebrity. When first wife Meri, for instance, became entrapped in an emotional affair with an online lover, multiple forums from Twitter to Facebook commented on her cheating heart. When it was later revealed that Meri's mystery man was actually a woman who had catfished her, social media could not contain its delight, and *Sister Wives* could not refuse to comment on the scandal. Meri's catfishing has thus become one of the major plotlines of the reality show diegesis, and it is featured prominently as, by turns, a rupture of marital trust as well as a signifier of loneliness in an empty-nesting woman, who only has a husband one day in four. The program has also used the catfish scandal (and the loneliness that led to Meri's vulnerability) to suggest a motivation for Meri's desire to leave the family and open a bed and breakfast in a house in Utah that used to be owned by her great-grandfather. In episodes in 2019, Meri is questioned by Kody whether she cares more for the Utah property or her house in Las Vegas, enmeshed as it is in the compound of their four collective houses. "The value of both homes is equally important," she says defiantly. Meri then comments about the irony of his question in a direct-address response to the camera. "I don't think Kody should be questioning me about this. At all. I love both of the homes just the same," she says dissolving into laughter. "If he can say that about his wives, then I can say that about the two houses." Meri here reveals the open secret at the heart of this family's truth: love is not always multiplied as it is divided.

The show also, however, reinforces the basic functionality of the Browns' version of polygamy, spending as much screen time on reconciliation and conflict resolution as on conflict itself. After an episode in which the Browns participated in a contentious panel discussion about the relative merits of polygamy at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV), for example, the show ended the episode with UNLV anthropology professor Dr. William Jankowiak, whose academic work deals explicitly with plural families. He noted in direct address to the camera (a visual cue to enhance his credibility

as a scholar), “I estimate 25 percent or one in four [plural] families were able to achieve a satisfactory marriage or living arrangement, about 35 percent of families were in some state of ongoing, albeit manageable, conflict, and 30 percent were dysfunctional or in complete disarray” (Rodriguez 2013). While UNLV’s digital newspaper, *The Virtual Rebel*, reprinted these statistics, it did not reprint Dr. Jankowiak’s subsequent comment that these figures of 25 percent good, 35 percent average, and 30 percent bad are basically the same demographic spread experienced in the U.S. population as a whole. As such, much as Kody and his wives claim, there isn’t much difference between polygamous couples and monogamous couples in terms of the day-to-day affective and domestic labors, struggles, and triumphs of relationship building.

There is a significant difference between polygamous and monogamous arrangements, however, in that the intensity of plural marriages’ structure, the demands of the large family environment, and the complications of so much emotional and physical caretaking make polygamy an exquisite balancing act that only the strongest will survive. “Polygamy,” jokes Robyn Brown, “it’s not for amateurs.” A sympathetic regard for polygamy thus credits it with being complex, difficult, and draining, yet portrayals also praise polygamy, in all of its excesses and triumphs, as a creative and complex way of loving. “*Living in a monogamous lifestyle would just not be full enough for me.*” Positive portrayals establish polygamy as an important cornerstone in a twenty-first-century marriage debate presently ongoing in Westernized countries where nontraditional marriage is a polarizing double-coded signifier standing for both modern progress and devolution. As I discuss in the next section, modern polygamy stories mindfully use a language of consent and choice to authorize their structures, making common cause with what many consider to be the civil rights issue of the present moment: same-sex marriage.

The sexual contract articulated by and through modern polygamy stories demonstrates how fully regulation of the body and its hungers factors into the kind of modern citizen that polygamy of this form yields, a citizen who is able both to acknowledge emotions and to control them. In these stories, for example, each of the sister wives contends with varying degrees of jealousy in relation to one another and frustration in relation to her husband. Udall typifies the sister wife in *The Lonely Polygamist* as “a burning spotlight of attention and need” (2011, 17). In a broader mediated context, talk shows and special news hour episodes with sister wives frequently include discussion on how women contend with jealousy, particularly the sharp pangs at night when a woman is alone in her bed but knows her husband is down the hall or one house over making love to his other wife. Says Rosemary, wife

number three of Brady Williams in the reality show *My Five Wives*, “Jealousy for me is like a wild animal [chuckles]. You’ve got to keep it in the cage, or it will tear you up [laughs].” Invariably, these women affirm that jealousy is natural, but if they are able to “set aside emotion” they can thus “communicate objectively,” in turn heightening the functionality of the family (Ling 2011). Coping with these challenges is positioned in the narratives as part of the structural payoff of polygamy. In an LDS and FLDS religious context, strife in the earthly domain allows a woman to work through her biggest emotional hurdles as a form of self-improvement and a preamble to placement in the Celestial Kingdom, the highest stage of a tripart arrangement in the Mormon cosmogony. If she can forfeit her need for exclusivity, the logic goes, she can live in submission to God. Men must also learn to submit their will to that of a heavenly patriarch, who asks for sacrifices in the name of servitude. But a man often shows this devotion to the divinity through his leadership skills rather than his subservience.<sup>4</sup>

Modern polygamy stories carry these valences of religion, but they also make appeals to more secular, even workplace, values. For instance, “objective communication” could well be taken as the watchword of human resources managers, who encourage employees to transcend emotional upset in service of a more harmonious and efficient business setting. *The Lonely Polygamist* mocks this tie to corporatism with the installation of a suggestion box in the Big House, so that members of the household can register their concerns anonymously. Modern sister wives talk less about feeling their feelings than about suppressing them in the name of rational talk and overall familial well-being. Doing so has its payoffs. According to these stories, when modern polygamy works well, women are able to transcend both the edicts of patriarchy and the work/life dilemma while governing their lives by choice, a critical, though certainly not uncontested, element of contemporary feminism. Depending on inclination rather than obligation, FLDS women might stay at home or go to work. Says Kody, “Each of my wives has come into our family of her own free will. Choosing to join a plural family has been their choices, their preferences” (Brown et al. 2012, 6). On *Sister Wives*, this means that the third wife, Christine, can stay home with the children while second wife Janelle works outside the home. And while the freedom to work for money represents a major tension between Barb, Nicki, and Margene on *Big Love*, the extended family network makes room for a gigantic plot of free-range murders, lost boys, nosy neighbors, and homicidal patriarchs, each woman able to pop away from the domestic

sphere of child rearing and dinner preparation into a bigger world of intrigue simply by leaving her young children with one of the other wives or older kids. On these programs, the sole man faces management challenges and has concerns about the best way to inspire confidence and to lead his family, who are, by turns, made synonymous with workers, troops, and pilgrims.

In this context, the man's task is to govern, seek consensus, and spread himself evenly across the wives and children who desire his time, attention, and affection. "It's a whole lot of work," laments patriarch Michael, talking to Lisa Ling (2011) on the modern polygamy episode of *Our America*. One of his wives acknowledges, "I'm sure it appears easier than it really is. It's living *la vida loca* for the guy, right? . . . The reality of not only providing for those women but trying to meet their physical, spiritual needs is huge. It's a huge responsibility." "Believe me," said an unidentified polygamist to the *New York Times*, "there are cheaper ways to have sex" (Williams 1997). As Emily Nussbaum (2007) joked about *Big Love*: "Bill may be trapped in every man's dream—three naked ladies!—but he's also living every man's nightmare: relationship processing so endless it might paralyze a seventies lesbian cooperative." In fact, it is precisely this impediment on masculinity and male sexuality—the fact that polygamy obligates men to cultivate committed sexual relationships through marriage rather than engaging in promiscuity (as if male sexuality can manifest only through one of these polarities)—that leads modern polygamy to consider itself committed to women's welfare rather than opposed to it.

But what may on the surface appear to be a woman-friendly system could in fact be seen as a new domain for cultivating masculinity. A good deal of gender theory contends that masculinity often establishes its contours on the edges of civilization and through certain kinds of excess—think the Western frontier, the demands of war, the challenges of Arctic exploration. In each of these cases, however, masculinity must absent itself from a feminized domain of home, child rearing, and emotional labor. As Michael Kimmel (1997) puts it, manhood is established in those places where it perceives itself as free of the feminized lassitudes of domesticity. In stories about modern polygamy, however, the home space establishes the alpha and omega of experience. While men like Bill or Kody or Brady or Golden might work outside the home, the narrative pull is always back to wives and children, to making ends meet, to the extremes and excesses represented by the home itself, and to a modern masculine frontier of emotional attentiveness that the man must cultivate in himself.

It's a most extraordinary set of circumstances and challenges for an otherwise quintessentially ordinary American family. Writes Kody in *Becoming Sister Wives*, "The demands on a plural family are far greater than those on a monogamous couple. Since we have to consider the sensitivity of other wives and other marriages on an everyday basis, plural marriage consistently challenges us. It makes us confront our shortcomings and overcome them. We have to learn to handle our jealousy, contain our aggression. We have to check our selfishness. There is no room for ego in plural marriage" (Brown et al. 2012, 5). I would argue, quite in opposition, that rather than there being no room for ego in plural marriage, it is precisely the ego of self-making that fuels the domains of modern polygamy. In many ways, this level of personal challenge is presented as a gender-neutral circumstance. In the language of my son's preschool, problems help us become mindful, and mindfulness is critical to our success. I don't dispute these ideas. In fact, I engage daily in my own efforts for self-awareness, self-regulation, and mindfulness, but the point here is the way such disciplines of awareness and behavior constitute a pedagogy of gendered being that positions the excesses of modern polygamy as the perfect incubator of neoliberal selfhood, where masculinity and femininity are both reified in fairly conventional ways. Men emerge as natural leaders; women choose their place as followers.

#### Visibility as Justice: Success as Vindication

The common academic template for understanding polygamy (both Mormon and not) is that it has grown less prevalent worldwide as more societies have modernized. Judith Stacey argues, for example, that monogamy has historically been the outsider, since "many more societies have practiced polygamy than have prohibited it" (2011, 124). In a contemporary context, polygamy has moved to the margins, and many scholars credit this subordinated and often alienated position to the fact that, says Stacey, "in industrializing societies . . . few male wage earners can afford to support more than one wife and children" (127). While this rubric may be true for real families, in the mediated world tales abound of large families that must exploit innovative cost-cutting and money-earning strategies to not only survive but thrive in tough economic times when large families attenuate an already-strained budget. Whether polygamous or not, those people who face extreme challenges and yet learn how to prosper in a challenging economic climate are deemed survivors, in the basest of social evolutionary thinking. In this case, survival of the fittest is not about the glacial time of natural se-

lection but about finding the right sort of immediate self-management strategies that can offer instant payoffs.

This rapid-paced care and operationalizing of the self rings with the hegemones of both modernity and spiritual neoliberalism. Many scholars have insightfully shown that projects of the self often enact state ideologies through a process of governmentality, whereby subjects are governed through a distance by entertainment, discourse, and mores, all of which are imbricated in modern mandates about markets, individualization, and floating currencies.<sup>5</sup> As Nikolas Rose (1993, 283) has quite poetically (and frighteningly) put it: “The forms of power that subject us, the systems of rule that administer us, the types of authority that master us, do not find their principle of coherence in a State, nor do they answer to a logic of oppression or domination.” These forms of power are built into the very apparatus of a spectacular selfhood, which emerges as a commodity of value in a global marketplace that stresses the efficiency of privatization, the stability of financial markets, and the decentralization of government.

In many respects, a friendly but renegade and largely antigovernment group of conscientious lawbreakers (like progressive Mormon polygamists) offers the perfect model for neoliberal development, since political ideologies can be masked by religious imperatives. Thus, the turn away from government and toward individuals seems to be motivated by a drive for spiritual purity and social justice. But when these modes of ideology are mediated and dispersed through an international market of television networks, book sellers, and movie houses, and when they are dedicated to self-improvement in the service of heavenly outcomes, their combined messages soon begin to reinforce a market logic of choice politics, individual autonomy, limited government involvement, and heavenly reward—in short, spiritual neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup>

Mormon polygamy stories position themselves as markedly distinct from other big-family forms of mediation for the primary reason that polygamy (unlike simply having a large family) is illegal. Unjustly so, says the polygamist. In the context of this bigotry, financial woes are due not only to the largeness of one’s family but also to discriminatory practices that unfairly prohibit Mormon polygamists from living the American Dream. It is at times like these, they argue, that the polygamist must take matters into his own hands, and such agency in a postmillennial moment requires harnessing the mediascape. Writes Joe Darger in *Love Times Three*: “In the past, people like us who have polygamous relationships have zealously guarded their privacy and sought to stay out of the public spotlight due to this lifestyle’s criminal

status. We have stayed silent despite widespread misperceptions, mistreatment, and intolerance. To speak up is to risk persecution, prosecution, and, because of discrimination, economic hardship. We have carried the fragile hope that our silence will allow us to avoid unfair treatment. As a family, we have come to see that as unproductive and naïve” (Darger et al. 2012, vii).

Productivity and sophistication mandate that progressive and forward-thinking polygamists enter the court of public opinion in order to change understanding. Progressive polygamy stories thus have justice as their impetus, and the argument contends that understanding will breed fairness. Or, put another way, progressive polygamists are open about their explicit political and religious ideology, and, in being so honest about their objective, they expect to effect meaningful social change. Says Kody Brown when his family comes out of hiding at the start of Season 2: “The fundamentalist Mormon community and the polygamists have become secretive, in such a way as to threaten the rest of America even if it’s in their own minds. And so to be transparent, I believe, makes us more safe to them. We’re hoping that other fundamentalist Mormon polygamists will follow our example and open their lives up, and eventually we can become an open community rather than a closed community.” There is a similar hope for redemption through publicness on *Big Love*. The outing of the fictional Henricksons happens diegetically on a much smaller stage than the worldwide reality television platform chosen by the Browns, but the messages are quite similar. With the Utah capitol building behind him, three microphones before him, and cameras flashing all around him, Bill’s acceptance speech after winning the election for state senator is also the moment of irrevocability for himself and his three wives. “I am Bill Henrickson . . . and I believe in the principle of plural marriage.” His wives are dressed monochromatically, Barb all in red, Nicki all in white, and Margene all in blue, while Bill—in a red-and-white-striped tie to mimic the star-spangled banner, stands to their side. All of them unsmiling and clasping hands. The entire tableau stands as both symbol for and metonym of America, its plurality on full display, its obligation for tolerance in full demand (figure 3.1).

Indeed, narratives about progressive polygamy overtly press on a logic of American inclusivity to motivate and justify the narratives they mediate. “We’re not your typical American family, but we’re an American family nonetheless,” says Bill from the podium. Kody Brown’s fourth wife, Robyn, laments the lack of tolerance that makes it necessary for her and her family to flee Utah for the safer environs of Las Vegas: “This is not the America



FIG. 3.1 Modern Mormon polygamy as both symbol for and metonym of American plurality and modernity.

that I learned about in school.” Says Connie Cawley, star of several mediated texts about polygamy including a *Nightline* (Vega 2013) special, Lisa Ling’s (2011) investigation, and a reality show called *Polygamy USA*: “This is our version of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If everyone else in the United States is entitled to that, so are we.”

Clearly, in this formulation, representation and visibility serve political ends, and the logic in these stories indicates that American democracy promises all citizens acceptance. Further, the narratives press on a rather remarkable idea that what is known and liked cannot be discriminated against. It’s a formula for social change that has important precedents, as, for instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s use of sentimental fiction to dismantle slavery in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) or Elizabeth Gaskell’s sympathetic portrayals of a fallen woman to rehumanize those who are abandoned and made destitute by circumstances and society in *Ruth* (1853). But this to-know-me-is-to-love-me approach assumes that all visibility brings intimacy, and intimacy, in turn, always and invariably yields affection and fair treatment. As teleological partners along a scale of acceptance, the logic indicates that visibility,

intimacy, and affect are always good, positive, and salutary. In this respect, texts like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* are very little indebted to the generic conventions of sentimental fiction; instead, they are more firmly situated in the parlance of contemporary celebrity, where mediation fosters a feeling of to-be-knownness between fan and star, a closeness that both mimics and departs from the functions of intimacy.

As does modern celebrity, the structures of polygamy create a public curiosity that carries value on the open market. Oddity creates interest, and interest creates customers. The Browns, for instance, have parlayed their struggle for justice into a financial windfall, all while storylines on the reality show itself depict them struggling to make ends meet. Since its premiere in 2010, the Browns have not only capitalized through the show, they have written a best-selling memoir, *Becoming Sister Wives*, started a business called My Sisterwife's Closet, and established a media presence through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, all incorporated under Kody Brown Family Entertainment, LLC (established March 30, 2010). The website Celebrity Net Worth posits Kody's value at \$300,000, a figure perhaps not in the stratosphere for a celebrity but certainly far above the net worth of the average family that the Browns position themselves as being ("Kody Brown Net Worth" 2015).

Much like A-list celebrities advertising their latest movie, the Browns have hit the talk show circuit, appearing on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *George Lopez*, *Good Morning America*, and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, to name a few. At this point, all things Brown underscore a philosophy critical to American conservative cultures: everything can be put to use. But in this case, it is not growing food in a summer garden or canning that food for the winter that functions as the marker of resourceful savvy, it is marshaling the powers of the mediascape to sell products, both tangible (jewelry, soaps, handmade clothes) and intangible (personality, charisma, entertainment). Indeed, the Browns have shown remarkable business acumen in using their reality celebrity to the benefit of their entrepreneurial success. Using the logic of new-age aspiration—follow your bliss; do what you love and the money will follow—they characterize their businesses as a form of sister-led financial family adventure (figure 3.2). Similarly, following her legal divorce from Kody (so that he could legally adopt Robyn's children), Meri Brown joined MLM clothing company LuLaRoe, famous for their "buttery soft" leggings and founded by a mainstream Mormon mother of eight. While Meri's Facebook page tries to keep family issues separate, her Instagram account blends marketing and family. In turn, the Browns' own form of mediated



FIG. 3.2 My Sisterwife's Closet (<https://mysisterwifescloset.com/>), website image, with the following copy: "We have always had a dream to develop and design products that the everyday woman could use and then add our own personal fun and flair to those ideas! My Sisterwife's Closet is our little adventure to see if our dreams can come true and we are working together as a family to make it happen! We are developing new ideas and new pieces everyday. We are excited to introduce the first four products! It is a line of jewelry that we have all had a hand in bringing to reality. We hope you will look through our 'closets' and find something that you can't live without!"

Mormonism has included wife Christine wearing LuLaRoe leggings on the show and daughter Madison posing in LuLaRoe for her maternity photos in *People*. The composite solidifies the bond between celebrity prophets and MLM profits.

A parallel family, the Dargers, operates in a very similar fashion. While they do not have their own reality series, they did share a vacation to Southern California with the Browns on one episode of *Sister Wives* (in which Kody's wives swooned over Joe Darger's manly management skills. *He really knows how to run a family!*). The Dargers starred in a one-off special, *My Three Wives*, that aired on TLC in 2012. They seemed to be set for a show of their own, with the network even advertising upcoming episodes, when everything was canceled for undisclosed reasons. Like the Browns, the Dargers have

made use of major media outlets, such as *Dr. Drew* and *Dr. Phil*, and they are the featured family of *The Mormon Moment* (2011), a documentary produced by Australian Broadcasting Company and Journeyman Pictures about a typical American family that is anything but normal. “Disowned by their church,” intones the Australian-accented voice of *The Mormon Moment*, “and yet they’ve inspired the popular and enduring notion of what it is to be Mormon.” While claiming that they seek visibility for social justice reasons, the Dargers have also parlayed their moment in the public eye into a financial wellspring of support as aided by the cross-platforming of latter-day screens. Visit their social media sites, called either *TheDargerFamily* or *Love Times Three*, and in addition to updates about the family’s well-being (including sonogram pictures in November 2013 for Joe and second wife Vicki’s in-utero baby girl), you will find a link to the Polygamy Store ([polygamystore.com](http://polygamystore.com)), where customers can buy the Dargers’ book for \$14.95, as well as products such as Orange Cream Lip Balm and Solstice Healing Salve, which are “hand-crafted with care with enough love to share.” The website, a cooperative venture between the Dargers and “others from the Fundamentalist Mormon culture” promises high-quality merchandise, created by God-loving people. The advertising copy on the website reads: “The work ethic of plural families and the attention to detail, quality and creativity come through in the products we offer.” Lip balms, salves, baby hats and booties, professional website design, skirts, hand-crocheted dolls—these are the physical products the Polygamy Store sells.

But housed as it is within the Darger family’s website and Facebook page, the Polygamy Store equally advertises a modern polygamy brand, dedicated to promoting a set of practices and knowledges about modern living that is predicated on an American right to plurality. “How are major decisions made in the family?” writes one poster to the family blog in the FAQ tab of the website. Responds the family, “For small issues we all have the ability to use our brains and make decisions. When it comes to big decisions that affect everyone . . . we all discuss it and come to an agreement before moving forward.” It’s representative democracy in its purest form, at least as written here, but paired as it is with goods for sale, it is also citizenship defined by and through consumerism. As such, the Dargers seem to indicate that it is possible to eradicate social discrimination through discriminating consumer choices. “In this kind of country we should all be free,” says Joe to *Dr. Drew*, freedom here simultaneously meaning identity choice and/as consumer choice (Pinsky 2012).

Some have asked whether polygamy is viable in our modern culture. Our answer? Yes, absolutely. Ours is an example of a family created by consenting adults for whom this lifestyle works. At its core, this is a love story about people who came together to create a family that would support, nurture, and sustain each member.

Every day, people make bonds and blend relationships in ways that are defining what it means to be a “family.” Our particular definition is nothing new, however; polygamy is the most widespread family structure in the world, permissible in more cultures than any other. In choosing plural marriage, we have found purpose that goes beyond ourselves, sometimes in ways we never could have imagined as we built a family built on the most traditional of values: faith, love, loyalty, and unconditional acceptance.—The Dargers, *Love Times Three*

Brady Williams said the increasing social and legal acceptance of gay marriage has helped society open up toward plural marriage. Didn't take long for liberals and the elite media to move on to the next step in obliterating the social institution of marriage, did it.—Imlaughlin, internet commenter on Brady McCombs, “‘My Five Wives’ TLC’s Newest Polygamous Family Favors Buddhism”

As I've noted, to underscore the ordinariness of modern polygamy, narratives establish their bona fides by linking to the normative mainstream. What might be more surprising, then, is that these narratives make equal if not greater links to peoples and places often considered non-normative, or, at least, those who are positioned as marginalized, alienated, or non-hegemonic. Typically, these bids for common cause include assertions that oppressed groups are like one another simply due to the fact of their oppression. On *Sister Wives*, for example, this notion of equal-opportunity oppression takes many forms, perhaps none more telling than when the Browns go shopping for new furniture in Las Vegas and meet an African American salesman who, on camera, refuses to judge the practices of polygamy because of the discrimination he has faced as a black man.<sup>7</sup> On *Big Love*, a particularly memorable demonstration of equal-opportunity oppression takes place when third wife Margene accuses the representative of a non-specified Native American tribe, Jerry Flute (played by Latino Robert Beltran), of being a bigot because he does not want to link the reservation to polygamists through a business venture. Jerry takes offense, and Bill tries to reconcile on the grounds of similitude, spiritualism, prosperity, and appeals to authenticity. “We have too much in common to let this fall apart. Your

people were forced onto reservations. In a way, my people were too. We're both trying to improve the lot of those we love and maintain a sacred life in the midst of a culture that's forgotten what's holy. . . . Let's mend and prosper at the same time. . . . I'm not Vegas. I'm not glitzy. I'm just a regular guy trying to support my family." The scene ends with them shaking hands. In *The Lonely Polygamist*, these links to outsiders are more commonly made with a sardonic twist. Udall positions the polygamist and a brothel owner as synonymous figures joined by their equal trafficking in women through a sexual economy that rewards men for women's heterosexual sex acts. As his character Ted Leo, owner of a Nevada whorehouse, bluntly puts it, "Fucking for money, fucking for salvation, not a whole lot of difference" (Udall 2011, 496).

While oppression of any sort seems to bind modern polygamists to other marginalized peoples and thus to those in need of equal protection under the law, it is the metaphor of the queer closet that is mobilized most often in bids for recognition and respect. Judith Stacey has noted that *Big Love* often adopted the "idiom of the closet to describe their family circumstances," drawing "analogies between social stigma and discrimination against polygamous and gay families" (2011, 116). As a model for emancipation from unfair oppression and crippling secrecy, the closet apparently serves as a fluid portal for social justice. All of these texts about modern Mormon polygamy depict a white excessively heterosexual patriarch laying claim to a politics of emancipation in order to assert his rights to live his exceptional lifestyle as an American citizen and everyman. The Browns, for example, explicitly embrace the discourses of choice politics and queer cultures to fight for their right to come out of the closet (figure 3.3). Indeed, the Browns lay claim to human rights discourses clearly initiated through gay pride initiatives for queer and transgender justice. "I'm tired of hiding who I am," Kody tells the camera in direct address. "I'm tired of being discriminated against for my lifestyle." Their journey, he notes, is about coming out of the closet and living the American Dream. The appropriation of the language of LGBT+ politics seemingly allows polygamous families the same sort of rights to personhood as those afforded to anyone else who claims a lifestyle as a way of describing a life, particularly gay and lesbian people. Jane Bennion argues that "campaigns to decriminalize and legalize polygamy" are often "promoted in conjunction with right-to-marry crusades of gays and lesbians" (2012, xvii). This sort of reaching across the aisle was certainly in evidence in 2012 and 2013 when the Browns were indicted in Utah on charges of bigamy. Their attorney, Jonathan Turley, drew on templates to support gay marriage as a precedent for fairness with respect to modern polygamy. "We are not

## 'Sister Wives' Family -- Just Like The Gays!

f  323 7/12/2011 7:20 AM PDT

The Mormons and the gays -- they don't always get along ... but thanks to a brand new lawsuit about to be filed by "Sister Wives" star **Kody Brown**, it seems they have more in common than you'd think!



FIG. 3.3 Queer solidarities, established through the celebrity website TMZ and emblazoned with the gay pride banner.

demanding the recognition of polygamous marriage,” he wrote in a blog statement (Turley 2011). “We are only challenging the right of the state to prosecute people for their private relations and demanding equal treatment with other citizens in living their lives according to their own beliefs.” At the January 2013 Salt Lake City trial for bigamy (which the Browns did not attend but Valerie and Vicki Darger did), Valerie suggested that polygamists were less interested in the right to legally marry. They simply wanted to be left alone: “The thing that’s different about what we’re asking for is the right to exist and the right to be left alone. We’re not seeking marriage licenses, and so, as far as legal marriage goes, it doesn’t really pertain” (“Reality TV Show Polygamist” 2013). Turley reiterated this claim: “We’re asking for what [U.S. Supreme Court] Justice Brandeis called the most important constitutional right, the right to be left alone” (“Reality TV Show Polygamist” 2013).

We might argue this was modern polygamy’s great Greta Garbo moment, if it were not for the fact that the request to be left alone came through the mediated auspices of reality television, celebrity tabloids, and social media,

as augmented by an array of accessories from the celebrity website TMZ to the nation's paper of record, the *New York Times*. The demands for privacy and protection were resoundingly and incessantly made across an intermedial continuum that would not leave us alone. Further, the very mechanism these polygamous families chose for their stance on social justice entangled them in an integrated celebrity system, where financial currency, cultural capital, and Q scores (the measurement of the popularity of a brand or celebrity) coalesce to determine value and to perpetuate their public platform. In other words, they could have no sustained political voice if they did not also have sustained positive ratings.

But perhaps these mediated strategies designed to shape popular opinion are necessary critical counterpoints given the range and volatility of mediated scare tactics used to denigrate the end-of-decency scenarios polygamy supposedly augers. The mediascape abounds with fear-based screeds that link same-sex marriage and polygamy to not only the dissolution of conventional marriage but to a series of impurities that include miscegenation, incest, and assimilation. As one example, *The Manning Report*, an overtly Christian news and commentary program airing on the ATLAH Media Network with radio podcasts available on CRUSADE Channel Radio, Skybird Radio, and the Moral Nation Radio Network, aired a trifecta of slippery-slope concerns (gay polygamy and open borders). A caller to the program from Utah urged the African American host, Dr. James David Manning, to speak out against same-sex marriage, since its approval, he argued, would give an automatic green light to polygamy, and this, in turn, to the unregulated importation of illegal aliens, a category that quickly became conflated with Mexican nationals. Remarkably, what most seemed to concern Manning was that gay and polygamous peoples could and would pretend their orientation in order to perpetuate an attack on American racial purity. The line of reasoning would be laughable if it weren't so widely believed. Type "modern polygamy gay rights" into a video search engine, for instance, and you will feast upon a smorgasbord of fear, including major media and political figures like Glenn Beck and Kentucky senator Rand Paul claiming that gay marriage easily leads to polygamy and bestiality. But the mediascape also abounds with amateur video bloggers, like David Pakman (2013), eager to expose the "absurd, amateurish, and juvenile slippery slope arguments" created around these social issues. Modern Mormon polygamists, then, are not only fighting for their rights for intelligibility, they are joining the democratic conversation, making their claim for inclusivity and plurality.

When asked, modern FLDS polygamists typically voice support for gay people and same-sex marriage. The *Sister Wives* stars, for instance, support gay people and gay marriage, though their pronouncements of such often read as the teaser headline that advertises a new season of their reality show or the publication of their book. In this case, celebrity-based websites like TMZ or E! end up occupying the position of social rights gadflies. For instance, E! showcased Kody's declaration: "I married four women and I love them. I chose this out of love and out of faith. . . . Let individuals define their love and their marriage. I don't want the government doing that." Asked if their beliefs extend to gay couples, Kody said, "Let individuals define their marriage and let individuals choose who they love" (Malkin 2012). The piece ended with a reminder of the kickoff for Season 3 of *Sister Wives* and an admonition for further retail commitments: "The Browns' new memoir, *Becoming Sister Wives: The Story of an Unconventional Marriage*, is on sale now." The Browns had an opportunity to put their social justice money where their mouth is in 2017 when daughter Mariah, in great anxiety, informed the family that she is gay. As of this writing, they are all coping—as long as Mariah remains celibate.

It's fairly easy to reveal the commercial underbelly of these kinds of moments, so I don't really want to pursue that line of critique. Instead, I want to pause to be sympathetic to the idea that FLDS polygamists may well offer a progressive stance on tolerance and modern living. While the connection between Mormons (LDS and FLDS) and gay pride might seem somewhat audacious (particularly given the mainstream church's effort to defeat California's Proposition 8), if you squint your eyes just right, modern polygamists and LGBT+ folks do share experience due to the weight of harboring a secret life that hews closely to one's sense of identity. For instance, Robyn Brown speaks of the relief she feels in coming out through the auspices of their reality television show: being public means she no longer needs to be mindful of gestures, comments, and behaviors that tip off people to her identity as a polygamist.

I believe a case could well be made for the way polygamists experience biases that parallel other forms of social oppression. For instance, gay, lesbian, and transgender peoples and polygamists often undergo an intensification of vulnerability in spaces where official documentation is needed, say at border crossings, in airports, at hospitals, and so on. A telling moment of this sort came on *Sister Wives* when third wife Christine gave birth to the family's thirteenth child, Truely. Already the mother of five children, all of whom she birthed at home, Christine elected to have Truely in the hospital

due to her age (thirty-seven) and the fact that she had experienced a serious miscarriage a year earlier. Janelle informs the home viewer that largely because of fears of the father being arrested, “In our culture, home birth is a common thing.” More striking in this scene than the fear of possible outing, however, is the degree to which Christine takes to the hospital environment, finding birthing drugs to be amazing. Immediately after the birth (before Truely even starts crying), Christine exclaims, “Okay, I’m all for the epidural!” “That was so easy. That was so easy. *That* was amazingly easy.” The nurse jokes with Kody: “You’ll have all the wives in here to have epidurals.” And he seems to be joking back: “Yeah, yeah. Can you dull those needles on purpose?” His reasons for disapproving the pain-relieving drugs aren’t made clear on screen, but his position seems to be grounded in the double denunciation of his wife’s newfound (and seemingly erotic) pleasure in giving birth and in the contradiction of a tradition of home birth that hospitals and pain medications represent. Literary scholar Mary Poovey has made a remarkable case for the Victorian advent of chloroform as altering the experience of childbirth from pain to one more potentially of pleasure. She argues chloroform effectively converted fetus to phallus, and women who cried out often did so in ways that appeared to the medical men observing them as moans of sexual pleasure (Poovey 1988, 50). In this case, Christine’s vaginal/sexual pleasure from anything or anyone other than Kody and her enthusiastic rallying for more drugs challenges certainties about tradition and primacy. In so doing, this moment is incredibly telling about the heteronormative and even patriarchal values that structure both affective and actual labor.<sup>8</sup>

So modern Mormon polygamy may be gay friendly, but is it queer? Before answering that question, it is important to establish that queer theory as a political and intellectual system often overlaps with gay and lesbian studies, but it is not synonymous with it. Queering requires a blurring of categories, a refutation of the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual that leads to a state more polymorphous ideologically and ontologically. Queer theory must possess, says historian of sexuality David Halperin, a “radical potential” that reinvents “its capacity to startle, to surprise, to help us think what has not yet been thought” (2003, 343). This radical potential, says television scholar Samuel Chambers, means that queer theory need not only or always be about sex, “since its resistance to and subversion of the category of the normal has wide-reaching effects” (2009, 17). Indeed, Chambers points directly to *Big Love* as an example of a text made queer not because its protagonist Bill engages in three different ongoing sexual relationships but because the Henricksons “subvert the sanguinuptial model: their queerness emerges

not merely through representation of marginalized or deviant family, but through an illustration of the conflict and contestation between their family practices and heteronormativity. It is precisely the agonism here that makes their family queer” (2009, 188).

Chambers augments this reading of the Henricksons as queer through a lengthy and very convincing discussion on the politics of passing. The Henricksons, he argues, are not able to “come out” because the only “out polygamists” are fundamentalist (compound) polygamists—a thoroughly stigmatized and denigrated group not merely marginalized in respect to the norm but thoroughly displaced to the margins of society” (2009, 194). Indeed, argues Chambers, “polygamy has the advantage among queer forms of family of being so taboo as to be both unexpected and un-looked-for” (194). Polygamy, argues Chambers, is not even a presence interpellated into the closet. To paraphrase a line from feminist theory, modern polygamy has no there there—no identity to attach to and make intelligible one’s coming out. This point is comedically made in an amateur video posted to YouTube in which an improv group, *Is This Thing On?*, acts out two sister wives recruiting a third in an otherwise normal suburban neighborhood (Stanulis 2013). The recruit’s inability to understand the relationship between the beatifically happy women attenuates the humor of the sketch. “Are you sisters? Are you partners?” she asks. “Welllllll,” the sister wives drawl, smiling and holding hands, “we’re best friends. Let’s just leave it at that for now.” It’s only when the women reference a single husband that they create a category in which the terms for their own being become intelligible.

Chambers helpfully illustrates that the polygamy the Henricksons represent is so obscure it is queered. Their queerness is accentuated because there is no out space to emerge into. And yet, Chambers’s argument is quite specific to *Big Love* as a text standing on its own and primarily relevant to and in conversation with the time period in which it was aired (2006–11). I would argue by Chambers’s own logic that modern Mormon polygamy stories, existing as they do within a field of other similar stories, unqueer the queerness of themselves precisely because their presence creates a new epistemology of the closet that contains itself within it. In other words, the just-like-us appeal of mediated polygamous families, the broader network of visible and telegenic portrayals evinced by progressive polygamists (both fictional and actual), and the composite currency of polygamy as celebrity brand all work together to reinforce familiarity and recognition, thus obscuring the degree that they might startle, surprise, or help us think what has not yet been thought.

The temporal fluidity of contemporary television heightens this fact all the more. In a postnetwork age when television products are syndicated, sold as finite texts in DVD form, or downloadable for streaming through Netflix, Amazon, and iTunes, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue for the idea that texts stand in isolation to one another. Indeed, a single television show like *Big Love* is not only in conversation with other television fare such as *Sister Wives* or *My Five Wives*, it is part of a larger discursive network of ideas and identities. (If you doubt this, try buying the *Big Love* boxed set on Amazon and see what other like-minded products are recommended.) So my goal is not to chide Chambers for failing to note a broader field of representation about polygamy that he could not have foreseen when he published his book in 2009 but to argue that this complicated story about the closet, what it means to come out of it, and the very positions of in and out are all informed and reshaped by our very processes of storytelling. Call it the Heisenberg Theory of Mediation, where the tool for measuring modifies what is being recorded. In this case, any epistemology of the closet as it pertains to modern polygamy is very much bound up in and shaped by the mediated contexts that both announce its contours and obscure its position as marginal.

There is one further detail to consider with very specific relation to LGBT+ and queer politics. Although the people in modern polygamy stories often describe themselves as gay friendly, they use the language of gay pride without endorsing the realities of same-sex-desiring lives or of a non-normative erotics. Using the logic of homonormativity, for example, Brown fourth wife Robyn asserts, “We’re normal, and we’re just a family.” First wife Meri agrees, adding a bit of a queer-kinship spin: “And who says where the line is drawn of who you can love?” Meri does, however, draw a line about how you can love, noting that each of the wives has separate sexual relations and relationships with Kody. “It’s just how it is. We don’t go weird.” Joe Darger echoes this claim for decidedly unqueer sexual practices when asked about the sexual contract between him and his wives. When appearing on *Dr. Drew*, the good doctor quizzes the Dargers in the language of value-neutral therapy speak: “Is there one communal sleeping center?” They collectively cringe in response. “We have our own master bedrooms, and Joe visits us separately,” says one wife, emphatically. In *The Mormon Moment*, Joe reads from a script: “There is absolutely no kinkiness.”<sup>9</sup>

Modern polygamy stories thus rely on the language of LGBT+ social justice to reinforce a resolutely nonqueer social hegemony, constructing their lives and sexual relations in ways that ring bells of recognition for middle-class, white heteronormativity. *We don’t go weird*. Many of these stories tie them-

selves in knots in order to suggest a version of parallel monogamy at work in the progressive polygamist's family, where fully functioning nuclear families live near one another and are linked through a common male. The efforts to establish these normative grooves are both overtly and covertly uttered. So, in addition to the cringes and shudders when viewers ask about sex or insinuate some fluid arrangement or sexual desire in a plural family, the video-cinematic-textual code establishes blocks and separations between houses, bedrooms, and vaginas, sometimes through a wife's story being contained within one chapter or subheading (as in the memoirs) and other times by the structural separations established by sets or circumstances. On *Big Love*, for instance, Bill must walk out the back door of one house, through a shared yard, and then into the separate home of one of his other wives. In Seasons 3 through 5, Kody Brown actually drives from home to home, often leaving his belt or his socks behind. Golden Richards lumbers from wife to wife in an old pickup, going back and forth between Old House and Big House and a new duplex his most recent wife shares with her daughter.

Focusing on ordinary events (the opening of *The Lonely Polygamist*, for instance, contains an exquisite and gut-wrenching twenty-page description of Golden needing to pee—really badly—and finding no bathroom empty in his overcrowded house), these introductions to polygamous households tacitly reinforce that the men in question basically live in multiple fairly conventional heteronormative nuclear families, joined together by proximity, choice, and convenience, a fact demonstrated over and over again by how often speakers reference the idea that consenting adults have the freedom to act as they see fit. The nuclear families' separate-but-together motif is reinforced textually when each child is referenced in relation to his or her mother or by screen shots depicting family portraits of a father and each respective wife and kids. Rather than the communal living arrangements that characterize the polygamists we know, where young girls are married to old men and teenage boys are expelled from the fold so as not to compete with their fathers and where mothers indiscriminately care for each other's children, progressive polygamy stories make the case for a separate-but-together suburban form of living, where wives dress in fashionable clothes, dads drive Lexus sports cars or SUVs, and parents worry about their children, want their teenagers to go to college, and squabble with one another in mostly loving ways. They're living the American Dream, right down to the big houses, pastel walls, bright lights, iPhones, and leather couches.

In structure and substance, then, modern polygamy stories are fables about resolutely middle-class and heteronormative values. They basically say

gay and lesbian folks are fine as long as they don't do any gay stuff. This stance is reinforced by other mediated fare, as for instance lurid versions of FLDS polygamy that conflate plural marriage with cultism. In one episode of *Deadly Devotion* called "Mormon Murders" (2013), for instance, an orphaned teenage girl is taken in by a Mormon cult that practices increasingly "perverse" sex rituals on and with her. These rituals begin with a teenager's sexualized display for a seventy-year-old patriarch and her eventual symbolic marriage and rape by him. But the show reserves its greatest alarm for the woman-woman eroticism she is forced to engage in for the prophet's benefit and titillation. Women who have sex with women are here presented as not only perverse but a greater wrong done to a teenager than rape or kidnapping.

### Strong-Minded Sister Wives and Postfeminist Patriarchs

While Bill tells you about his money problems, Emily looks at him, concern on her face, maybe even a little pity. Now, wait a second here, you think. Pity for Bill? If you understand polygamy correctly, shouldn't all the pity be reserved for the wives? They are the ones who are oppressed, subjugated, and forced into positions of servitude, right?—Udall, "The Lonely Polygamist"

"What's the biggest misunderstanding that people have when they talk to you guys?" Jeff Probst asks the Brown family on *The Jeff Probst Show* (2012). Kody begins to speak, but Christine interrupts. "They think that we are weak-willed women. Until we open our mouths, and then they're like [in Valley Girl intonation] 'Oh, I get it now!'" Janelle adds, "Also, they think that Kody has this great life and, honestly, he's in the doghouse almost all the time with somebody." Kody chuckles about always having a frustrated wife, rolling his eyes in that "women, can't live with 'em . . ." kind of way. Robyn notes in sort of exaggerated hilarity that they gang up on Kody. If he steps out of line with one of the sister wives, the others send him nagging texts to urge Kody to "get in there and fix it." Probst jokes, "Now I'm feeling sorry for Kody!" The audience laughs.

In this chapter I've suggested that progressive polygamists want us to think differently about the lives and lifestyles they lead. They are not like the iconoclastic old-fashioned people you've seen and heard about. Instead, they are hip, technologically savvy, pressed for time, eager to please, doing the best they can, just like us. Polygamy as an ancient system is supposed to be great for a man, who calls all the shots and can have as many wives as he pleases. Conversely, polygamy is considered hard, inhumane even,



FIG. 3.4 Robyn, incredulous that she has just told the world things are just fine when Kody isn't there.

for women and children, who are subject to the edicts and desires of the prophets who rule their loves and lives. By contrast, according to these narratives, women under modern polygamy do better than anyone else, precisely because having more women around lessens the amount of time they have to be accountable to a husband and heightens their autonomy, independence, and self-nurturing. “All of the security of marriage and all of the freedom of being single” (Udall 1998). On yet another visit to a talk show, the Brown sister wives told *The Real* hosts that life with a quarter of a husband may well be better than life with 100 percent of him. Says Robyn, “A lot of women get really weird, like how do you share your husband? I have a lot of free time to myself. I really love it. [She covers her mouth with manicured hands, in an “Uh oh, did I really just say that?” gesture; figure 3.4.] I mean, I love Kody . . . but without him I can do whatever I want. I’m very independent” (“‘The Real’ Speaks with ‘Sister Wives’” 2017). As Arthur Hammon, an FLDS polygamist and Centennial Park, Arizona, elder, bragged to ABC’s *Nightline*: “I know of no greater freedom for a woman than living in a responsible, caring, polygamous home” (Vega 2013).

Polygamy as a salutary and loving space for women: that truly is rethinking the polygamists we think we know. If anything in this chapter, I’ve demonstrated how insistently and consistently mediated texts push on a logic

of choice, mutual respect, progressivism, and social tolerance as the defining characteristics of plural families as well as the necessary ingredients for modern subject status. These are also, I might add, some of the critical elements that define feminism, and in this final section I want to spend some time thinking more carefully about the various possibilities for women within modern polygamy. Many would argue that Mormon feminism is a contradiction in terms, fundamentalist Mormon feminism even more so. The key idea I want to investigate in this context is what we might make of the idea of FLDS feminism in a broader mediascape already more than dismissive of feminist politics and peoples.

Judith Stacey tells us in her invigorating investigation of love, family, and marriage that “most critics have associated polygamy with male domination and sexual promiscuity and portrayed it as abusive to women” (2011, 110). She thus contends that a “paternalist patina of feminist sentiments” often mingles with a “racially tinged rationale for criminalizing polygamy as an un-American activity” (110). Yet mediated fare about modern Mormon polygamy offers the rather audacious possibility that this model of marital and family relations might be so woman friendly that it can eschew the politics of feminism altogether and exist in a celebratory postfeminist paradigm. Indeed, modern polygamy allows a woman to solve the work/life dilemma since it gives a working mother backup on the home front—other women invested in a working woman’s children, who will gladly offer child care and nurturance without requiring payment. By these accounts, modern polygamy is also so differently situated in relation to masculinist power relations that it might be postpatriarchal. We are, after all, talking about a group of people who espouse tolerance for gay and lesbian peoples, claim bonds of kinship with other minoritized groups, and who believe in a live-and-let-live ideology of radical tolerance. Mormon ethnographer Janet Bennion concedes, for instance, that she entered her field research on FLDS polygamy “with a deep-seated belief in feminine empowerment and a contempt for abusive male dominance. But what I failed to realize was that fundamentalist women offered a new breed of feminism that made perfect sense to them within a rigid patriarchal context” (Bennion 1998, xi). This is the case, Bennion contends, because believing outsiders, those who do not uphold the orthodoxy of their faiths but still claim membership and common cause with the primary mandates of the faith, often “redesign codes within the doctrine,” essentially changing the center from its edges (xv).

When the protagonists of progressive polygamy tell the story themselves, one of the dominant themes they provide is women’s positive and

empowered relationship to one another, even and especially when working through their emotional conflicts. When outsiders tell this story, often in exposé form, they typically highlight the injustices of modern polygamy for the women who are caught within it, either through coercion or brainwashing. Consider, for instance, an interview Cecilia Vega (2013) had with a resident of Centennial Park on *Nightline*. Asks Vega of a young woman, Rosemarie, “Do you feel like you have any say in this [choosing your husband within polygamy] as a person?” “Oh yeah, absolutely,” says Rosemarie. “This is my choice. I chose to, basically, give myself over to Heavenly Father to basically give me to whomever he chooses.” Rosemarie’s response—that she exercises choice by choosing to giving it over to a higher power—flies in the face of how we understand agency as a set of behaviors governed by free will and motivated by self-determination. *Nightline* seems to air Rosemarie’s statements about choice as a way of offering commentary on how little influence she actually exercises in her own practices of polygamy.

But Rosemarie’s viewpoint in many ways highlights the hegemonies of choice that feminist analyses have worked to expose in a range of contested sites, such as beauty pageants, plastic surgery, or even sex work. If a woman resides within a beauty culture that punishes her for failing to invest the time, money, and effort to be lovely, can we really say she has exercised free choice when she works hard to write a conventional form of beauty on her face and body? Yes and no. She has indeed chosen it. But she makes this choice within a field of relations that expects, even mandates, her decision. Choice happens, then, in a broader context where what one chooses is to some degree preprogrammed into a menu of options. As a member of generational long-standing in the Centennial Park FLDS community, Rosemarie’s claim of empowerment through choice seems enigmatic, and so do those claims of the Darger wives, the Brown wives, and any number of subjects interviewed by *20/20* and Lisa Ling or appearing on the National Geographic Channel (in *Polygamy USA*). Tellingly, while several patriarchs in these mediated tales (Kody, Brady, Golden) were raised in the mainstream LDS Church or even in the Gentile world, a very small handful of women in these stories have ever lived outside of the structures of polygamy. Perhaps feeling more obligation for filling in motive and backstory, Udall tells us in *The Lonely Polygamist* that Golden’s first wife, Beverly, was once a stripper and escaped to polygamy as a way to flee sex work. Janelle, Kody’s second wife, is more circumspect in her rationale for transitioning from LDS to FLDS, saying, “There was something in the doctrines that intrigued me” (Brown et al. 2012, 38). Barb (formerly LDS) and Margene (formerly without

affiliation) on *Big Love* choose Bill, and he, in turn, feels the testimony for the principle of plural marriage. Standing by your man means also standing by his ideology. So the great enigma of modern polygamy for women made clear on an intermedial range of programming is that divine guidance can lead both to radical freedom and to the willingness to subject oneself to authoritarian governance.

This is particularly the case, as in both LDS and FLDS communities, when connections to the divine are perceived as being the sole domain of the man. *Big Love* made much of this tension in its final season when Barb, always a voice for independence, felt herself called to a priesthood unattainable within either a mainstream or fundamentalist Mormon structure. Even the newly developed Church of Bill, in which her husband is the primary prophet, cannot bend itself to accepting the possibility of her divine role until Bill lies shot and bleeding to death in the final minutes of the series finale, a conflict I discuss more in chapter 5. *Big Love*'s feminist creators and writers have spoken about building the tension of the narrative in a way that purposefully heightened the feminist fissures at the heart of the faith, ultimately killing Bill so that the women could find solidarity outside of his presence. As some sort of divine blessing, they create a scene that depicts Bill seeing the figure of Emma Smith, Joseph Smith's legal wife, smiling at him across a field of Mormon ancestors, seemingly to reinforce that his new choice to anoint women to priestly roles is a wise one. Yet Emma is a puzzling choice to offer a feminist blessing on a church organized around the principle of plural marriage, given that she was both deeply discomfited by plural marriage and strongly committed to priestly authority (so, basically, a monogamist nonfeminist). Mormonism does have strong women figures to reference, but like modern polygamists, they have faced their own recognition and persecution issues, and so perhaps Emma is the best that *Big Love* can offer as a symbol to reinforce women's love and participatory culture as manifest within and through the principle.

As on *Big Love*, across these stories about modern polygamy, women's relationship to one another is consistently held up as one of the major up-sides of modern polygamy. Narratives reinforce the voice held by women, the opinions they assert, their power within the family, and their ability to structure familial priorities, including decisions about pregnancy. Indeed, each of the women plays central roles in securing and vetting (or vetoing) new wives and family decisions, thus putting the emphasis on the closeness of the feminized domestic unit and the power that is a consequence of fused intimacies. On both the primary text of *Sister Wives* and in ensuing

interviews, for instance, much has been made of the fact that first wife Meri met and bonded with fourth wife Robyn before Kody did, only later encouraging Kody to dance with Robyn at a party and then later to court her as a new wife. In their memoir, Meri writes that she and Kody were both “bitten by the love bug” as it concerned Robyn (Brown et al. 2012, 72). Kody jokes on *Sister Wives* that Meri is the bait to attract new wives, while comedian George Lopez calls her Kody’s “wing man” (*Lopez Tonight* 2011).

Ironically, given that I am using Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* as the inspiration for my title, Meri’s role in relation to the other wives actually offers a reversal of Eve Sedgwick’s theory of triangulation, where women are used as devices to further intimacies between men. In the representation provided by this reality TV text, Kody is merely the mechanism that allows Meri greater access to and familiarity with Robyn. As Ellen DeGeneres said amid audience giggles on her show, “Why would they even want the man?”

Indeed, the idealized representation of women within plural marriage could well be taken as a twenty-first-century version of what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1986) labels the female world of love and ritual in the American nineteenth century, when women were allowed, and even encouraged, to participate in forms of affection and physical intimacy that coded as sisterly rather than lesbian. What constitutes lesbian identity within the sisterly solidarities of feminism has offered a rich discussion for feminist scholars, and I don’t really want to rehearse those arguments here except to note that the gender politics of these mediated stories steer far more toward emancipatory possibilities than they do toward patriarchal hierarchies. I even consider it a sign of progressive gender development that comedienne and talk show hosts (and out lesbians) like Rosie O’Donnell and Ellen DeGeneres would joke about becoming Kody’s fifth wife, all the while clearly being intrigued by, if not specifically attracted to, the women in the family unit.

Modern polygamy stories hail not only the political mandates of feminism but the seeming emancipatory possibilities of postfeminism. Melissa Miles McCarter (2010) presciently notes in a blog post, for instance, that *Sister Wives* is “made possible by feminism but clearly reflects a postfeminist perspective,” in that it suggests a position of being beyond the political mandates of female equality that feminism espouses. Using Diane Negra as a guide to postfeminism, McCarter identifies three postfeminist principles: having it all, emancipation through consumerism, and fetishized but limited female desire—all of which are highly operative in the show (McCarter neglects to mention Negra’s [2008] discussion of the postfeminism cult of motherhood, and certainly *Sister Wives* glorifies motherhood as the most

important and real work a woman can do). McCarter notes that the sister wife scheme allows each woman access to the “feminist dream” of “having it all,” since the role of wife is essentially split between four women. In this age of work/life dilemmas, the fixative offered by plural families seems more than appealing, as does the sororal solidarity.

On *Sister Wives*, Robyn Brown has characterized her relationship with her sister wives as a nonstop “girl party!” and this effusion, in combination with the market appeal of their brand, raises a banner of postfeminism, where women’s empowerment is often construed as the dividend of conventional choices to live as wives and mothers, in specific contrast to second-wave feminist mandates for work-place equality. The narrative logic suggests that these sister wives experience far greater equality in their relationships and affection with one another than in the sisterhood-is-powerful credo feminism upholds. Indeed, writing for the feminist website *Jezebel*, Dodai Stewart (2011) mocked the Brown wives for their expressed fear of feminists: “On last night’s episode of *Sister Wives*, the Browns visited Tufts University, where they’d been invited to be part of a discussion about their religion and lifestyle. When asked if they were nervous or scared. Christine said she was ‘imagining an audience full of *feminists*.’ OH NO OH MY GOD ANYTHING BUT THAT. She continued: ‘They’ll look at us and think that we live a suppressed, oppressed lifestyle.’ Well . . . yeah. Honestly, these women seem intelligent and communicative and happy. But their religion—invented in the 1820s—is a tool of oppression.” Looks like Christine had reason to worry. To be fair, this particular *Jezebel* post didn’t rule the day in its judgments on either the Browns or polygamy. Indeed, the column sponsored a very intelligent set of reader responses about personal choice and the meanings of feminism, including several resounding critiques of Stewart’s unjust dismissiveness of the Browns’ code of beliefs and of Mormonism more broadly.

When questioned about why they do not feel the sting of hypocrisy since the faith does not allow brother husbands, the wives of modern polygamy laugh and respond, “Would you really want that? Men are a lot of work. I need my *me* time.” At the same time, however, on *Sister Wives* when Kody and Meri go to Mexico to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary, Meri puts this question to Kody in a much more pressing manner. Meri wants him to acknowledge that she feels jealous. Meri: “If I were to be giving attention to another guy, how would it make you feel?” Kody: “Obviously, it’s just not something I’m comfortable with imagining. The vulgarity of the idea of you with two husbands or another lover, sickens me. It seems wrong to God and nature. I understand this seems somewhat hypocritical, but I

don't know how to get around it. With me answering this question, there's no way I can win. I feel like I'm admitting that what I'm doing is completely and totally unfair. I feel like if I address that emotion, it's an unhealthy place to go." Kody later called this interaction one of his most embarrassing screen moments caught by the TLC cameras.

Modern polygamy stories are structured much like a soap opera, in which feminine storylines about relationships and emotional conflict carry the bulk of the narratological interest. The masculinized presence is thus primarily important to the narrative for the degree to which he accentuates interest in these areas. On the reality shows *Sister Wives* or *My Three Wives*, cameras briefly capture participants when they run errands, go out for dinner, leave for vacation, or even head to the mall, but they are resolutely fascinated with moments of parallel domestic and affective tension—Brady in the privacy of his room with wife one, then two, then three, then four, then five, as they talk about money problems or desires for more children or body image and jealousy issues. On *Sister Wives*, cameras have never lingered on Kody (or Janelle, the other masculinized breadwinner) at work. We only know Janelle is a career woman, and Kody works in sales. In later episodes and largely due to their reality celebrity and TLC paychecks, what each of the Browns does for remunerative work has become less tangible, and so even when strategizing about business opportunities, the narrative focus is on interpersonal dynamics between the family. Indeed, just as in the case of other famous large families on TLC, such as the Duggars (*19 Kids and Counting*) or the Gosselins (*Jon and Kate Plus Eight*), the show itself constitutes the very work of image production and entertainment, members of the family thus functioning in double-coded roles—as befits modernity—as persons and characters, players in an ensemble acting troupe as well as members of a plural family.

And this leads us to the beset and often woebegone patriarch, who frequently functions in these stories as a focal point of pity and bathos. To say that the goofy Kody is unthreatening is a bit of an understatement. He himself agrees he is more like a surfer dude, say Shaggy on *Scooby Doo* or Jeff Spicoli from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, than a priestly alpha male, all dripping with gravitas. As presented in TLC's diegesis, he's not exactly a thundering authority figure. And neither is his brother in reality television Brady Williams, whose affectations regularly position him as a male cheerleader before an otherwise uninspired crowd of wives and children, dubious at his enthusiasm. A good deal of the narrative arc of *The Lonely Polygamist* features Golden, beset by a piece of gum that has nestled into his copious amounts of copper-colored pubic hair. As focalized through one of his sons,

Rusty, Golden was “a Sasquatch, who smelled of Ben-Gay and stumbled around blinking like he didn’t know where he was” (Udall 2011, 297). On *Big Love*, Bill asserts a certain kind of worldly power as a successful businessman and state senator (as well as a former lost boy with a mean right hook), but Bill is endlessly mocked by his father, his mother, his wives, his children, and the universe itself that won’t quite play ball with him.

Men in modern polygamy stories don’t come off well—collectively, they are a group of guys with a lot to learn. “The next generation of men is on a mission,” says Hammon to *Nightline* (Vega 2013), “learning how to be good husbands. Modern polygamist husbands.” Udall reinforces these points in his expository piece on modern polygamy: “It used to be that Bill didn’t really know how to deal with family problems, the jealousy among wives, the conflicts among children of different mothers, the competition for his attention, so he mostly tried to ignore it all” (Udall 1998). But what ties these trying-to-cope men both to American everyman stories and to the complexity of modern living itself is the fact that they are educable. They can learn, change, adjust, and if they do it right, they regain the privileges of masculinity and earn their prize as Gods. “Now he realizes,” writes Udall, “that he is not merely the head of the family but also a judge, a counselor, a referee, an arbiter of justice. It’s as if he were the prime minister of a small, unstable country, mediating disputes, keeping his eye on trouble spots, putting down rebellions from within” (Udall 1998).

The subtext of these stories indicates that success with the complex demands of modern polygamy proves that a husband and father is man enough, able to take on the chin the punches that modern living gives and rise with a smile on his face. Nurse Joanne tells Lisa Ling (2011) that she grew up in a plural family in Centennial Park, but though she still lives in a majority polygamous community she adheres to a monogamous life because her Catholic husband isn’t up for the marital demands of FLDS. Most men couldn’t do what Kody does, raves Robyn. “The majority of men in our faith have two wives. Fewer have three wives, and hardly any have four. It’s just too challenging” (Brown et al. 2012, 73).

This putative title to real man status seems lost on a larger blogosphere that pulls no punches in its critique of male polygamists. “Much as i’m loathe to admit this,” writes grumpygirl, a respondent to Stewart’s (2011) *Jezebel* post, “these women seem happy (except meri, meri is never really happy). more to the point, they seem to have made this their choice and nobody appears oppressed (no matter what the original edict says). kody, however, seems like a total loser. the women are better off having 1/4 of him than all

of him.” Sassitron agrees: “It’s a show about four very cool women and the potato-head they all married. They’d be better off if they just started an all-lady commune and kicked Kody out.” “Totally!” responds AstridColeslaw. “If I lived in a society/culture that was pretty patriarchal and I had to choose between a douchebag and a fraction of a douchebag, I would absolutely choose the latter provided my wives were awesome. I think it really is the sisterwives that make or break this sort of arrangement.”

The postfeminist polygamous man deals with added performance anxieties in both love and sex. “Forget the financial stress of having thirty-five mouths to feed and living on the wrong side of the law and having trouble finding the bathroom in the middle of the night,” writes Udall, “it’s this love thing that would have to be the ultimate complication of Bill’s life. Regular guys can’t seem to love even one woman without twisting themselves into knots, always wondering if they’re saying the right things, being the kind of man they should be. So how could he ever hope to simultaneously give four different women the love they require? Is Bill’s heart—along with everything else—oversized as well?” (Udall 1998). In many ways and somewhat astoundingly, modern polygamy stories offer the quintessential portrait of radical postfeminist manhood—where women have joined together to make their lives easier and the sole man is relegated to a position of itinerant helpmeet, never fully knowing in which house all of his belongings might be found or in which womb his seed might have been implanted. But they also offer a complicated telos of masculinity, in which fallibility lends credibility as a marker of the American everyman and where redemption-through-domestic-management is part of his gendered narrative. In contending with the demands of strong-minded women and enormous families (to the power of three and four and five), these men reify codes of modern masculinity that valorize leadership, boundary crossing, and flexible problem solving.<sup>10</sup>

### The Polygamist Guide to Modern Living

While the ebbs and flows of either monogamous or polygamous marital life might follow similar tidal rhythms, these mediated texts make clear that modern polygamy is unlike any other practice of domesticity, in that it exponentially heightens the stresses of modern living. As if multiple houses and households, scores of children, strained finances, and police prosecution aren’t enough to increase the stress level, in any given moment these families also contend with a broad array of challenges, both interpersonal

and logistic. In one episode of *Sister Wives*, for instance, third wife Christine is a week overdue with her sixth child, soon-to-be fourth wife Robyn's wedding is in eight weeks, and first wife Meri's twentieth anniversary is coming up and needs to be marked in a special way. Is it any wonder, then, that when Kody goes to the hospital with Christine for the birth of their baby, he uses the opportunity to multitask by inquiring about fertility options for Meri, who has birthed only one child. Indeed, I would argue that in terms of the representation offered by *Sister Wives* and other progressive Mormon polygamy stories, it is not the appearance, commitment to tolerance, or lifestyle practices of the Browns or the Williamses or the Henricksens or the Richards that mark them as modern so much as the temporal complexity of their lives that brands them very specifically as a model of mediated American (and Mormon) selfhood, grounded in the frontier logic of steely determination and beset by the fast pace of productivity in late capitalism.

Progressive polygamists claim a position of sameness with the rest of America. In so doing, they establish an epistemological dilemma within the binding logic of binary thinking that serves as the scaffolding for a self/other relation between the "polygamists we know" and normal folks, whatever normal might be taken to mean. Even while these statements assume a homogeneity in "the rest of America" that simply isn't present, for modern Mormon polygamists to be "just like us" and thus able to stand in for any given husband in any given (presumably heterosexual) American family, their contrastive Other cannot be a fringe group often considered a cult (if bookstore shelving policies are any indication). So, Kody and Bill and Golden cannot be a prototype for difference and a prototype for everyman at the same time, except within the juxtapositional logic of both celebrity and Americanness.

Indeed, the conjoined desire for both distinction and democratic belonging nicely illustrates the contradiction that lies at the very heart of both celebrity—in which stars are praised for being simultaneously exceptional and ordinary—and American ideological character. The unique/alike axis takes on new dynamics in relation to Mormonism, which, since its founding in 1830, has traded on the value of a democratic and egalitarian message. As Paul Gutjahr notes, "The theme of equality appears constantly through the *Book of Mormon*. . . . Joseph [Smith] built his church upon a firm conviction that all men were created equal, and both men and women flocked to his teaching because it promised that everyone, not just the rich and educated, could enjoy a more intimate relationship with God" (2012, 41). Fittingly, this makes Mormonism a quintessentially American faith.

Yet Mormonism has often found its identity in marked separation from and superiority to mainstream American culture and people. Marvin Hill has argued that since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, Mormonism has been marked by its “quest for refuge” from what Armand L. Mauss describes as a “bewildering religious and political pluralism of the America of Andrew Jackson and Alexis de Tocqueville” (1994, 24). “Since then,” writes Mauss, “the Mormons, like many other questing people of history, have struggled to find the optimum balance between sectarian refuge and worldly participation” (24). As Mauss observes, the more that Mormons (both LDS and FLDS) turn to mainstream American culture for acceptance, the more they refute the very terms that have conventionally established what Mormonism might mean, in this case isolation, separation, and, indeed, persecution. So it is not so much the physical barriers of the Rocky Mountains or the Great Salt Lake that create the terms for Mormon exceptionalism; their difference is written into the DNA of the religion itself. To be Mormon is not to be mainstream. All of which leads Mauss, a Mormon himself, to a very important question: “Just how ‘American’ can a Mormon be without appearing to be like all other Americans (and without undermining the identity that he or she presumably shares with the world’s three million non-American Mormons)?” (1994, 25).

This may be true for SLC Mormonism, but modern Mormon polygamy (which is typically FLDS) needs sameness in order to be a stakeholder in the American project. Indeed, sameness, averageness, and the ordinary are primary commercial appeals of the modern polygamy brand. Gallery Books advertises *Becoming Sister Wives* (Brown et al. 2012), for example, by making much of the family’s bid to be just like us: “In many ways, the Browns are like any other middle-American family. They eat, play, and pray together, squabble and hug, striving to raise happy, well-adjusted children while keeping their relationship loving and strong. The difference is, there are five adults in the openly polygamous Brown marriage—Kody and his four wives—who among them have seventeen children.”

So intent are these texts on striking an American everyman pose that they often neglect to detail the very thing that makes these families like 83 percent of Americans—religion. Certainly, religious beliefs make an appearance in dialogue about religious choices, moments of prayer, or even in scenes depicting a mother chiding her daughter for wearing a short skirt to church, but those beliefs are in every case referenced without being fully explained. In the first episode of *Sister Wives*, for instance, Kody explains to the viewer in voice-over that he and his family are Fundamentalist Latter-day

Saints, a sect that splintered from the mainstream Mormon religion at the end of the nineteenth century, largely due to the FLDS's continued belief in the spiritual calling of plural marriage. As I've noted, the Browns are actually Apostolic United Brethren, which doesn't consider itself a church at all and holds basic doctrinal differences from both the FLDS and LDS communities. But these differences are never alluded to or mapped out, so viewers are left with the vague palliative that Kody's choices are divinely ordained and religiously fostered, even as the specificity of his beliefs is not addressed. On screen, Kody is confused and troubled because, he says, he never became a polygamist out of any disrespect for the law, yet the religious conviction that seemingly grounds the family's constitution and organization is so unspecified as to be unconvincing.

Indeed, as I've suggested, the family is far more likely to make a bid for their lifestyle based on the rationale of liberal tolerance, with very little acknowledgment of the legalities bound up in the practices of polygamy or the events in nineteenth-century American history, including the polygamy wars between Mormons and the U.S. government, that pitted LDS plural marriage against a conflicting discourse of ethnic and racial diversity, tempered by a (hetero)normativity that marks American practices, laws, and beliefs. The logic of modern Mormon polygamy is not just that plural families have a right and obligation to be public, but that the ideology of Americanness guarantees this right and demands that it be exercised. Ultimately, the appeal for visibility finds validation in an ethos of egalitarianism considered to be American. "This is my civil disobedience," says Joe Darger. More to the point, the Mormon Church and American popular media present these families as both average and anomalous, familiarizing viewers to an ideology of Americanness through consumerism and image management.

In spite of this call for social justice, the combined narratives of progressive polygamy seem much more concerned with the details of how a family of twenty-two pays all of its bills, how it manages eight teenagers, and how it apports the time, attention, and tenderness of one man across multiple wives and two score children. This normalcy is meant to do the work of idea management, functioning as the silver bullet that stops the werewolf of oppression in its tracks. Yet the more famous these families become, the more recognizable their family brand, the less able they are to be avatars of either normalcy or exceptionalism.

In this, these narratives create representative figures who in their extremes both model the hectic pace of modern living and offer a version of excess so far outside of the lives of most viewers that there is a comfortable

detachment in the voyeuristic gaze. Even as the represented family dynamics both reinforce and resist the very normalcy the texts seek to establish, the logic indicates that it is impossible to demonize the Browns, Henricksons, or Richards since by all accounts the heteronormative nuclear family they are (times four) means that we must surely relate to them—if we are, as interpellated, sympathetic to heteronormative nuclear families. So, importantly, though these stories hail the viewer/reader through a discourse of liberal tolerance, choice politics, and emancipatory rhetoric about not judging others for their lifestyle practices, these texts are themselves quite judgmental, not through the overt gestures of bigotry but through more subtle strategies that make common cause with outliers only to demonize their practices. Progressive polygamy stories play by and reinforce a set of codes that rely on the stability of the very structures they seem to be challenging. In the end, we must ask, are these stories progressive? I can only answer by saying there could be no *Sister Wives* or *Big Love* or *The Lonely Polygamist* without feminism, queer theory, and gay pride, but equally, there could be no modern polygamy without patriarchy and hegemony.