

## Affirming Plural Marriage: *Sister Wives* with Benefits

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### Abstract:

TLC's controversial reality show *Sister Wives*, currently in its seventh season, radically challenges traditional conceptions of 'sisterhood'. *Sister Wives* documents the daily life of the Browns, a fundamentalist Mormon polygamist family. As the title makes clear, the series is as interested in the relationships between the wives as it is the relationship between husband and wife in a polygamist family. The term 'sister wives' is used in fundamentalist Mormon contexts to acknowledge the importance of this special connection between the wives, a union that is valued alongside the marital commitment. While the faith of the Brown family is considered conservative in nature, is it possible that this family organization has feminist undercurrents? How does this concept of 'sister wives' fit into a feminist framework? This paper will chart the interpersonal communication and emotional development between the four wives on the show: Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn. By analyzing the rhetorical claims made by each wife of the show, each woman's personal experience of her family and lifestyle will be honored. Even as there are immediate problems that present themselves when analyzing the show from a feminist perspective (for example that Cody, the husband, is free to have multiple wives while the wives are not able to have multiple partners) the show does reveal benefits to this arrangement that are not available in the 'traditional' family unit.

1 Social ideals of the family have been rapidly changing over the last decade, with more diverse representations of family structures focused on single parents, queer parents, cohabitating parents and non-traditional gender roles being portrayed on television. However, these representations still by and large reinforce monogamy as the ideal. *Big Love* broke new ground when it debuted in 2006 by being the first television series to focus on a polygamist family. It was met with widespread acclaim amongst critics and audiences alike and was praised in the academic literature surrounding the show; "the point and the poignancy of the show is to depict a 'real-life' family. Bill Hendrickson and his three wives struggle with all of the daily trials of contemporary family life: parenting, finances, intimacy, and sex. The sympathetic portrayal of their family is as culturally real, although it suffers by virtue of its nonlegal recognition" (Cossman 167).

2 The 'real-life' aspects of polygamy in television flooded into the mainstream in 2010 with the debut of TLC's *Sister Wives*. Now in its seventh season<sup>1</sup>, *Sister Wives* documents the

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<sup>1</sup> There is no consistency online about how many seasons there have been as sources break up the episodes across different lines. Seven seasons is the most commonly interpreted number of seasons.

daily life of the Browns, a Fundamentalist Mormon polygamist family.<sup>2</sup> The show has consistently high ratings and the premiere of season 7 was the highest-rated season premiere with women ages 25-54 since December 2013 and was TLC's highest-rated telecast of 2016, driving the network to be #1 on Sunday nights amongst the demographic.<sup>3</sup> As the title makes clear, the series is as interested in the relationships between the wives as it is the relationship between husband and wife in a polygamist family. The show's popularity amongst women is significant as it reflects the show's emphasis on the women's perspectives as opposed to portraying events from husband Kody's point of view. The show is unscripted and the format switches between capturing the daily lives of the family and talking head style interviews that address issues raised on the show. The wives all have the opportunity to express their point of view on different aspects of their family life in these extended interviews; there are similarities and significant differences between their perspectives that highlight the diverse ways they experience polygamy.

3 Polygamy, the union of one person to multiple people, is synonymous with plural marriage. Polygamy comes in the form of polygyny, when a man takes multiple female spouses, and polyandry, when a woman takes multiple male spouses. Polygamy presents itself almost universally in the form of polygyny and therefore is often used to refer to polygyny specifically. Polyamory, the practice of having intimate partnerships with multiple people, is a distinct arrangement that is often at odds with how plural marriage is presented in media and is practiced.

4 When plural marriage appears in the media it often takes the form of uncovering abuses in polygamist communities.<sup>4</sup> Data that gives insight into the lived experiences of women in plural marriage is limited, largely due to the legal prohibitions against polygamy. In Angela Campbell's research into women's agency in plural marriage she found, "polygamy's severe legal implications generate a great deal of resistance among women to share their experiences as plural wives or as members of plural marriage communities. As such, polygamous women's experiential knowledge is not widely disseminated, and this is an important impediment to understanding their encounters in this practice" (Campbell 50). The women on the show face

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<sup>2</sup> The family identifies as Fundamentalist Mormon, distinct from both the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) and the mainstream Mormon Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS).

<sup>3</sup> As of June, 2016, based on Nielson data reported by Discovery Communications.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the sensationalized media coverage of the trial of Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) in 2011.

many legal consequences as a result of appearing in the series and provide a wealth of experiential knowledge to the uninformed public. The mainstream visibility of the Brown family on TLC's *Sister Wives* provides a rare glimpse into how women experience plural marriage. The family also makes appearances on other shows including *Good Morning America*, *Oprah* and *Ellen* and wrote a book together *Becoming Sister Wives: The Story of an Unconventional Marriage*, providing more access into their private lives. This additional access works to reinforce the perspectives of the wives on the show and add to the legitimacy of their portrayals.

5 Moreover, women choosing to practice polygamy pose a challenge to many of the foundational assumptions in liberal and poststructuralist feminist scholarship, principally in how secular feminist theories theorize agency. Saba Mahmood's account of women's participation in the mosque movement, calls for a re-theorization of the concept of agency in feminist theory, in particular in the context of religion. Mahmood notes, "what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (15). It is only by attempting to understand women that practice polygamy from within their own worldviews, rather than applying a predetermined theoretical point of view, that these decisions can be understood and accounted for. Mahmood argues, "it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (14), because agency should not only be understood from the perspective of being subversive. Mahmood's concept of the politics of piety calls for a shift away from secular feminist theory in order to include perspectives that are religiously informed. One of the main reasons the women on the show choose polygamous marriage is because they believe it brings them closer to God. The women's practice of their faith is an instance of agentival capacity (and as will be discussed later the women both inhabit norms of their faith but also violate the law and social norms that surround them).

6 Elizabeth M. Bucar's concepts of creative conformity and dianomy are also helpful here. Dianomy understands agency as layered, outside of the simplistic dichotomy of being free or being oppressed. Agency here is doubled "agency as creative conformity moves away from an idea of empowerment that depends on an autonomous place of perfect freedom. In contrast, creative conformity considers self-representation of women who still see themselves as existing

within the structure of other representations, and as operating inside those lines” (Bucar 682). The wives on the show acknowledge the way they are viewed from the outside and also negotiate their place within a religious structure. Creative conformity creates space to account for these negotiations: “In the case of religious women, creative conformity comprises actions that may not produce ends that appears ‘feminist’ within a secular-liberal framework” (Bucar 683). Rosi Braidotti’s re-definition of the political subject through a post-secular turn also supports this approach arguing that agency can be expressed through religious piety.

7 Several articles have been written about the show, focusing on different areas of emphasis Derek Jorgenson applies the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Cedric Clark to the first season of the show, concluding that the positive portrayal of polygamy on the show “is denied by a depiction of women that can be interpreted as limiting to women, especially from a feminist perspective” (37). The practice of polygamy has generally been interpreted as sexist and in opposition to feminist theories of agency and freedom. However, this reading fails to account for the diverse ways women interpret their lives and creatively express themselves while inhabiting religious norms. Similar to Mahmood’s study of the pious subjects of the mosque movement, “women’s active support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist analysts. On the one hand, women are seen to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority” (5-6).

8 American culture is firmly rooted in monogamy as the ideal. It isn’t simply idealized though; it is presented as the only relationship option available. Following the work of Adrienne Rich’s exploration of “compulsory heterosexuality” which takes the step of “questioning heterosexuality as a ‘preference’ or ‘choice’ for women,”<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Emens argues the same thinking should be applied to “compulsory monogamy” (261). It is the attachment to the fantasy of monogamy that prevents consensual non-monogamy from being considered. Discussing alternative relationship models is not to express “that monogamy is always a failure. Rather, the aim is to highlight a perspective that we do not always see. The ideal of monogamy as satisfying and desirable, as the only path for truth – and of jealousy as a necessary, even defining, part of love – is so pervasive as to blind us, at times, to its operation as law” (Emens 264). *Sister Wives*

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<sup>5</sup> See Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631-660.

participates in this highlighting of an invisibilized perspective and calls attention to the fact that monogamy is not the only option available.

9 In an essay for the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Courtney Bailey focuses on the parallels between the show's pro-polygamy arguments and LGBT politics. She argues the show queers heterosexuality “by highlighting continuities between the experiences of polygamists and the experiences of LGBT individuals in a heteronormative world” (42). Beyond the parallels between living polygamist and being LGBTQ, plural marriage can itself be understood as a queer form of kinship, although it has not usually been accounted for in queer theories surrounding alternative kinship. Shelly Park argues, “at the same times as adoption, divorce and remarriage and (monogamous) same-sex relationships have become a ‘normal’ part of our social fabric in recent decades, polygamy as a form of kinship remains largely exoticized and vilified as the queer ...‘other.’ Thus, it is not surprising that both feminist theorists of motherhood and queer theorists and activists have largely ignored polygamy—except insofar as it is used to highlight an oppressive practice against which the gender freedoms sought by feminists and queers can be upheld” (15). The focus on the politics of sexual identity in queer theory prevents an inclusion of polygamous families in the accounting of queer forms of kinship because these families may be read as intensely heteropatriarchal. However, this fails to account for the ways women discursively position themselves in plural marriage. Park explains, “The reduction of polygamy to a heteropatriarchal form of kinship undeserving of the label ‘queer’; fails to note the explicit resistance to both monogamy and monomaternality voiced by women who choose polygamy” (Park 235). Polygamy’s challenge not only to monogamy but also monomaternality (i.e. the mother-child dyad) lends itself to queer readings of family life.

10 Kaitlin McGinnis provides an extensive legal history of polygamy in the United States and focuses on the charges brought against the family. McGinnis concludes that despite facing criminal charges the show “may simultaneously be ushering in a new social movement regarding more widespread acceptance of the practice of polygamy” (280). In Mahmood’s concept of the politics of piety she argues “the task of realizing piety placed these women in conflict with several structures of authority. Some of these structures were grounded in institutional standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some were grounded in the authority of parents and male kin, and others in state institutions” (15) The women’s choice to practice their faith is illegal, as the nation state’s concept of kinship only applies to the couple,

(previously defined as heterosexual but now allowing for queer couples), denying the women the economic and social advantages tied to this structure. The family faces ongoing legal battles with state institutions that have negatively impacted the family, forcing them to leave their family home and community support in Utah. Their practice is also in conflict with other Mormon traditions that distance themselves from the practice of plural marriage and in many cases they are rejected by their parents and family members on the show who see their practice as disgusting and oppressive (put in some episodes here). In all of these cases, the women's practice of plural marriage can be seen as subversive and radically challenges social norms, while at the same time the women inhabit the norms of their chosen faith.

11 This paper will chart the interpersonal communication and emotional development between the four wives on the show: Meri, Janelle, Christine, and Robyn. By analyzing the rhetorical claims made by each wife of the show, each woman's personal experience of her family and lifestyle will be honored. The show provides rare and vital access to the experiential knowledge of women living plural marriage. The term *sister wives* is used in the practice of polygamy, one of the 'fundamental' tenets of Mormon fundamentalisms (not practiced in contemporary Mormon orthodoxy), to acknowledge the importance of this special connection between the wives in plural marriage, a union that is valued alongside the marital commitment. How does this concept of "sister wives" benefit the women living plural marriage? Even as there are immediate problems that present themselves when analyzing the show from a feminist perspective (for example that Cody, the husband, is free to have multiple wives while the wives are not able to have multiple partners) the show reveals benefits to this arrangement that are not available in the 'traditional' family unit.

## **Reality Television**

12 The role reality plays in reality television is widely contested and most theorists work to distinguish between the documentary tradition and reality television. In the observational documentary mode<sup>6</sup> the filmmaker removes themselves from the situation as much as possible and captures what unfolds in front of the camera in an attempt to "observe" reality without

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Nichols identified six documentary modes in *Introduction to Documentary*, observational being one.

interference.<sup>7</sup> While the supposed objectivity of all documentaries has been subject to criticism, the tradition carries on in reality television filming strategies. The view that reality television is ‘fake’ and therefore shouldn’t be studied by popular culture theorists does little to advance the field, especially since the form is incredibly popular and prolific.

13 Despite the fact that *Sister Wives* is a reality television (RTV) show rather than a documentary (which is generally perceived to have more authenticity and social value), it still offers audiences significant information about plural marriage, particularly so because audiences have minimal exposure to the concept through any other means. For example, RTV has played an important role in the way queer people are understood in mainstream culture because it portrays ‘real’ experiences of queer people.<sup>8</sup> Whether or not these portrayals are ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ the format influences spectators to believe that the people they are seeing portrayed exist in reality. In the same way, the portrayal of plural marriage in RTV is impactful on audiences because it focuses on actual people living the lifestyle rather than a fictional narrative like *Big Love*, challenging audiences to think about the social construction of monogamy. The fact that this family makes it work undermines the belief that monogamy is the only option. As Murray and Ouellette argue “one of the most compelling aspects of reality TV is the extent to which its use of real people or nonactors contributes to the diversification of television culture” (11). The show provides the opportunity to understand how the women construct themselves through rhetoric and thus provides insight into how they position themselves in a wider cultural landscape. The way they present themselves is what is of interest in this essay. Certainly the perspectives presented should not be universalized and understood as the ‘true’ depiction of polygamy. The family on the show portrays one instance of how polygamy can be practiced.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this specific family could be seen as an ideal candidate to introduce audiences to this form of ‘otherness’ because they are racially white and occupy a privileged social and economic position. However, the depiction presents a counter-view to the dominant representation of polygamy in the media that presents it only in the form of abuse and misogyny.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed review of the criticisms surrounding observational documentary see Stella Bruzzi’s *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>8</sup> See Bennett, Jeffrey. “In Defense of Gaydar: Reality Television and the Politics of the Glance.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 2006, 408-425.

<sup>9</sup> A lengthy discussion of the issues in representation and RTV is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay. A consideration of Gayatri Spivak’s work on representation and the subaltern would enable a more detailed discussion of ‘voice’ in RTV.

14 Within the reality television genre there are many subgenres, and the supposed role reality plays in each one is specific to the category. Stella Bruzzi's definition of the docusoap genre is helpful in placing *Sister Wives* in context. Susan Murray applies Bruzzi's docusoap analysis to reality television that combines "many of the textual and aesthetic characteristics of direct cinema (handheld camerawork, synch sound, focus on everyday activities) with the overt structuring devices of soap operas (short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plot points, mini cliff-hangers, use of a musical soundtrack, and a focus on character personality)" (67). *Sister Wives* utilizes all of these conventions, but also complicates the discussion because docusoaps emphasize "entertainment as opposed to serious or instructive value" and "focus on everyday lives rather than underlying social issues" (Bruzzi, 76).

15 *Sister Wives* both advances a compelling, entertaining narrative while also being a serious political text that raises awareness about plural marriage, shows the legal obstacles and social exclusion people that practice it face and decenters monogamy as the only relationship option available. Feminist television criticism has documented the complicated ways the soap opera genre interacts with feminist spectatorship and women's culture, and *Sister Wives*' overlap with the docusoap provides an opportunity for understanding women's various strategies of negotiating their identity outside of monogamy.<sup>10</sup> The show has followed the lives of Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn for nearly a decade. Their views on their own lives and how they ascribe meaning to living plural marriage should be validated as a source of evidence, "familiar to anthropologists who have long acknowledged that the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience" (Mahmood 16). Tellingly, a storyline develops in the most recent season where anthropologists stay with the family to study them and their dynamics. The voicing of their individual perspectives provides insight into how they live and inhabit plural marriage while simultaneously constructing their experience within it by assigning meaning to their lives.

16 Like in feminist discussions surrounding sex work, women's voices who participate in practices presumed to be patriarchal are often left out or ignored in discussions, because they are presumed to have internalized sexism. As Campbell notes, polygamy

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<sup>10</sup> See Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera* (1991); Martha Nochimson, *No End to Her: Soap Opera and the Female Subject* (1992) and *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (1994).



raises concerns about the authenticity of women's choices given their ostensible vulnerability within these practices and the compromise they appear to impose on women's interests. A practice conjuring associations with cultish, patriarchal, undereducated or geographically isolated communities, plural marriage is met with steep legal and social skepticism and resistance (49).

Like feminist standpoint theory<sup>11</sup>, this essay values the experience of women who actually live plural marriage. Analysis of the show should be grounded in how Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn view their lives, not to universalize their experiences, but rather to call attention to the diverse ways these women ascribe meaning and value to their sisterhood. The theoretical dismissal of their lifestyle from the outside reinforces universalist accounts of experience. Standpoint epistemology is useful here to refer to "both the importance of perspective and experience to conceptions of truth and to the existence of differing concepts of knowledge for people of differing experiences" (Cirksena and Cuklanz 40). This approach can also be understood as an instance of Bucar's dianomy; "dianomy is not meant to be a universal theory of agency, other than its assertion that in order to understand women's actions we need to understand some aspect of their context" (682). The benefits the women identify in plural marriage fall into seven categories: sisterhood, self-actualization, motherhood, choice, freedom, economic benefits and division of labor.

## **Sisterhood**

17 One of the primary benefits the women see in their relationships are the deep bonds they have with one another. Bonds with sister wives often "constitute a more critical relationship than that with her husband for her productive, reproductive and personal achievements" (Zeitzen 127). Meri sees sister wives as a sisterhood, defining it as "a sister relationship we have with each other but we are all wives."<sup>12</sup> In another episode she explains, "There is definitely a special relationship...with the wives. An emotional intimacy... it is a sisterhood."<sup>13</sup> The concept of sisterhood in feminist analysis is used to express the solidarity between women working together toward a common goal. The Brown women see themselves as a team working together to

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<sup>11</sup> See Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (1990).

<sup>12</sup> "Polygamy Questions Answered," Season 4, Episode 7

<sup>13</sup> "College Bound Browns," Season 2, Episode 20

enhance all of their lives. Robyn is drawn to it because “Wives work together. I want to be a part of that team.”<sup>14</sup> While the wives on the show are married to a man, the majority of their lives are oriented toward an investment in their relationships with one another. The rhetoric of solidarity forms a connection between the women that can be understood as a queer form of kinship. The queering of their intimate connections does not need to rely on their sexual identities. Park argues, “in thinking about polygamous families—as in thinking about other queer forms of kinship—we need to shift our attention away from the politics of sexual identity and toward the politics of solidarity” (226.)

18 Having sister wives is seen as a benefit monogamous marriage cannot offer. Christine in particular never wanted to be monogamous with Kody, preferring to come into the family after there were already wives. Christine grew up wanting to be a third wife in a plural marriage, explaining she was “less interested in the monogamous stage of the relationship than in the plural stage. I wanted sister wives as much as I wanted a husband.” (Brown et. al 48) In the first episode to the series she explains

I never wanted to just be married to a man, I always wanted sister wives. I just like the idea of the companionship, I like the idea of the freedom that it got me. There are too many things that I want to do and be free for, and I just like the idea of having someone around, and I just like the idea of sister wives a lot. I honestly wanted sister wives more than a husband for a good time of my life, I wanted the whole family, I didn’t just want Kody. I wanted everything.<sup>15</sup>

The women are constantly asked throughout the seasons whether their bonds with one another are real and whether they really do in fact like each other. The women speak openly about the conflicts that they have with one another, in particular Meri and Janelle’s difficult history, but they still find tremendous value in their arrangement. They are always trying to explain their experience but ultimately they feel it can’t be fully understood by outsiders, as Robyn explains, “I feel like a sister wife relationship is not something that anybody else in the world could understand unless they’ve had it themselves.”<sup>16</sup> The navigating of their differences with one another expands how love is understood within the context of marriage, beyond simply a romantic notion of love between a couple. The commitment to enrich and honor their relationships forms alternative networks of intimacy. In polygamy, “love is enlarged beyond

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<sup>14</sup> Opening lines to the show.

<sup>15</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>16</sup> “College Bound Browns,” Season 2, Episode 20

parochial and privatized understandings of intimacy by merging care (affection) for particular, concrete others with a reflective commitment to understanding, respecting, valuing, and openly negotiating our differences from them” (Park 29).

19 The women see their sister wives as a source of emotional support, especially when one of them is having a difficult time and needs to reach out. Robyn explains, “There are a lot more blessings, a lot more love, a lot more support...If I’m having a bad day, besides you Kody, I know I’ve got three other adults that are going to sit there and support and help with the kids.”<sup>17</sup> The family structure enables the women to depend on one another and ask for help when they need it. They have different relationships between one another as well—individual relationships with each person in the family as well as a group relationship with one another. Christine expresses that their dynamics shift:

The thing is Meri and I have had a lot of really good, deep conversations and there’ll be a day where I’m struggling, and Meri’s the person I go to, there’s a day I’m struggling and Janelle’s the person I go to, there’s a day I’m struggling and its Robyn I go to. It’s where I am emotionally, and where they are emotionally, and where we’re both going to connect and both feel safe.<sup>18</sup>

Having sister wives means the women always have someone to go to and are not alone and isolated in their individual marriages. In this context, the concept of sister wives, undermines the traditional nuclear family model through its rejection of monogamy and focus on solidarity amongst the wives. Sister wives do not exist as a concept in the monogamous, heteronormative model. While sisterhood is available in monogamy, the “eternal” bonds of the wives within their relationships with one another are unique to polygamy. In season one, when Robyn comes into the family as the fourth wife, they all become new partners to one another as well. Meri, Janelle and Christine go to the jewelry store to shop for a Claddagh ring for Robyn. She explains, “The Claddagh ring is the traditional Irish wedding band and it’s kind of become a little symbol in our family.”<sup>19</sup> She explains the ring is a symbol they all share with one another. At Robyn’s wedding ceremony Meri presents the ring and Robyn is overcome with tears of joy. The ring is a queer practice of solidarity; “polygamy constructs an alternative to heteronormativity through queer practices of solidarity—practices that challenge us, perhaps, to critically reflect on our own political alignments and practices of abjection” (Park 226).

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<sup>17</sup> “Sitting Down with the Sister Wives, YouTube Compilation

<sup>18</sup> “Sister Wives Tell All,” Season 4, Episode 11

<sup>19</sup> “1<sup>st</sup> Wife’s 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,” Season 1, Episode 5

## Self-actualization

20 The women present plural marriage as an opportunity to grow and learn about who they are. They see it as a process toward self-actualization and self-knowledge. Nearly every episode, questions come up from people about how the women navigate jealousy. They are open about their experiences of jealousy and discuss how they process their emotions. Confronting and overcoming their jealousy is a main factor in why plural marriage allows them to grow as people. Janelle explains, “Jealousy is almost always an insecurity...so I had to find my own voice, embrace who I was as a person and enjoy my strengths and be able to recognize everyone else’s strengths, too. When you become confident in who you are,” Robyn jumps in, “you don’t need him to tell you, you are ok.”<sup>20</sup> Meri holds a similar view, “One of the benefits of plural marriage is that you are forced to confront your own weakness of character and work on being the best wife, sister, and mother you can be. I’m confident that I would not be the person I am today if I had chosen a monogamous marriage” (Brown et. al 110).

21 Since each woman has a different perspective on the world and their family, they learn from one another through their differences. As a result, they push one another to be more open minded. Janelle explains, “We have all contributed something to the way our family runs. My sister wives have influenced the way I see the world, and I have done the same for them. Some of these changes are moral—we are, among our culture, considered fairly open-minded, almost liberal” (Brown et. al 130). The women grow by learning from each other’s different perspectives and choosing to overcome their differences over the course of their relationships. They are committed to continual growth and self-reflection; “As a queer familial assemblage, the polygamous family is characterized by multiplicity and the ongoing need to reflectively engage with difference” (Park 29).

22 Plural marriage also brings the women in line with their religious beliefs, in their view, bringing them closer to a union with God. The family believes in ‘plural celestial marriage’ as a commandment established by God. Janelle summarizes their views: “Religions have rules and beliefs and it can even be as simple as conduct in a marriage, or foods you can and can’t eat. Every religion has rules that they think bring them closer to God. That is how it is for us. We believe that living plural marriage is a commandment designed for our happiness.”<sup>21</sup> In this way

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<sup>20</sup> The Today Show, September, 2010

<sup>21</sup> Season 2, Episode 20

their desire to practice piety places them on the path to self-actualization to becoming better human beings.

### **Motherhood**

23 The sister wives express important reasons concerning motherhood that exemplify the benefits of their lifestyle. Motherhood in their household extends beyond the individual mother, and the kids have unique experiences with each mother that contribute to their upbringing. Christine highlights her reasons talking to Kody when she says, “I got into plural marriage, I love you, but not because of you, I got into plural marriage because of the sister wives. I wanted sister wives to help me, and my reason was that when I was younger, to help me raise my kids. My kids are better kids than they would be if I just raised them myself.”<sup>22</sup> Christine’s view points to the benefits of practicing ‘coalitional mothering’ to both help with the responsibilities placed on her but also because she believes they will turn out better than if she practiced ‘monomaterialism.’ Understanding the polygamous family structure only through the lens of heteropatriarchy “of the label ‘queer’; fails to note the explicit resistance to both monogamy and monomaterialism voiced by women who choose polygamy” (Park 235).

24 Christine goes on to say speaking to her sister wives, “I’m not going to raise any of my kids without any of you, I’m just not.” She remarks on the fact that in polygamy she can have multiple mothers including herself, and her ideal family has influence coming from each mother. She would not choose to have it any other way. Meri affirms the idea when she says “Three of us moms, when we work together, it just makes each of us better in what we do.”<sup>23</sup> It is the diversity of the different mothers working together as a collective that the sister wives advocate helps the unique growth of their children. Robyn states that “The little girls love Meri. They adore her, and she gives a perspective that Christine, Janelle and I don’t give, and I want her to be there... I want my kids to have the exposure to [her] as a mother to them as well.”<sup>24</sup> The sister wives see the advantage of multiple mothers as creating a more supportive environment that can enhance the lives of the family.

25 These are not only short-term benefits as all of the children grow up together, but the sister wives view their presence in each other’s life as connected to a much deeper, more long-

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<sup>22</sup> “You Asked, Browns Answered,” Season 3, Episode 4

<sup>23</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>24</sup> “4 Wives, 4 Valentines,” Season 3, episode 6

term spiritual commitment. The significance of having more than one mother in this respect is further demonstrated by how the sister wives speak to the possibility of a scenario in which something could happen to one of them, or if one of them passed away. Meri describes her story:

My sister was in a polygamous relationship. She was the second wife. My sister ended up getting cancer and she ended up passing away eleven months after she found out that she had cancer. And her sister wife was just there for her all the time to support her and take care of the kids, and do whatever she needed to do. My sister already had a mom in place to take care of her kids for her. So that's definitely a benefit to this lifestyle because if, I know that if anything were to happen to me, I know that there would never be any question that Janelle and Christine would be there to step up and raise my daughter just like I want her to be raised, with the freedom that she deserves, and whatever she wants to do.<sup>25</sup>

The possibility of death, and the understanding the mothers have concerning the future lives of their children and who will be able to look after them in such a case enhances the meaning of what motherhood can be, and what it is to the sister wives. Each child has more than one mother who cares for them, and in this way it is an understanding of love that is truly multiplied, one that goes beyond any single individual, thus uniting feminist and queer theory; “polygamous kinship highlights, perhaps better than any other form of kinship, a meeting place for feminists seeking to resist normative (monomaternalist) forms of motherhood and queers seeking to resist normative (monogamous) forms of intimacy” (Park 15).

26 In terms of bearing children and the aspects of motherhood involving fertility, there are also reproductive benefits within this type of relationship structure. For a woman that experiences infertility, such as Meri who expresses interest in having another child with Kody but is unable to, there are advantages that polygamy offers in a way traditional relationships do not. Meri tells of this possibility when she says, “Robyn offered to me to be a surrogate for Kody and I and carry a child for us, if we wanted to try and have another baby.”<sup>26</sup> Even though Meri herself may not be able to conceive, it is still possible for her to have a child with Kody, one that can be born within the family. It is also significant that the person who can become her surrogate is her sister wife Robyn, someone she already trusts to be one of the mothers within the family. This tightly bound and intricate understanding of motherhood within the family structure points

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<sup>25</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>26</sup> “4 Wives, 4 Valentines,” Season 3, episode 6

to how the relationships founded in sister wives promote unity and cohesion in ways other forms of relationships cannot, and creates opportunity for a woman who may be infertile.

27 The family also values each marriage equally even though Meri is the only legal wife. The empowered way in which the sister wives think of motherhood is brought to a new level by a decision Meri makes. In a demonstration of how much she loves her sister wife, and to what ends she was willing to go for Robyn, Meri begins the process to obtain a legal divorce from Kody. Because of Robyn's previous divorce and a pending custody battle, there was a real possibility that she would lose access to her children. Knowing this could happen, and seeing only one way out, it was Meri who approached Robyn about the idea. If she divorced Kody, then Robyn would be free and able to enter into a legal marriage with him, and then he could legally adopt her children. It was a significant sacrifice for Meri, but she selflessly engaged in the process because she knew for the children it was a necessary step to give them the life she would want them to have as one of their mothers. It is this understanding in plural marriage that shows what is not only possible, but what motherhood can become.

### **Choice**

28 The women view plural marriage as a choice and often frame their decision making in the context of choice. They present their religion as something they should have a right to pursue and promote the idea that freedom of religion is an inherent right. In an episode where anti-polygamists that were formerly in the church that have left confront the family, Janelle expresses her right to choose a religion that tells her it is ok if the man she wants to marry is already married. She views it not as a restriction, but as a benefit that other women do not have because of their faith. In this sense, she is allowed more choice than other religious practices. She also extends this freedom of religious choice to her children, "I want my children to have the same choice...I want them to understand that any choice...you have to be comfortable with your choice and accept the path you are on."<sup>27</sup> Christine holds a similar view, "We try and let our kids have as much freedom as possible. We want them to have full and rich lives.... And they can absolutely marry who they choose. As much enjoyment and fulfillment that we have found in this lifestyle, that's for us and it's a calling for us and a religious decision for us and there is no

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<sup>27</sup> The Today Show, September, 2010

way we want them to have any part of this for themselves unless they choose to.”<sup>28</sup> This bears out in a later episode when her daughter Maddie decides to join a different faith.

29 The women are often denied choice by outsiders who do not believe the women are in control of their decision making. People believe that they are being controlled by Kody or being forced into plural marriage. Janelle explains, “Usually they are quick to blame the man, they think somehow he’s manipulated me or made me make this choice, which is so baloney.”<sup>29</sup> They are aware of how they are viewed. Robyn is especially bothered by this view. In the anti-polygamist episode she gets upset about how she is being portrayed and demands “Do not make me a victim, sweetie.”<sup>30</sup> She later asks Meri, does it “offend you or frustrate you when a woman comes up to you and says you’re just broken, how could you let your husband cheat on you with another woman?” Meri replies, “I just think she’s stupid, I mean that’s her perspective. It’s dumb...I know my truth.”<sup>31</sup> The women continually insist that they are intelligent enough to make their own decisions.

30 In an episode where anthropology students visit them to study their family dynamics, they play around with the idea that they are submissive to Kody. They devise a prank to play on the students at dinner time where each wife goes up to Kody to serve him food. The prank becomes increasingly absurd until they are all four shoving food into his mouth at the same time. The women performatively enact the stereotypes surrounding polygamy, reclaiming their right to tell their own story. This is another example of dianomy, understanding agency as doubled where “a woman is formed within a specific discursive and performative environment, but she is also able to interrogate that environment” (Bucar 678).

## **Freedom**

31 The women also argue that having sister wives enhances their freedom. Meri explains, “Having the lifestyle, and having him once every third night, frees up a lot of time for us to go do what we need to do.”<sup>32</sup> During the anti-polygamy debate episode, when a woman tells her she is not free because she doesn’t have the ability to sleep with Kody every night, she jokes “Do you

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<sup>28</sup> Season 2, Episode 20

<sup>29</sup> “Sister Wives on the Rope,” Season 4, Episode 9

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1, prior to Robyn joining the family



know how liberating it is to not have to sleep with him every night?”<sup>33</sup> In the same episode another woman claims that the wives are not free because they are dependent on Kody economically, and Janelle quickly jumps in “I make my own paycheck and I have my own bank account. I don’t share with Kody.”<sup>34</sup> The same question could be asked of a woman in a monogamous marriage, but the question of freedom is not equally applied to that context. Christine feels she is more free because her relationship is not monogamous. She didn’t want to be the first wife because “being the first wife takes too much work and involves too much self-sacrifice...It’s just you and your husband until the day he marries a second wife. This kind of single-minded devotion never appealed to me—I’m independent and I like my freedom” (Brown et. al 43).

32 One of the first issues raised when looking at whether the Brown family benefits women is the objection that the wives cannot have equivalent brother husbands. The women defend the arrangement because it is a tenant of their religious faith, but they also emphasize labor and freedom. Janelle argues that “living plural marriage is designed for our happiness<sup>35</sup>” and in response to a question asked by one student, she counters “Who really wants that, do you? Guys are a lot of work.” This is consistent with Janelle’s emphasis on how plural marriage gives her room to be career focused and gives her space to be who she wants to be. She does not want the additional labor responsibilities. Meri responds, “I would not ever choose to have more than one husband from a religious standpoint...and also from a personal standpoint, I need my me time and I wouldn’t get it if I had many guys around.” The women ground their choice in the benefit it has for them to develop as individuals and do not desire to live polyandry. Their religious beliefs support their happiness and well-being, an example of Braidotti’s argument that “agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety” (2).

### **Economic Benefits**

33 There are economic benefits to plural marriage, as the family can reduce costs by sharing resources and spread out wealth amongst the family so everyone is taken care of. Kody states,

If one of my wives chooses not to work in order to stay home and look after our kids, I make sure she is taken care of. If another wife makes a bundle while her sister wife is

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<sup>33</sup> “Sister Wives on the Rope,” Season 4, Episode 9

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Season 2, Episode 20

looking after the kids, she will share her bounty...Although my wives are fiercely independent and entirely self-sufficient, they never let anyone go without. We are a family of equals (Brown et. al, 9).

Janelle takes care of the finances and works for the family while her sister wives take care of her children. Christine explains, “Ever since I’ve been married, Janelle has always taken care of the finances. And so I’ve never really had to pay utility payments, or rent, and it is not fun. For that reason alone, I would always want to live with someone. I don’t like it [doing finances].”<sup>36</sup> Janelle states “I’ve always been a career person, I’ve always worked. I would prefer to be working, rather than be home with the kids, because in a family this big, one breadwinner is not enough.”<sup>37</sup> In reality, one breadwinner is not enough for many monogamous married families either in the modern economic situation where it is difficult to earn a living wage.

34 In Season 4, the sister wives start a company together called My Sisterwife’s Closet, an online store. The women discuss business strategies and work together to build the company. They try to make choices that benefit other women as well, for example when Janelle is researching sourcing she says they should work with a local producer Cottage Industry a “woman power, woman driven, entrepreneur.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Division of Labor**

35 Elizabeth Joseph, an attorney and journalist living in a plural marriage, opposes the perception that plural marriage is oppressive to women and claims “compelling social reasons make the life style attractive to the modern career woman.” She acknowledges the difficulty women face in balancing family life and a career in contemporary society. She sees monogamous marriage as challenging and founded in compromises; in her view, plural marriage offers women “who live in a society full of obstacles, to fully meet their career, mothering, and marriage obligations.” In a speech delivered at a conference organized by the National Organization for Women, Joseph calls plural marriage “the ultimate feminist lifestyle” because it does not force women to choose between motherhood, marriage and a career.

36 The women on the show often express plural marriage as the solution to the failures in the myth of modern motherhood that tell women they can have it all. Janelle explains, “I work

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<sup>36</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>37</sup> “Meet Kody and the Wives,” Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>38</sup> “Sister Wives Tell All,” Season 4, Episode 11

really long days, so I'm gone usually from about 6:15 to 7:00...It's nice usually Christine will make dinner and I don't have to worry about that when I come home. I work with a bunch of women who are like, 'Oh I've got to go home and fix dinner' and I'm like, 'Oh, not me, ha ha.'<sup>39</sup>

37 The women take turns filling in when another wife needs help. In response to a viewer question about if there is a cleaning wife, a shopping at the mall wife, a take the kids to soccer wife, or a bedroom wife the women answer:

Meri: "I think we're all, all four."

Christine: "You know; I think we are all of them. But the only difference is we don't have to be."

Robyn: "When Christine had Truly, I went over to her house and cleaned the bathroom and the bedroom. I was the mall wife; I was the clean the toilet wife..."

Christine: "I think we complement each other quite well. We all represent, we are four distinct personalities, and I like it like this."

Meri: "Ultimately, I really think it's teamwork, what we are trying to accomplish."<sup>40</sup>

Being able to divide up labor allows each of them to excel at what they are best at. Janelle explains the arrangement: "I love it because I get my children, and we do all the really fun things together, and I get to be the mom, but I don't have to do the cooking or the chauffeuring."<sup>41</sup> "I can say, I'm going to a movie, will you watch my kids? And I have somebody to watch them. I don't have to do everything. I have the time for the things I like to do, not just household stuff." It also helps her balance her work and family life. The family heads away on a family trip. Janelle: "Everybody is leaving to go to the ranch today, and it's really busy for me right now so I couldn't get away. So I'm going to work one more day and then Kody and I are going to go up. It's kind of nice in my world, because I have people in my world who can get my kids there and they can start their vacation, and I can join them."<sup>42</sup> The family structure gives the wives more flexibility in navigating their schedules and benefits their children's lives.

## Conclusion

38 Meri, Janelle, Christine and Robyn demonstrate substantial benefits to living plural marriage for women, but they are not trying to convince others to live their lifestyle. They repeatedly demand on the show to have the right to choose their family structure but say they do

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<sup>39</sup> "Meet Kody and the Wives," Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>40</sup> "Viewers Questions," Season 3, Episode 10

<sup>41</sup> "Meet Kody and the Wives," Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>42</sup> Free Range Browns, Season 2, Episode 2

not believe it is the right choice for everyone. The show undermines compulsory monogamy by showing audiences an alternative family structure of queer kinship. Whether viewers support plural marriage after watching the show does not matter, what matters is that the show proves other options exist, thereby showing monogamy is one choice out of several available options. Each relationship is unique and negotiates its own form of community and values. The show creates space for women who live the experience of plural marriage to enter the conversation and claim their lives, and their narratives, as their own.

39 While the show engages in some aspects of post-feminism (i.e. the rhetoric of choice) its emphasis on collective action through the bond between sister wives, rather than a focus on individuality, is a radical divergence from post-feminist media texts. The solidarity between the wives offers an example of what Braidotti's postsecular feminism might look like as a practice of affirmation in which "the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others" (16). The women value their relationships as sister wives above their personal differences for the goal of building a better family unit for everyone. Their practice of polygamy attempts to develop deeper connections with multiple others over time. In this way they creatively form a system of support that allows them to overcome difficult times, a model of ethical relations: "Ethical relations create possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. They are the driving forces that concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others" (Braidotti 16). This isn't only in service of the family unit but can be spread to new forms of coalition building between communities. Assuming polygamy can only be heterosexist has "prevented strategic coalitions among those interested in creating non-normative kinship relations, as well as between those practicing queer kinship and those practicing queer sex" (Park 222). Understanding the sister wives' decisions through the concepts of the politics of piety and dianomy allows polygamy to be understood as a possible positive option for women to pursue, one that forms a supportive network of interconnection with others. *Sister Wives* portrays one possible example of Braidotti's 'ethics of becoming', "the quest for new creative alternatives and sustainable futures" (19). It may be a concept that has been around for a while but it is only now becoming a visible option because the practice is no longer in the shadows.

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