This is to certify that the
thesis entitled

Multiple Wives, Multiple Voices, Multiple Publics:

Polyvocality in *Big Love*

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts degree in American Studies

Major Professor's Signature

4/25/2009

Date

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by

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

American Studies

2009

Abstract

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The one-hour HBO drama *Big Love* explores the lives of an independent polygamist family in contemporary Utah. This thesis looks at *Big Love* and the way it employs a variety of interrelated discourses that draw upon theological and historical facts and queer codings consistent with Bakhtin's notions of polyvocality in order to address a variety of publics and counterpublics as described by Michael Warner. This approach allows *Big Love* to address a major cultural issue, what makes a family and what are the issues confronting families that are not "counted" in mainstream society, in a way that opens up a different perspective and can reach a different audience then explicitly queer texts. This thesis looks at how *Big Love* negotiates and addresses this question in relation to the texts various discourses and the conflicts between them. It looks at how *Big Love*'s affective use of multiple discourses that complement and create productive tension with each other demonstrates the potential of television texts to demonstrate a complexity that encourages attentive and active viewership and shows that television can reach a mass audience through varying levels of heterogenous legibility rather than the oversimplification and facile pluralism that it is sometimes accused of relying upon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Gary Hoppenstand and Amy DeRogatis for their guidance and help in the research and writing of this thesis. Special thanks to Joseph Darowski for his time discussing LDS doctrine with me.

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Introduction

Big Love made big news when it chose to portray a temple endowment ceremony in the episode "Outer Darkness" of its third season over strong objections from the Mormon Church that the ceremony is intended to be private and solely for church members. In the extensive controversy about this relatively short scene, it was not uncommon for this scene to be referred to as Prop 8 payback (Banack 1) or for people to say that "the Proposition 8 controversy makes them" (the LDS Church) "a more likely target" (Holder 1). Those who condemned the showing of the ceremony and saw it as some kind of vengeance for proposition 8 most likely unwittingly drew attention to one of the most fundamental aspects of *Big Love,* its incorporation of Mormon religious and queer discourses into the same narrative. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* writes that

> finally, the intentional double-voiced and internally dialogized hybrid possesses a syntactic structure utterly specific to it; in it within the boundaries of a single utterance, two potential utterances are fused, two responses are, as it were harnessed in a potential dialogue (Bakhtin and Holquist 361).

I will argue that *Big Love* is intentionally double-voiced and internally dialogized and throughout its narrative includes utterances and events that fuse together meanings from both Mormon fundamentalist polygamist religious and historical discourses and queer discourses, particularly those regarding kinship. I will be looking at how the polyvocality of *Big Love* as a text plays a role in making multiple public and counterpublics as described by Michael Warner. While Bakthin's specific interest in *The Dialogic Imagination* in terms of heteroglossia and the internal dialogic is in terms of the novel, I

will be arguing that Bakthin and Warner's ideas of multiple interacting discourses and their related publics can and should also be applied to television texts and work particularly well for analyzing *Big Love*.

I am responding in part to writing on television that tends to treat it as simplistic and prone to oversimplifying even the more complicated issues it addresses. John Corner writes that "narrative, particularly when applied to non-fictional material, has the effect of oversimplifying what is properly regarded as diverse elements of an issue" (Corner 51). *Big Love* through the use of referentiality, coding, and diverse interacting discourses routinely complicates rather than simplifies the issues they tackle. The way in which many of the biggest names in television studies, such as Stuart Hall, have been used often contributes to this impression of television as simplistic. In his famous article "Encoding/ Decoding," Stuart Hall frequently refers to "*the* message" of a text as if the message is a singular thing, and it is often treated that way by other scholars. Yet Stuart Hall himself does not make claims about television quite so simplistically. He notes that "the televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural" (S. Hall 121). I will be arguing that television texts in fact include many kinds of discourses many of which present, sometimes conflicting, "meanings" of the text. Hall recognizes the mutability of television signs by noting that "its connotative level, though also bounded, is more open, subject to more *active transformations*, which exploit its polysemic values" (S. Hall 123). In this way Hall is in accordance with Bakhtin by drawing attention to the multiple meanings of any given word, phrase, or textual element. Hall nonetheless speaks of "dominant or *preferred*

meanings" but that they say "*dominant*, not 'determined', because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'" (S. Hall 123). Where I must part ways with Hall is regarding his assumption that the dominant reading, which he terms as decoding from the "dominant-hegemonic position" (S. Hall 125), will be a reading that decodes the text's message(s) in a way that reaffirms the dominant ideology of a culture. Hall lays out three positions from which viewers could hypothetically decode television texts: 1) the dominant-hegemonic position that "decodes the message in terms of the reference code it has encoded" (S. Hall 125), generally in ways consistent with the dominant ideology of the culture, 2) negotiated readings which includes contradictions but "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions" (S. Hall 127) and 3) oppositional readings which "decode the message in a *globally* contrary way" (S. Hall 127). Using this framework it is not unusual for critics of television to argue that it portrays and enforces dominant ideological culture viewpoints. Indeed Hall says of the hegemonic viewpoint, which he links to dominant readings of a text, "that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy- it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable'" (S. Hall 127). However *Big Love* and many other television programs, particularly on cable, do not take as its subject what society has already ratified as legitimate, such as the heteronormative monogamous marriage, but rather takes up the lives of marginalized groups and the issues that concern them. By asking questions about what defines a family and what issues a family and marriage not recognized by society must deal with, *Big Love* significantly problematizes Stuart Hall's formulation. Here the "dominant" reading, meaning the reading encoded into the text, is a reading sympathetic

to and privileging a family that is not only religiously nonnormative but in many ways is coded as, and functions as a stand in for, a queer family. An oppositional reading of *Big Love* as a text might come instead from a conservative Evangelical Christian viewer who may be opposed to Mormon theology, polygamy and same-sex marriage/queer kinship, all central sources of meaning in the text who resists the texts own terms of framing and reads it instead as a morality tale about what calamitous things happen when one does not follow normative marriage and family patterns. One cannot then argue that reading the text as it is encoded is reading it in terms of the dominant cultures "hegemonic" ideology. For the majority of members of contemporary American society queer kinship groups and same-sex marriage are not "normal" or "inevitable," and even fewer approach polygamy in this way. Television texts that are produced by members of marginal groups or take up marginal groups as their subjects fundamentally confound the assumptions of Hall's categories of decoding positions. Furthermore I will be arguing here that texts can be, and are, encoded specifically to most often produce *negotiated* readings. *Big Love* by incorporating both religious and queer discourses in its text builds contradictions into its narrative. By addressing multiple publics *Big Love* includes attributes that will inevitably make more sense or be more comfortable to some of its publics then others, requiring its publics to negotiate their readings to some extent.

Michael Warner speaks of three uses of the term public: the people generally, a specific audience such as spectators at a sporting event or play, and his own sense of the term "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" (Warner 66). I will be using the term public, and its related concept of a

counterpublic, in the way Warner frames it as in relation to a text and in some ways created by the text, but not in a way that the creators of the text controls. Warner observes that "people often speaks these days not just of the *public* but of multiple publics. And not without reason, since the publics among which we steer, or surf, are potentially infinite in number" (Warner 9). While Warner speaks of multiple publics and the potential of a single individual belonging to multiple publics, he rarely speaks of multiple publics created by a single text. However in this thesis I am deeply concerned with the ability of a text to address and create multiple publics as a result of its polyvocality. This is consistent with Warner's claim that "I urge an understanding of the phenomenon of publics that is historical in orientation and always alert to the dynamics of textuality" (Warner 15). As Bakhtin has found the dynamics of textuality is a multi-voiced and messaged dynamic, his discussion of the novelistic hybrid and the internally dialogized text brings out the importances of multiple languages, language not used in the sense of foreign languages, the novel as a text. He explains that "the novelistic hybrid is *an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another*, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image of another language" (Bakhtin and Holquist 361) and differentiates it from the internally dialogized by saying that

> there is no direct mixing of two languages within the boundaries of a single utterance - rather, only one language is actually present in the utterance, but it is rendered *in the light of another language.* This second language is not, however actualized and remains outside the utterance" (Bakhtin and Holquist 362).

Big Love demonstrates aspects of both the novelistic hybrid and the internally dialogic throughout the series. In some cases this is focused on the utterance and the *word* such as when one of the Henrickson's plural wives, Margie, tells the rest of the family that another wife, Barb, "outed us to the neighbors" (Oh Pioneers). At one level the term "outed" refers to the revelation of a marital relationship and religious orientation, indicating a membership in a stigmatized group. However the term "outed" also has a very explicit meaning in "coming out" as part of an LGBT discourse practice. Here the word "outed" quite literally mixes two languages, I will be using the term discourses, in a single utterance. In other cases the second discourse, usually a queer discourse, sheds light upon the specific utterance and remains outside of explicit representation. Examples of this might be Barb's trouble with her family rejecting her after she becomes polygamous, something that is not explicitly part of queer discourse but is understood in the text *in light* of queer discourse. I will be using the term discourse as an effective way to address the practices surrounding the issues explored in *Big Love* and because of the term discourse practices association with particular groups and histories that provide the context to *Big Love* as a text. Bakhtin says that "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (Bakhtin and Holquist 293). The theology and history of Mormonism and fundamentalist Mormon polygamous groups and the issues of queer kinship that I will be discussing in the first and second chapters are the contexts by which the words and discourses in *Big Love* are structured.

In this thesis I will be looking at the way in which *Big Love* employs a variety of interrelated discourses that draw upon theological and historical facts and queer codings consistent with Bakhtin's notions of polyvocality in order to address a variety of publics and counterpublics as described by Michael Warner. This approach allows *Big Love* to address a major cultural issue, what makes a family and what are the issues confronting families that are not "counted" in mainstream society, in a way that opens up a different perspective and can reach a different audience then explicitly queer texts. *Big Love*'s effective use of multiple discourses that complement and create productive tension with each other demonstrates the potential of television texts to demonstrate a complexity that encourages attentive and active viewership and shows that television can reach a mass audience through varying levels of heterogenous legibility rather than the oversimplification and facile pluralism upon which it is sometimes accused of relying. *Big Love* demonstrates both the levels of complexity that television is capable of and the possibilities of addressing complex political discourses through multi-voiced texts.

In chapter one I will be looking at the role of religious and historical discourse in *Big Love* and the important role referentiality to theological and historical knowledge play in the show's narrative. *Big Love* embeds historical and theological references into its narrative that, for publics who have the knowledge to recognize these references, shed light on the motivations and behaviors of the show's characters in profound ways while lending the show some sense of historical position and authenticity. The show's characters demonstrate various values and motivations that are shaped by their relationship to Mormon theology. Chapter one is named after Nicki, Bill's first wife, who

was raised on a fundamentalist compound and who is radically different then his other two wives because of how heavily influenced she is by polygamous Mormon theology. The theological veracity of *Big Love* is important as a structuring motivation for many of the characters in the show and plays an essential role in keeping the show from becoming too much about its more salacious aspects and significantly complicating the texts relationship to issues like marriage and sex. I will be looking at the show's accuracy in relationship to historical polygamy, contemporary polygamy, and some of the contemporary fundamentalist compound in part to address criticisms that claim the show is unrealistic and portray a fairy-tale version of polygamy. This is particularly crucial because in later seasons *Big Love* significantly troubles the role of authenticity in its text through plot twists and the controversy regarding the endowment ceremony. I will be discussing the ways in which this discourse addresses a particular public formed based on access to knowledge about Mormon and fundamentalist theology and history and how the ability to follows the show's references to theology and history significantly may affect the way those publics sensitive to this discourse may view and interpret aspects of *Big Love* as a narrative.

In chapter two I will be examining *Big Love's* queer discourse. This discourse functions in ways consistent with the long-recognized tradition of queer counterpublics looking for coded narratives in media texts. The queer narrative in *Big Love* brings out questions about what makes a marriage or a family legitimate and the challenges that these unaccepted kinship groups may face when dealing with a society that does not recognize and/or stigmatizes their families. This queer discourse also brings attention to

the queer aspects of polygamy itself as it is practiced in *Big Love*. Chapter two is named after Margie, Bill's third wife, because she is the wife most likely to get deeply emotional involved with other women in ways that come close to being romantic. I will be examining queer discourse in *Big Love* in three ways. I will be looking at the way *Big Love* functions as queer analogy looking at issues such as closeting and passing. I will also be discussing how *Big Love* as a text posits polygamy itself as practiced by the Henricksons as queer in a variety of ways including the wives profession of love for one another and their conception of having marriages to one another that goes beyond their marriage to Bill. Finally I will be looking at explicit references to or depictions of homosexuality and other queer subject positions in *Big Love* and demonstrating that although these representations are usually negative they play an important role in creating a queer mise en scene for the show. In the case of queer discourses I will be considering two groups: a queer aware public who could include anyone familiar enough with the discourses discussed to recognize them and a specifically queer counterpublic whose subject position is in some ways defined by their relationship to society at large. The queer discourse in *Big Love* is essential to exploring the way that the show interrogates issues of marriage and family that have become contested in our society and that are central to the program's narrative.

Chapter three looks at the way in which *Big* Love puts religious and queer discourses into conversation with one another. Although many perceive religious and queer discourses as often oppositional, *Big Love* brings these two discourses into communication with one another in ways that enhance each discourse. These two

discourses in *Big Love* relate to one another in varied ways. The discourses can interact in the text by putting them in productive tension with each other; in these cases queer and religious discourses may conflict with each other regarding issues like patriarchy or procreation. The discourses can also interact in a supportive way when representing issues, like stigmatization, that both groups, fundamentalist polygamists and queer individuals deal with. Chapter three is named after Barb because, being from an LDS background with LDS family members, she confronts the most conflicts between traditional religious and moral values as held by the LDS and her devotion and allegiance to her family, husband and sisterwives whose marriage and family form violates these values. In this chapter I will not be focusing on publics or counterpublics as in the other chapters but will instead be addressing the way the discourses that I have previously associated with certain publics interact. In the interaction of these discourses we can see that the text is constructed in a way that involves not maintaining discrete discourses and publics but in combining these discourses in a way that requires the overlapping of publics in order to engage with the full complexity of the text. While a viewer may be a part of a queer counterpublic, they can also be, to varying degrees, part of a public that is knowledgable about Mormon religious values. Being part of both publics, to one degree or another is potentially the richest position from which to interpret the text. Indeed the text appears to "make[1]" not only multiple publics but multiple overlapping publics.

While my focus throughout this thesis is on the specificity of *Big Love* as a text, I hope that it can also be looked at as an example of the complex cultural discourses

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[1] Michael Warner talks about the way texts do the work of making publics (Warner 12).

television texts are capable of addressing. Bakhtin writes that "the importance of struggling with another's discourses, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous" (Bakhtin and Holquist 348). Indeed the representation of and interaction between discourses in culture is of enormous importance. The role of television programs in representing and interrogating cultural discourses is important. Judith Butler draws attention to the role of the symbolic structure in legitimating the social arrangement (Butler 120). *Big Love* deploys a different symbolic vocabulary and set of discourses that interrogates the dominant social arrangement rather than legitimizing it. This thesis examines *Big Love*'s symbolic vocabulary and complex discourses and also demonstrates the potential of television texts to employ complex and socially relevant discourses in ways consistent with Bakthin and Warner's observations about more traditional texts.

Chapter 1 - Nicki: Theological and Historical Discourses

When planning a new campaign for the Henrickson's business Home Plus the companies marketing people suggest that Home Plus' new advertisements use visual "code" to suggest that Home Plus represents local Utah, specifically Mormon, values (Eviction). In one example they show Bill a woman whose line of her garments is visible beneath her clothes. In another example they give him an advertisement where photos of the temple and a stuffed cougar for BYU are in the background. They argue that these ads are subliminal, that people to whom these images would be meaningful would register them and identify with them even if they were not explicitly aware of it. (Eviction). To some extent the narrative in *Big Love* functions the same way. In his book *Publics and Counterpublics* Michael Warner uses the term "functional intelligibility" to describe how the form of a "public" is comprehensible "across a wide range of contexts" (Warner 9). A similar concept can be used to describe *Big Love*; as a television text it requires a degree of widespread functional intelligibility in order to be interesting to the wide ranging audience a mass media text requires. We can also think of the this text, like all texts, as having multiple publics for which different areas of the text have different levels of legibility to its various publics. In this chapter I will be examining the text in terms of its legibility in the Mormon theological and historical meaning registers embedded in *Big Love*. *Big Love* is one of the most exceptionally well-researched television programs I have ever encountered. A vast number of the program's moments and exchanges contain details that are theologically or historically consistent with the realities of Fundamentalist

and Mormon faiths and what is known about the functioning of Fundamentalist Polygamist sects and the history of 19th century Mormonism.

This meticulousness, it must be acknowledged, will only be appreciated by a certain, limited, segment of the program's audience that is, for whatever reason, familiar with the theology and history it draws upon. For other audience members what is in fact a result of a specific behavior or belief in Fundamentalist Polygamist sects[2], such as Nicki's feelings about love or appropriate forms of sex, can be read by audiences unaware of the beliefs of such groups as a particular personality quirk. Many comments and references will simply go unnoticed by audiences not sensitized to them, as Bill's advertising consultant suggests, while others might simply be understood as a personal belief or habit. When Michael Warner suggests that he wants an "understanding of the phenomenon of publics" that is "always alert to the dynamics of textuality" (Warner 15) might he also be suggesting the reverse? That in some cases in order to understand the dynamics of textuality, or in this case a particular text, we need to think about it in relationship to its multiple, and overlapping publics.

A perfect example of this is *Big Love*'s introductory credit sequence, a scene that I had to watch several times before it became legible to me in terms of Mormon theology and not merely as a depiction of love, dispersal and reunification. The sequence goes as

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[2] I am choosing to use the word sect here to describe Fundamentalist polygamist groups like the FLDS, Kingston Clan and AUB despite the fact that many observers have described these groups as cults because of their focus on and obedience to an often charismatic leader and their tendency to isolation. Jan Shipps in her book *Mormonism The Story of a New Religious Tradition* says: "it is important to remember that a sect grows out of disagreement over how a tradition's story ought to be understood, i.e. over interpretation, while a cult's antagonistic stance rests on acceptance of a story changed in essentials,"(Shipps 49). Since most of the theology of these groups comes from Doctrines & Covenants, even if differently interpreted, and the early days of Mormonism under Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, one could potentially perceive these groups as restorationist in themselves and not truly antagonistic to the story at large, particularly prior to the Woodruff Manifesto.

follows: as the song "God Only Knows" play in the background Bill, ice skating, approaches and skates with Barb, Nicki, and Margene each in turn and then the four join hands and skate, smiling, in a circle, until a spreading crack in the ice separates them in four different directions. Bill begins to wander through a maze of slightly transparent white sheets, the women are also wandering here, until he locates each of his wives. Then we see the four of them sitting down together to eat at a picnic table, which as the camera pulls back we see is sitting on top of an otherwise barren planet, other planets hang in the background. For the average viewer this can be understood as a straightforward, albeit odd, love narrative of coming together, breaking apart, searching, and eventually reconciling. Its stranger features, like the planets in the background, can be dismissed as quirky features of what seems very much like a dream sequence. However this introductory sequence can also be read very explicitly in a theological framework drawing on Mormon beliefs. If one takes the breaking apart of the ice as separation not through discord but through death, Bill's wandering through the white maze can be understood as his locating his wives after death and bringing them to him. Both Fundamentalists and LDS believe in eternal marriage that lasts after death (Arrington and Bitton 185). At Bill's fathers funeral for one of his wives, Roberta, his father references the important role a husband has in his wives salvation in the afterlife. He says to his deceased wife "I shall call you wife through the veil in the celestial kingdom by the name known only to me, and I'll pull you through to be reunited with me for all eternity" (Roberta's Funeral). Clearly the veil is well known Mormon parlance for the space between this world and the afterlife as Joseph Smith has also been known to use the

term in this way (Givens 30). In this reading the dreamy wandering sequence in which Bill searches for each of his wives, takes on specific theological meaning in which he is searching them out to "pull them through the veil" to be with him in "eternal marriage" in the after life. Indeed when we see them next they are all united at a picnic table together. The seemingly strange realization that this picnic table is atop a planet is also theologically legible in the Mormon context. Along with eternal marriage, there is a belief in eternal progression, where one continues self-improvement towards salvation after death with the theoretically possibility of becoming as a God, after which he will father spirits and grow his family further. According to Apostle Orson Pratt, recorded in *The Seer*, when "his Heavenly inheritance becomes too small to accomodate his great family, he...organizes a new world....forms a world" (Lindbloom). While the possibility of any individual reaching such an exalted state may be somewhat disagreed upon, the idea of a families eternal life continuing and the formation of a planet for a man's spirit children is certainly theologically consistent with some major Mormon figures such as Pratt.

The layers of legibility of this opening sequence, in addition to illustrating an approach to the text that looks at ways various publics may understand the same facet of the text, also allude to some of the essential theological aspects of Fundamentalist Mormonism, and in some cases mainstream Mormonism, that factor most significantly into understanding *Big Love*, eternal marriage and family, pre-existing spirits of children, and the role of husbands in their wives salvation. Other essential theological factors that I will be considering is the essential role continuing revelation and personal testimony

plays in Mormonism, both mainstream and Fundamentalist and the role of the husband/ father as the family priesthood holder. Beyond the theological framework at play in *Big Love*, the rules and traditions of Fundamentalist Polygamist sects and the historical aspects of 19th century Mormon polygamy also provide an essential frame to understanding the text. One way of understanding *Big Love* is through the tension between Nicki and Bill's families on the Compound, whose beliefs and practices are more consistent with Fundamentalist Polygamist groups, and the polygamous life that Bill, Barb, Nicki and Margie are forming in the suburbs, that has much more in common not only with what are called Independent Polygamists today but also with the way that polygamy was practiced in the 19th century[3].

The coding of historical and theoretical content into *Big Love* is not an occasional feature of the show, a sporadic insider reference, but consistently is embedded in the shows narrative, both implicitly and explicitly. It provides not only context but explicit challenges and motivations for the characters in *Big* Love. Some former and current members of polygamist groups (including Carolyn Jessop and people from the Centennial Park group) have questioned the validity of *Big Love* as a program based on its consistency with their perception of the facts of polygamy. While including theological and historical information in ways perhaps not explicit enough for some *Big Love* is concerned with lending itself something of the veracity of truth through its incorporation of elements intimately related to theology and historical or current facts about Mormon

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[3] While little academic work has been done studying the marriage and family patterns of independent polygamists, Jessie Embry has done detailed research in *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* on the way 19th century polygamy has been practice the Henrickson's lifestyle is consistent with the results of her research.

polygamy. In the third season the question of the role "authenticity" plays in the text becomes complex and imperative. For those viewers familiar with the history of polygamous groups the purported appearance of a letter from Wilford Woodruff indicating the church never intended to give up polygamy in "Fight or Flight" will appear anachronistic. The closest thing recorded is a report by Loorin Wooley that the Taylor Manifesto was intended to assure the continuance of polygamy as God's will (Bistline 19). As Bill pursues this letter, sold to the church by Alby, it may strike those more familiar with Mormon and polygamous history as exceedingly odd that *Big Love* was suddenly including seemingly fictional history. When in the final episode of season three it is revealed that this letter is in fact a fake, this revelation to some is a shocking plot twist but to others it resolves a conflict in the show presented by this sudden depiction of history that is inconsistent with fact. Although even those who were puzzled by this introduction of history not based in fact may still be surprised with the way *Big Love* resolves this contradiction by working the inauthenticness of the letter into the diagetic narrative, and may still experience the plot twist, their ability to recognize this as uniquely ahistorical for the program changes their relationship to this revelation. This question of accuracy and authenticity also became central in the episode "Outer Darkness" when the program depicts a temple endowment ceremony. Some Mormon groups strongly objected to the depiction of a temple ceremony, which is supposed to be kept private among Mormons, the program's producers provided assurances that it would be shown accurately, as if this removed all concerns (Horiuchi 1). However for those who are familiar with the faith they know that showing a ceremony accurately is still deeply

offensive from an LDS framework, perhaps more offensive. The insertion of this controversial scene into the program and the question of accuracy surrounding it in the responses of the program's producers to LDS critics demonstrate the importance of accurate theological and historical facets of the program. While a book could easily be written on the various ways these theological and historical frameworks impact the understanding of *Big Love,* I will only be very briefly examining how these frameworks impact the understanding of five aspects of the Henrickson's life: marriage, kids, love, sex, and the business and politics of the compound in order to demonstrate the different textual meanings for the publics of the program that are appropriately sensitive to these frameworks.

Marriage

As I have already mentioned eternal marriage, is a fundamental belief for both mainstream Mormons and Fundamentalists, the idea that all marriages that are sealed in the temple, or by a priesthood holder with the authority to do so, are for both "time and eternity" and will continue into the afterlife. After the 1890 Woodruff Manifesto the mainstream LDS Mormons rejected polygamy and in some periods of history were "encouraging the prosecution of cohabs" polygamists (Krakauer 244). Fundamentalists believe that not only eternal marriage but also polygamy, referred to more often as "plural marriage" or "celestial marriage" is necessary to reach "the highest degree of the celestial kingdom" (Llewellyn 20). They base this on Doctrine & Covenants 76 and 131 (Llewellyn 14). More specifically some sects, such as the FLDS in Colorado City and Yearning for Zion, believe that "a man must have at least three wives to reach the highest

degree of heaven" (Bistline 92). While it is never specifically referenced in the text, it is unlikely a coincidence that both Bill and his business partner Don, an independent polygamist, have precisely three wives each at the beginning of the series. It is also notable that Barb objects much more strongly to getting a fourth wife than she does to a third one. The notion of three wives being the amount required to reach the highest level of the celestial kingdom, and that this is the number of wives Bill has, is a reminder that ultimately polygamy/celestial marriage is about faith and, perhaps with the exception of Margene, the characters of *Big Love* pursue this form of marriage motivated at least in part by faith.

In *Big Love* Bill and Barb Henrickson are monogamously married, in fact as a former resident of the compound Bill had spoken against polygamy in the past. But when Barb becomes very ill with cancer, and has to have a hysterectomy, Bill begins to believe in "the principle" of plural marriage and convinces Barb to practice it with him by marrying Nicki, who had helped with Barb when she was ill. Bill grew up on a polygamous compound, very closely modeled on the FLDS currently led by Warren Jeffs, in which having a number of wives was not only a sign of cultural status but also a sign of blessedness in the eyes of God. Many from the compound and similar groups could interpret Barb's illness and hysterectomy as punishment for their rejection of the principle. Rhonda, a young girl from the compound, described Barb's situation to someone as follows: "They used to be regular married but didn't live the principle so god wouldn't bless her with anymore babies. They took her to the hospital but they still couldn't fix her, I'm never gonna get cancer" (Pilot). Rhonda believes that since she is

going to live the principle by marrying the prophet, a man well past middle age, that she would be protected from such misfortune as cancer. This is not simply a narrative device; in her memoir *Escaped* Carolyn Jessop speaks of her own dangerous pregnancies, explaining that: "My hysterectomy and near-death experience were further proof to Merril's other wives that God was still condemning me for my rebellious ways" (Jessop and Palmer 311).

While this may be the perception of members of the compound of Barb's misfortune, it is unlikely Barb and Bill would describe their situation similarly. While based on many of the same theological foundations as the compound, the Henrickson's practice of plural marriage is drastically different from that of the compound, and similar to real world Fundamentalist groups. To begin with, although Roman, the "prophet" of Juniper Creek and Nicki's father, had some influence over Bill's decision to take Nicki as a second wife, by and large Bill, his colleague Don, and to some extent their wives make their own decisions about when to take another wife into the family and who that wife should be. At Juniper Creek new wives are assigned to families by the prophet, who can also re-assign them as punishment to men who are "out of harmony" with him. This is consistent with certain fundamentalist groups, particularly the FLDS[4], where according to John Llewellyn "all marriages are controlled by the priesthood, neither the boy nor the girl has a choice. When a girl in the FLDS is biologically mature enough to bear children, she is married off" (Llewellyn 18). This is an essential difference that impacts

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[4] The term FLDS here refers not to Fundamentalist Mormon groups at large, but specifically to the group headed currently by Warren Jeffs, concentrated in Colorado City, Hildale, and the Yearning for Zion ranch in Texas. This is the largest fundamentalist group and many of the other groups, such as Centennial Park splintered off from the FLDS.

relationships between each other and their compound family. After seeing how young and pretty Bill's third wife, Margene, was Bill's mother is furious at him. She admonishes him, "plural marriage is a religious calling not a license to coerce young girls." It is very difficult for him to convince her of the truth, that Margie "chose us not me her or we her, she us...We all debated it. We all considered it and we all agreed" (Home Invasion). This would be unheard of on a compound, where women have no choice at all over whom they married, but it is not so unusual for 19th century polygamy in which new wives were selected in a wide variety of ways[5].

Many observers have noted that since polygamy was practiced openly amongst LDS Mormons for a relatively short period of time, no single formal arrangement was established for the practice of plural marriage. In his history of plural marriage Richard S. Van Wagoner observes that "the rules of wooing depended on the individual involved: interest could be initiated by the man, the prospective wife, or even the first wife who felt it was her religious duty to do so" (Van Wagoner 90). We see all three of these occurrences, to some extent in *Big Love*, Bill initiates an interest in Anna as a possible fourth wife, that is maintained when their relationship encounters difficulties, first by the third wife, Margie, and later, reluctantly, by the first wife, Barb, when a health scare makes her worry about her family's future and their religious obligations. Margie initiated her relationship with Bill as a prospective wife, she selected the family rather than being chosen by Bill or Barb.

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[5] In the nineteenth century sometimes polygamous wives sometimes selected the new wives that would join the family.

In their day to day lifestyle, The Henrickson family's closely followed many patterns of 19th century polygamy. Jessie Embry, a major Mormon oral historian, discovered that "often the wives shared a home just after the second marriage, but as soon as it was financially possible, the husband provided a separate one for each wife" (Embry 73). While Bill and his wives did all live in one home for a little while after he married Nicki and Margie by the time in their marriage the show is set each wife has her own home, with linking backyards for dinners and events. This particular living arrangement, more than simply paralleling common 19th century patterns, also serves as a good metaphor for the Henrickson's relationship to the world. Their public face, the houses facing the street, shows three separate family and lives. Their private, protected, space, the large fenced-in backyard allows them to be what they truly are, one family with a shared life. Bill's pattern of changing homes nightly, seeing each wife once every three nights, was narrowly the most common in the the 19th century. In 19th century Utah "27 percent of the husbands changed homes nightly" (Embry 80). While more husbands divided the goods and made the schedule in the 19th century, the Henrickson's solution, giving these responsibilities to the first wife, was the second most common approach(Embry 123-24). Other facets of the family's organization, from the giving of allowances (Embry 126) to the prevalence of "family home evenings" (Embry 119) are consistent with 19th century polygamous practice. The preponderance of occasions when the wives, Barb, Nicki, and Margene, work together to make a meal, an event, etc. might seem unlikely to the average viewer, it was reasonably common in 19th century polygamous families (Embry 98).

That *Big Love* so closely mirrors 19th century Mormon polygamous family patterns is, in and of itself, of limited interest. However in context of the tension the show develops between "exploitive" plural marriage on the compound with the Henrickson's very different marriage, it is easy to dismiss *Big Love*'s depiction of the Henrickson's complicated, challenging but ultimately loving polygamous family as "unrealistic" (Marshall 1) or "a bunch of nonsense" (Adams 1), both claims of famous ex-polygamist Carolyn Jessop[6]. However closer inspection allows for an argument that *Big Love* in fact provides a quite realistic alternative in line not only with contemporary independent polygamists, although there is great variation in this group[7], but also on the patterns of polygamy prior to its prohibition in the LDS and its relegation to the compounds. This temporal quirk of *Big Love*, in which elements of the Henrickson's marriage that are unusual for much of today's Mormon polygamist practice but extremely common in 19th century polygamy adds an interesting twist to the reading of marriage behaviors in this program, it presents polygamy not necessarily as it is but as it could be, how it might have been had polygamy continued in mainstream culture rather than on compounds and in isolated groups.

. Theology is a structuring concept for the Henrickson's when considering their marriage. When Bill encounters frustrations with his wife his friend Don tells him to "you've always gotta keep reminding them of the big picture" (Viagra Blue). In this case

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[6] Carolyn Jessop is the author of the memoir *Escaped* about her escape from the FLDS and Colorado City. She has made costumes for Big Love but has also frequently criticized the show for being unrealistic in her eyes.

[7] Some independent polygamists like Tom Green have young wives others marry only adult women (Bistline, 191). Pro-polygamy activist and a wife in an independent plural family, Anne Wilde, has taken some criticism for being affluent, having a lot of freedom, and not suffering the abuse common in the FLDS (Llewellyn 130-131) and therefore not understanding the reality of polygamy.

the big picture means, as Bill explains to Margie that they "are links to eternity. Ahead of us, family yet to come, souls to be born. Behind us, ancestors -ancestors who sacrificed. We are making those sacrifices to live the principle, to keep faith" although Margie's response "but I still need a car" (Viagra Blue) brings their relationship back to earth, Bill's explanation of what they are doing contextualizes their marriage both in their theology and in Mormon past, in which many men were jailed or had to go underground in their defense of Polygamy (Arrington and Bitton 182).

Childbearing

When Bill explains to Margie the theological motive behind their marriage, he refers "to souls to be born". Both fundamentalist polygamist groups and the mainstream LDS have a concept of pre-existent spirits that are born of Heavenly Parents, taught by them before "coming here to mortality for further advancement" where parents on earth must help them progress towards salvation. Some believe that "being parents in mortality is an opportunity to share in God's divine, creative work" (Arrington and Bitton 186). According to Arrington and Bitton parenthood "was regarded as both an obligation and a blessing" to Mormon families (Arrington and Bitton 190). Children were a gift God "sent" a family but also a duty of that family because a child pre-existed conception as a spirit who was "thought to be waiting eagerly" to come to earth. Special pressure was put on faithful families because a spirit's time on earth was in part an opportunity to spiritually progress. Arrington and Bitton note that while these spirits "would all be born sooner or later, but how much better for them to be born of believing parents, Latter-day

Saints who understand God's plan. It would be deliberately selfish to have no children or an unseemly few" (Arrington and Bitton 190).

This relationship to childbearing puts particular pressure on a wide range of characters in *Big Love* and tremendous strains on marital relationships for both polygamous and LDS characters. Although, by and large, Rhonda is not a reliable character, her association between Bill and Barb accepting plural marriage and the hysterectomy that renders her barren is quite strong. Barb's inability to have children becomes a source of personal disappointment; she tells Margie that "losing the ability to give that to Bill was quite a blow" (Empire). She and Bill find something of a solution to the inability to continue to grow their family in plural marriage. For mainstream LDS who would never consider that an option in this show, the inability to produce children can be devastating. When Margene lies to their neighbor Pam and tells her she is a surrogate in order to cover up their polygamous lifestyle without getting a bad reputation for being single and pregnant, Pam becomes desperate for Margene to be a surrogate for her. She tells Barb that she desperately wants a baby and is even worried her husband will leave her if they do not. She says "Carl is concerned if I can't have his children, where will his spirits go, to an atheist or a meth addict?" (Take Me As I Am). For Pam being unable to have children is more than just the inability to be a mother and have a family, her husband's understanding of theology leads him to fear that spirits that would otherwise be raised by Mormon parents that would help them progress spiritually would instead end up in destructive situations that would impede this progress. It seems it is this

theological progress that makes an atheist as dangerous as a meth-addict in Carl and Pam's eyes.

For those who can have children, the pressure of these beliefs can create their own problems. Barb and Nicki tell Margie that she cannot be a surrogate for Pam because, according to Nicki "our purpose is to bring superior souls into this family, not give them away." Margie retorts that she has "been a baby factory" for Barb (Take Me As I Am), a position with which she clearly is not entirely comfortable with. Preganancy can become political in families; as Carolyn Jessop observed in some families "pregnancy is also a status symbol" (Jessop and Palmer 148). Nicki in season one announces that she wants to have another baby, although at the time she is secretly on birth-control, not an option in traditional polygamous families, in an attempt to get more time and intimacy with Bill. When Margie actually gets pregnant, the dynamic in the family shifts again. Margie's desire to not have to have another baby right away, brings Nicki's four years without a pregnancy into issue in season 3. Rather than telling the others she is on birth control, she repeats the ideology she has been taught. When Margie asks her honestly if she wants to have another baby, she curtly replies "it is my wifely duty to bear as many children as I can to bless this family and bring glory to my husband in the afterlife" (Empire). While Margie is annoyed because she thinks Nicki is not being serious with her, a conversation with her mother about her options, demonstrate that clearly this is the framework in which she was raised. Adaleen tells Nicki that the more children she had for her Roman "the higher I rose in his estimation. Honey our real power as women is our ability to bear our husbands large and robust broods" (Empire). When she tells the doctor that she

"never had a choice" she believes it as she does when she says that she wants children because "I'm not a monster" (Empire). Although she chooses to continue to take the birth control pills, this disconnect between her personal desires and her upbringing remains unresolved[8].

Many of the issues women confront dealing with childbirth, as well as marriage, are compounded by the importance groups like the FLDS put on obedience. Despite Rhonda's subsequent rebellious behavior when she tells Sarah about her pre-marital placement with the prophet that "the greatest freedom we have is obedience" (Home Invasion), it is clear that at the very least she is repeating a prevalent belief in her community. This is consistent with the FLDS in which John Krakauer reports that Rulon Jeffs has preached that "perfect obedience produces perfect faith" (Krakauer 12).

Love

The dynamic of marriage and childrearing is complicated further by differing relationships to the idea of romantic love. One of the reasons Nicki is uncertain about continuing to have children is that she is concerned that having too many children and being seen more as a mother and less of a wife will hurt her relationship with Bill. Her mother is horrified at such a notion. She tells her that: "if you are letting a desire to have a relationship with your husband stand between you and your duty you're on the path to ruin" (Empire). Yet even admitting such a concern is quite a step out of line for Nicki. While Barb and Margie, not coming out of Fundamentalist Polygamous communities, put romantic love, at least for Bill, at the center of their relationships. Nicki has much more

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[8] This narrative regarding Nicki's feeling that she has no choice but to have children has powerful and troubling implications from a feminist perspective however these concerns are beyond the purview of this thesis.

trouble with an idea of marriage based on love, even if that love is for one's sister-wives as well their husband, because of her compound background.

Part of this is because in compounds like the FLDS, unlike independent polygamists, often one has little to no say over who your spouse will be. It is religious faith, duty, and obedience to the prophet that form the basis in at least some compound marriages as they are framed in the program and described in Ben Bistline and John Llewellyn's work. An exchange between Barb and Nicki on their anniversary lays out some of the essential differences between a viewpoint that is centered on the contemporary notion of romantic love and one for which religious duty is the more central feature. Nicki explains to Barb that "I didn't marry for love. I married for the principle." Barb replies that "I didn't. I tried. I don't know that I have a testimony for the principle. But I love you. I love our family more and more." For Nicki she is commited to her marriage because of the principle, if she loves her husband and sister-wives, which she clearly does, that is incidental. On the other hand Barb expresses her commitment to the marriage through her feelings of love for Nicki and their family; for her this makes up for her uncertainty regarding the principle. For Nicki this is an unstable basis for a marriage. She tells Barb that "I don't know that a marriage based on love can go the distance. The sacred holiness of the institution, the sanctity of marriage, without it, it's just random couplings with no purpose or stick-to-itivness. I mean, how will we survive the bad times on just love." (The Writing on the Wall). For the viewer familiar with groups like the FLDS, this belief can be understood as a reflection of Nicki's compound background. In *Polygamy Under Attack* John Llewellyn explains that "love among many

of today's polygamist families is not a factor" but rather that "the binding component that welds the marriage, the bonding agent that ties the woman to her husband, is not love, but the *sealing authority*- in other words, the Fundamentalist priesthood" (Llewellyn 104)

The extent to which romantic love played into 19th century polygamous marriage is something of some debate. While certainly many married for love, Joseph Smith apparently married Emma for love, love was not a necessary prerequisite for marriage. One of Brigham Young's wives, Zina, once said "a successful polygamous wife must regard her husband with indifference, and with no other feeling than that of reverence, for love we regard as a false sentiment" (Van Wagoner 101). Many take such statements to mean that polygamous marriages in this era were not about love. Jesse Embry paints a much more complex picture of love in this period. She notes that the fact that "romantic love was not the prime reason for marriage," in many cases romantic love as inessential for marriage is consistent with 19th century courtships of all kinds (Embry 71). She explains that marriage manuals of the era more generally depicted love as something that "grows out of the relationship rather than being the cause of it" (Embry 66). In response to those who depict polygamous marriages as loveless she emphatically argues that her oral history sources "do not support such a conclusion. There was intense love between husbands and wives; while the love had to be shared, plural husbands, and wives did have romantic attachments" (Embry 51). This aspect of love that had to be shared that was not "something held exclusively for one person" (Embry 66) represents the essential difference in polygamy and in *Big Love*. The complex entanglement of romantic love, attachment, and attraction that is held in varying degrees for several people at once forms

a particularly strong aspect of *Big Love's* narrative and contributes significantly to a very different discourse in *Big Love*, its queer potential which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Sex

Like in any marriage, sex is an important, if controversial, aspect of *Big Love*. NPR's program Day to Day watched the first episode of *Big Love* with a group of polygamists from Centennial Park[9]. They severely objected to the fact that the very first scene of the first episode is s sex scene; they feel that " "it's all about the bedroom" is one of the biggest stereotypes polygamists have to deal with" (Real Life Polygamists React). One woman complains about its depiction at all explaining that "we look upon such things as sacred to us and these types of things cheapen it," while another is concerned that it is perceived not only as a joke but also "the motive" for polygamy (Real Life Polygamists React). I've already argued that *Big Love* embeds theological content to paint a picture of a motive with theological and historical roots that transcends simple desire for sex. However sex plays an important role in this theological and historical framework as well in the dynamics of the Henrickson's family.

What the group of polygamists who saw only the first episode didn't realize was that by the second episode, sex would look less like a motive for or perk of polygamy and more like a reasponsibility and challenge[10]. In the first few episodes of the first season Bill finds himself unable to keep up sexually with his "duties" as a husband and has to

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[9] Centennial Park is a splinter group off of the FLDS. They are generally perceived as much more open and modern then the FLDS (Llewellyn 19).

[10] Indeed although the first episode begins with a sex act, sex is depicted less and less frequently as the show wears on, although references to Viagra return. By its second or third season any kind of sex scene has become rare enough to be considered exceptional.

turn to Viagra for help. In this family sex also has rules and having sex with another wife on a certain wife's designated day can become a volatile source of conflict. When Bill begins wanting more time to be intimate with just Barb, they sneak off at lunch hours to hotels and Bill finds himself having an affair with his own wife. In many ways the Henrickson's feelings about sex are quite traditional. When their teenage son Ben begins having pre-marital sex with his girlfriend, he struggles with it horribly, praying for God to restore his virginity (The Baptism). Having dreams about sex, he asks his father if it is possible to get testimony from dreams (Eclipse). Later, after his parents found out about his sexual experience and tell him that "its the most unholy thing you can do with your body," he goes to his mother to tell her "I'm not ruined inside" (Kingdom Come). It is clear that while sex may be an important part of their marriage, conservative mores about pre-marital sex dominate in this family. This too comes from a theological background. Ben's sister Sarah, after finding out he is sexually active reminds him of their time in LDS Sunday School. She asks him to remember "when they said it was better to see your sons and daughters come home in wooden boxes than to have them give up their chastity" (Reunion). Clearly the stakes for chastity are very high.

In marriage childbearing is important and while sex in *Big Love* is clearly not solely for procreation, Bill continues to be intimate with Barb after she becomes barren and engages in oral sex with Margene, Nicki uses this typical conservative adage "physical intimacy is for procreation not recreation" (Kingdom Come) to chastise Margie for not taking pre-marital sex seriously enough as a problem. This adage was also found

in Embry's research that "sexual intercourse was practiced only for procreation" according to some Mormons (Embry 50).

However within the marital relationship, sex is not deviant, nor a shameful necessity for procreation; it is, as the Centennial Park woman noted in the NPR segment "sacred." Despite the strong prohibition on extramarital and premarital sex, Arrington and Bitton in *The Mormon Experience* argue that these "very proscriptions stem from recognition of the positive place sexuality plays in human happiness, self-fulfillment, and progress toward godhood" (Arrington and Bitton 186-87). Terryl Givens in *People in Paradox* noted that because of Mormonism's embrace of a corporeal deity, and "its association of sexuality with eternal states and relationship" (Givens 45), this theological approach allows sex within the marital relationship to become a positive part of the practice of the principle of plural marriage and the progression of the self. Even within this relationship, however, sex can be fraught with anxiety, Nicki's discomfort with a man performing oral sex, Bill's inability to always perform, and Margie's fear that her relationship with Bill is too much about sex, but ultimately it is something that cannot be ignored or glossed over and is not merely salacious but an essential part of celestial marriage.

The Compound

In this analysis of *Big Love* I have been focusing on aspects of theology and history that impact the depiction of the family in the program. The discourses that surrounds the issue of family specifically are the focus of this thesis; nonetheless I'd like to make a quick comment about the ways in which the show is faithful to its non-fictional

context in other aspects. Much of the conflict generated in *Big Love* is produced through tensions between the Henrickson's independent life in the suburbs and Roman Grant's authority on the compound, an authority that he attempts to wield outside of it for personal and financial gain through Bill's businesses and position.

It is tempting to see some of the dirty-dealing and mafioso meets corporate espionage tactics depicted on the compound as completely a television conceit. Certainly the frequency and intensity of the scheming and manipulation that takes place between Roman Grant and Bill Henrickson in their power struggle is an extreme exaggeration for the sake of the show. However even many of these scenarios have at least some basis in the reality of the various Fundamentalist groups. In season two Bill's pursuit of a video gambling business, Weber gaming, finds him tangling with the Greens, a small secretive polygamous group based on a single family, that can be particularly violent, employs shadowy tactics, and asserts their right to Weber gaming. The Greens hold more than a passing resemblance to the real world Kingston Clan. The Kingston Clan's "heirarchy consists exclusively of Kingston progeny" (Llewellyn 27). Rumors indicate that they can be quite unpredictable and violent, certainly consistent with the Greens who forcibly brand a businessman who crosses them (Llewellyn 30). They have gotten attention for their "coin-operated amusement machine" business, reminiscent of Weber gaming (Llewellyn 29).

This is not to say that *Big Love* does not employ its own artistic license with such facts. *Big Love* depicts a prolonged and elaborate turf war between the Greens and Roman Grant, intentionally instigated by Bill in pursuit of a personal desire for

vengeance against Roman. No such conflict occurred between the Kingston Clan and the FLDS to my knowledge. Similarly Roman Grant is shown having trouble with strikes in his businesses when in fact it was the Kingston Clan that encountered such demonstrations at one of their mines (Llewellyn 29). Rather than simply showing a fictionalized version of true stories, *Big Love* adapts actual occurrences in fundamentalist compounds, such as politically and strategically motivated evictions (Bistline 119), the reassignment or threat of reassignment of wives (Bistline 14), the kicking out of teenage boys from the compound (Jessop and Palmer 324) and the misuse of police officers controlled by the religion (Bistline 148) to build tensions specific to the dynamics of the Henrickson's family and the compound.

The history of this particular conflict has two major parts. Prior to Roman Grant coming to power Bill's grandfather was the prophet; he died mysteriously when alone with Roman (The Baptism). Roman also ordered Bill's father to throw him out of the compound when he was only fourteen (Viagra Blue). While this story too draws some aspects from fact, Roman was Bill's grandfather's, the previous prophet, accountant before becoming prophet (Eclipse) and Rulon Jeffs was Leroy Johnson's CPA before following him as prophet, although under less suspicious circumstances (Bistline 133), it is a fictional innovation that places Bill in constant opposition to Roman Grant in the compound in more than just lifestyle choices. The touches that are added to this depiction of the compound that are drawn from fact lend authenticity for those publics with some knowledge of the Fundamentalist Polygamist compounds depicted by Benjamin Bistline and John Llewellyn, to scenarios that might otherwise seem too extreme to be believable.

Conclusion

Big Love's use of theological and historical fact and information does something radically different from a straightforward attempt at reality. Often translated through fiction *Big Love* mixes historical contexts, takes aspects of real individuals and combines them in a single fictional character like Roman Grant, and mixes theological aspects of both LDS and Mormon Fundamentalist polygamist faiths. Rather than simply using fact and questions of authenticity to give the audience a feeling that the show is realistic, *Big Love* uses theological and historical facts to create a complex context for the program based on referentiality and the decoding of religious references and symbolism. For viewers who have the informational knowledge to catch and decode these references, the factual context that the show provides adds significant registers of meaning to the behaviors and motivations of the characters in the show and their interactions with one another.

In its representation of fact, in *Big Love* the program troubles the divide between the past and present. Bakthin comments that "characteristic for the historical novel is a positively weighted and modernizing, an erasing of temporal boundaries, the recognition of an eternal present in the past" (Bakhtin and Holquist 365-66). *Big Love* puts something of a twist on this idea and in its depiction recognizes the past in the present, collapsing strict boundaries between the two. After Anna divorces the family in "Come Ye Saints", Bill takes them on a trip to the holy, and historical, sites of Mormonism a sort of reverse journey of the pioneers. The trip is framed as both an attempt to reunite and solidify the family and for Bill to pursue his personal search for God (Come Ye, Saints). While both goals are not met, Bill's choice to look for family unity and faith in the very concrete

elements of Mormon history speaks powerfully about the role of the past in their present life. In many ways the past is structuring in *Big Love*. Roman's presumed murder of Bill's grandfather in order to usurp him on the compound motivates many of Bill's actions interfering with the compound. Bill's personal and familial history with Roman and the compound is vital to the story. History is something, with which he and his family must always contend In some ways this mirrors the way that the LDS church sometimes is asked to confront or respond to its polygamous history, something that is brought up in *Big Love* when Barb argues with her mother about polygamy (Take Me As I Am) and when Ted and his associates in the LDS arrange to buy supposed church documents sold by Alby on the compound that speak to the issue of polygamy and claim its legitimacy. Temporal boundaries are more subtly collapsed in the various ways I have demonstrated that the Henricksons in *Big Love* organize their family life in many ways most consistent with 19th century polygamous marriage as described by Jessie Embry.

The troubling of temporal boundaries and the incorporation of theological and historical references and frameworks into *Big Love* prove to play a crucial role in illuminating the inner lives and motivations of the character. I have demonstrated that theological beliefs impact how various characters deal with marriage, kids, love, and sex leading to differences among how Barb, Nicki, and Bill think about these issues based on their very different religious backgrounds. The added information about the characters and plot lines plays several important roles in *Big Love*. The most straightforward is that it provides vital context that allows a deeper understanding of the program's narrative. Having a deeper understanding of the text allows viewers to combat those who mischaracterize it by focusing solely on its more salacious aspects. While it would be

easy for casual viewers to conclude that the show is too much about sex, as do the viewers in centennial park interviewed for NPR, an understanding of the text's religious discourse allows viewers to understand the important role theology plays in motivating decisions regarding sex, procreation and marriage. *Big Love* uses a significant and consistent religious and historical discourse to make certain that ultimately sex is not portrayed as "the motive" as the centennial park viewers fear. It is also important when addressing concerns that the show misrepresents the practice, as Carolyn Jessop has claimed. Instead of misrepresenting polygamy or representing it in a way that is accurate in the sense of documentary representation, *Big Love* posits a different kind of accurate representation, one that does not rely on mirroring something that is but that is based on the incorporation of accurate historical and theological frameworks, combining contexts and disturbing temporal boundaries to create a representation that is based on factual referentiality but is not in any exact sense "realistic."

Finally the religious and historical discourse in *Big Love* plays an important role in the context of the text's other discourses. In this thesis the other discourse that I will be talking about is a queer discourse. By paying close attention to theological and historical references, *Big Love* enriches its specific narrative about polygamy as a practice and makes this narrative well rounded and independent as a narrative. This prevents polygamy in *Big Love* from becoming simplistically a queer analogy or stand/in. Polygamy in the show has a specific character and evokes questions regarding its practice in its own right while also serving as a queer analogy. This allows for a much more rich and complex internal dialogic in the text. The interaction between the religious and queer discourses in the text become crucial in later chapters. Because of the various conflicts

and similarities between the religious and queer discourses about the text the interaction between theses discourses allows each discourse "to shed light on," to use Bakthin's terminology, the other discourse. In later chapters I will look at how the interaction between these discourses create productive tension with one another or enhance one another's argument.

Chapter 2 - Margie: Queer Discourses

In the previous chapter I noted that it was not unheard of for wives to participate in the courting of a new sisterwife; it is likely unique to *Big Love* for a wife to see a potential sisterwife behind her husband's back. Margie continues to see Anna, the women Bill is dating, even after he dumps her. Tearfully she begs him to begin to see Anna again. She tells him that "I love her, I do, I can't help it," but Bill replies that "I can't marry her for you, Margene". He goes on to tell her that he thinks it might not be a celestial calling, that it could just be "lust" (Dating Game). This exchange can be read in a variety of ways by different publics. If it were possible for a bourgeois 19th century audience to watch it today, they would probably interpret this exchange as related to a particularly passionate same-sex romantic friendship, a reasonably common and accepted relationship in the nineteenth century (Jenkins 126). For many queer oriented or queer aware viewers[11] this profession of intense, heart-breaking love (or maybe just lust) by one woman for another has clear queer overtones, an effect heightened by the fact that for much of film and television history queer discourses were routinely coded, and queer reading practices have often been built on the interpretation of subtexts, counter readings and in some cases simply gossip (Becker 30). For the supposedly "average" white, middle-class, heterosexual, suburban Neilson family watching the program, the scene could have a variety interpretations, ranging from understanding Margie and Anna as having an intense friendship, a non-sexual romantic relationship, or a relationship with erotic undertones. Because this is a 21st century viewer, not a nineteenth century one,

[11] Here I use the term queer oriented or queer aware not to refer to those with a gay, lesbian, or bisexual sexual orientation but those who, for varied reasons personal, political, or academic, are particularly sensitives to narratives that are open to queer readings.

watching in a period when homosexuality is in fact visible, *Big Love* itself is sometimes programmed opposite from *The L-Word* on Showtime, the potential queer character of this scene would be legible to many of these viewers as well. The extent to which this queer tone shapes this scene varies for the programs multiple publics. The queer tone of polygamy in *Big Love*, the marriage of one woman to other women as well as her husband, also varies slightly from character to character. Yet the centrality of this queer tone to the depiction of many characters plays an important role in making questions about queer marriage and queer families central to the text.

Margie, who is not from an LDS or Fundamentalist background, is the most removed from the theological and historical context that informs Barb (who was raised LDS) and Nicki's relationship to polygamy. For her, polygamy is intensely about love and family; she perceives her marriage to Barb and Nicki as an important part of her marriage to Bill and not primarily a religious or personal obligation. In fact when Barb is thinking of leaving the family Margie tells her "I don't know if I can be married to Nicki and Bill, if I'm not married to you" (Damage Control). Her relationship to polygamy for the first two seasons is by far the most queered. As the show progresses the relationship between the sister wives becomes more intense and this queer potentiality begins to be more strongly evidenced in other characters behavior.

The term queer in academic usage is an often troubled one; exactly what or who is included in the term "queer" is often disagreed upon. Several scholars, particularly Calvin Thomas, have recently begun to deploy queer theory to interrogate heterosexual or

"straight" subjects[12]. I will be drawing upon this research but also interrogating what makes a subject queer, particularly how central sex and sexual desire has to be to a relationship in order to make it queer. Is marriage, love, and co-parenting between women without erotic acts or attraction queer? It is certainly not homosexual; you can describe the individuals involved as heterosexuals, but it is just as certainly homosocial. At stake in this complicated term "queer" is whether or not a relationship that can be considered queer must also be a relationship that includes same-sex erotic acts or desires. *Big Love* demonstrates that a queer sensibility can be present in relationships that are clearly homomarital and homoromantic but not homoerotic.

I will be engaging with *Big Love* as a queer text on three levels. First I will be looking at *Big Love* as an analogy for queer relationships and issues of what constitutes a family from a queer perspective. Then I will be examining *Big Love* for the ways in which polygamy itself in the text can be understood as a queer positionality because of the complex set of affections, allegiances, and desires between sisterwives and potential sisterwives. Although depictions of gays, lesbians, or transgendered people are relatively few in *Big Love*, and generally negative, the role of these problematic portrayals in creating a queer-conscious mise en scene for the program is important. I will be exploring these depictions, as well as a handful of other non-normative family portrayals, in the last part of this chapter. These different readings of *Big Love* as a queer text are not exclusive; rather the queer potential of polygamy reinforces the way that the program works as queer analogy.

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[12] See *Straight Writ Queer* and *Straight With a Twist*.

At stake here is not the queer individual or subject but rather the "queer" relationship, specifically in relation to the "queer" family. Kath Weston[13], Judith Stacey[14], and many others have indicated how central the question of the queer family is to a queer politics. For Kath Weston the recognition of families we choose and gays and lesbians as parts of kinship is essentially to the recognition for them "as fully social persons" (Weston 205). For Stacey what is at stake is not only the queer family or the gay and lesbian family but the way they are representative of the potential for the "postmodern" family that takes a variety of familial forms both tied to and untied from procreation (Stacey 7). *Big Love* puts both the queer and postmodern family at stake while complicating rather than eliminating the role of procreation in family life. While depicting what is in many ways a conservative family, one that believes in chastity before marriage, is deeply religious, patriarchal, and focused on procreation, it also puts the very queer question, what exactly "counts" as a family in this society, front and center.

Big Love **as Queer Analogy**

A variety of different publics may recognize the queer analogy in *Big Love*, from explicitly queer viewers to those aware of queer social and political issues, even if this awareness takes the form of opposition. Not all of these qualify as what Michael Warner calls counterpublics. However a queer public, capable of being a counterpublic, is particularly likely to see the program as an analogy due to the specifics of the history of this counterpublic and its tradition of media texts that are "coded" to discuss queer issues.

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[13] In her work *Families We Choose*.

[14] In her work *In the Name of the Family*.

A counterpublic is "defined by their tension with a larger public" and "discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules of obtaining in the world at large" (Warner 56). What makes queer public, rather than simply a queer aware or symphatizing public, a counterpublic is Warner's claim that "a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one" (Warner 119). The queer counterpublic approaches a text like *Big Love* with the awareness that they, like the family it depicts, are often placed as "other" than the dominant public, as violating their rules, and, crucially of having their voices suppressed over history. The shape of this suppression has made queer counterpublics particularly receptive to a text that deals with the question of queer families through analogy or allegory. In his article "The Great Escape" Al LaValley explains that in the formation of gay film history, "in the many years of absence of any real representation of themselves on screen, gays created this history out of straight or nominally straight films. They found what could be called a gay sensibility" (LaValley 60). In "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic" Robin Wood observes that sometimes texts that are not explicitly about homosexuals serve the gay liberation movement more effectively than those with more explicit themes (Wood 13). Films and television programs that take up larger questions, like the association between gender and sex or, in this case, what qualifies as a legitimate family, that are important to queer groups without explicitly depicting gays, lesbians, or transgendered individuals would be a familiar mode of address to a queer counterpublic. So would linguistic or visual coding. While *Big Love* as a queer analogy is

comprehensible to many kinds of viewers and some queer viewers may not read the text that way, this form of address would be particularly familiar to a queer counterpublic.

In *Big Love* the Henrickson's polygamous family serves as an analogy for the queer family in multiple ways addressing the generalized question of what makes a legitimate family. The legal vulnerability, in fact potential criminality of their family, is one way that the program addresses this question. Extremely relevant to the queer family are issues of being closeted and coming out, particularly of interest to Kath Weston in her work on queer families, as well as depictions of motherhood not based on bio-genetic connection, estrangement from biological kinship, and the conception of the Henrickson family by others as immoral or perverted. There are many other aspects, large and small that contribute to programs function as queer analogy but by looking at three categories of depiction: closeting and coming out, multiple motherhood, parental recognition and the lack of biological connection and the adversarial relationship of others to their type of family. We can begin to see how such a queer analogy might function.

Closeting and Coming Out

Because of the social and legal admonitions against polygamy, much of the tension in *Big Love* comes from the threat of the Henricksons being outed as polygamists, and they go to great lengths to avoid others finding out their secret. This need to be in the "closet" about who their family really consists of structures much of their lives. At work Bill is only able to have photos of Barb and his kids with her. Barb is the only one able to stand with him at events for his large business, a family-friendly home store called Home Plus, or to even shop at a discount at the store. The neighbors are told that Nicki and

Margie are single mothers who rent houses from the Henricksons. Perpetuating this lie puts great stress on the family. Barb and Nicki chastise Margie for becoming friends with the neighbor across the street because she could discover their secret. Margie for her part is distressed that they tell people she is a single mother because she doesn't want to be judged for this differently "deviant" behavior that is not truly hers. When the family takes on a new business with Weber Gaming her desire to be a "public wife" becomes clear when she makes a bid to be the public wife for this business as Barb is for HomePlus. But even here things go awry when Bill runs into a couple from his and Barb's former life as monogamists (The Happiest Girl). However the greatest cost to everyone involved is the psychic cost of being closeted demonstrated by Nicki's panic when she thinks they've been widely exposed as she runs through the house screaming to Bill "They could come for us! They could burn us down! You could be arrested! You could be taken!" (The Ceremony) and Sarah, the oldest daughter's confession to an ex-mormon groups that "I just feel like I'm living the most dishonest life of anybody in Sandy, Utah" (Damage Control). It is not just the fear of being revealed that has a psychic cost for Sarah, it is the attempt to conceal their life itself; while the most opposed to polygamy in her entire family, she most frequently objects to the deception her family must employ. She tells her father that "it hurts to see you lie, dad. I hate that about this life, watching you and mom hide, all of us having to hide."

For many queer scholars of the family, the closet is a particularly troubling construction. Kath Weston explains that "the closet symbolizes isolation, the individual without society, a stranger even to self" (Weston 50). Indeed the families discouraging

Margie making new friends outside the family, the extremely small circles of any of the family members friends outside of other polygamists, reflect such isolation. Margie's withholding the truth about her marriage even from her mother depicts the fear of rejection that necessitates such closets (Good Guys and Bad Guys). Some researchers have come to the conclusion that the closet itself causes much of the psychological damage to gays and lesbians (and in this case polygamists) rather than the fear or rejection that necessitate it. Judith Stacey refers to literature that "suggests that parents and children alike who live in fully closeted lesbian and gay families tend to suffer more than members of "out" gay families who contend with stigma directly" (Stacey 136). These and many other reasons are why the act of coming out has been so important to gay and lesbian individuals and families and incomplete moments of coming out, or coming out to only a small number of people, becomes pivotal in *Big Love*. In the season finale of Season Two things reach a crisis point for the family. Margie tells elaborate lies to the neighbors to explain her most recent pregnancy by denying that the child is "hers" and claiming to be a surrogate. When the neighbor wants her to serve as a surrogate for her and Margie tells the family she'd like to do so, conflict erupts when Barb and Nicki forbid her to do so. When a distressed Margie finally goes to tell her friend she can't be a surrogate for her, for fictive reasons, Barb joins Margie and claims her as her wife in front of Margie's friend, Pam. When Margie tells the others that "Boss lady outed us to the neighbors" Bill is overjoyed. This moment is shown as a major step for Barb in coming to terms with their marriage (Oh Pioneers) and a major step for their family.

Parenting

The subject of motherhood and parenting is a particularly troubled site in which to discuss *Big Love* as a queer analogy. Discussion of homosexuality often focuses on its non-reproductive nature, or the not solely biological nature of many homosexual's efforts to obtain children. Some scholars associate gay liberation with the rise in the availability of birth control (Wood 14) because of the divorce of sex from procreation and visa versa. The Henrickson family is an intensely procreative environment. Nicki's secret birth control use is portrayed as a massive betrayal of not only her faith but also her family (Come Ye Saints). Many characters recount the importance of having as many children as possible to both LDS and fundamentalist faiths. Building a family for the Henricksons is an entirely heterosexual procreative and spiritual experience.

Despite a failure to completely separate procreation and biology from parenthood, *Big Love* nonetheless complicates these relationships in queer ways. It is important to remember that Barb and Bill began to consider polygamy when Barb became unable to continue to naturally bear children. As Margie reminds Barb, she and Nicki have essentially been "surrogates" for her, or "a baby factory" (Take Me As I Am). Although all of the children do have two biological parents, the series frequently reminds us that they have two non-biological parents as well. While forming a true mother-child relationship is harder with the older children,[15] the program emphasizes that most of the children consider Barb, Nicki and Margie all their mothers. Nicki's young sons refer to Barb as "Mother Barbara", consistent with Kath Weston's finding that many lesbian

[15] Barb and Bill's oldest boy Ben becomes attract to Margie and does not see her as a mother, although Margie has always seen Ben as a son (Come All Ye Saints).

mothers have children who refer to the biological parent solely as "Mama" and the other mother as "Mama...So-and-so" (Weston 173). While this nomenclature still gives the biological mother some priority, it nonetheless designates all three as legitimate co-mothers. Additionally this language would be familiar to the program's queer counterpublics as a normal way of dealing with having multiple legitimate mothers. Yet outside the family to outsiders the non-biological mothers in the Henrickson family are invisible as mothers, in fact often they have to explicitly pose as the babysitter. Unlike the co-mothers Cheshire Calhoun analyzes in *Feminism, The Family, and the Politics of the Closet,* they cannot afford to try and "pass" as the biological mother in case someone knows or meets the biological mother and the family's illegal polygamy will be found out, because of the illegality of their family arrangement, the danger is too high. For the same reason, they do not have the option of educating strangers about their situation that Calhoun indicates is a common strategy of lesbian co-mothers (Calhoun 233). Instead Nicki and Margie often have to pass as "babysitters" or "sisters" rather than claiming kinship. Calhoun discusses the importance of truth-telling by co-mothers because "it is not simply one's own sexual identity at stake but also a complex of kin relations that must be *socially recognized as such* if these families are to function in the world" (Calhoun 251).

This claim ignores the fact that queer families continue to be vulnerable to violence, custody battles, and homophobic laws. Similarly as polygamists, the Henricksons are vulnerable as a family not recognized by the law and society. As parents they have to behave differently to their non-biological children in public not due to any

lack of parental feeling but because of the dangers associate with claiming them as their children in public. Bill insists that Nicki's oldest son, Wayne, continue to attend the Roman Catholic school Nicki dislikes because its far enough away that Bill can publicly be his father there (Vision Thing). He can claim his son almost nowhere else. When Wayne calls out to his father at Home Plus and tries to go to him, Bill must ignore him and Margie has to physically stop Wayne from going to him (Damage Control). Here we see the complex dynamic of public and private in play in the text. While the show's depictions of family home evenings and meals and the stated ideology of the family project an image of a seamlessly united family in the private sphere, due to the need to be closeted, in the public sphere co-mothers have to pass as something other than mothers and Bill sometimes has to pretend not to be involved with some of his children at all in public. He cannot even have a photo of his entire family on his desk. *Big Love* as a queer analogy shows a variety of complications, social and psychological, from being parents that are *not* recognized by society.

Adversarial Relationship with the Outside World

That children would suffer as a result of societal recognition of their family is consistent with Judith Stacey's research on the gay family. She observes that

> children of gay parents are vicarious victims of rampant homophobia and institutionalized heterosexism....Living in families that are culturally invisible or despised, the children suffer ostracism by proxy, forced to negotiate conflicts between loyalty to home, mainstream authority and peers (Stacey 135).

The potential of ostracism by proxy looms large for the Henricksons. When Teenie is no longer allowed to go over to a certain friend's house, the whole family assumes she is being excluded because the friend's parents must have found out about their polygamy. They are shocked when they find out that her exclusion is instead because she'd been showing her friends dirty magazines (Block Party). Sarah is teased by her friends at work, although not excluded and is called "plygie" or taunted that "Sarah has three mommies[16]" (Pilot).

Like queer families, the Henricksons face not only potential ostracism but are legally vulnerable. The episode "Where There's A Will" traverses the complex legal wrangling the family undergoes to try to keep the kids together if any of the parents die. Of the three wives only Nicki wants her children to go to her mother, in part because Barb, like many gays and lesbians has been ostracized by her family as a result of her choosing to be in polygamy. Although Margie's mother eventually comes around, initially she declares Margie's beliefs "perverted" (Good Guys and Bad Guys). This situation with biological kin can escalate easily. One of Barb's friends, another independent polygamist, tells her that "my own mother tried to grab my kids. She followed Ruby around in her Lexus for weeks" (Reunion). Family members who do not come from recent polygamy so disapprove of their lifestyle that they cut their children off, refuse to speak to them, and even threaten to take their children. Because polygamist families are also legally vulnerable, the loss of custody over one's children is a real concern in the series. When Don, Bill's best friend and business partner, consults a lawyer when two of his wives run

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[16] This is an allusion to the childrens book *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman and Diana Souza.

off with his kids, he tells Don that he can't fight for them. Don tells Bill that "if I fight they'll say we're a cult. That we brainwashed and abused them. I can't even claim my own children without fear of arrest" (Empire). In the show these fears are heightened since Don's wives left shortly after a nationally publicized raid on a compound in Kansas.[17] Gay and lesbian parents have frequently had trouble with the family legal system, losing custody battles to straight exes or biological grandparents and being denied the right to be foster or adoptive parents in some states. Beyond solely being unable to publicly claim all their children in some public situations polygamist families in *Big Love* (like many queer families) are legally vulnerable as well as socially marginalized.

Several of these issues, ostracism, rejection by biological families and legal vulnerablity would be familiar to queer counterpublics and other publics aware of queer and LGBT social and political issues. It is important that we are careful not to essentialize any "type" of viewer. Alexandery Doty reminds us that

> queer positions are not the only ones from which queers read and produce mass culture. As with nonqueers, factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, occupation, education, and religious, national and regional allegiances influences our identity construction, and therefore are important to the position we take as cultural producers and readers-consumers (Doty 74).

Clearly not all queer individual viewers will read *Big Love's* approach to these issues as an analogy for the queer family. I hope, however, to have adequately demonstrated that

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[17] Based on the 2008 raid on the FLDS Yearning For Zion ranch in Texas.

Big Love's approach to issues that face the marginalized family can be connected to issues that face queer (LGBT) families.

In *Feminism, the Family and the Politics of the Closet* Cheshire Calhoun notes that

> specifically, lesbians and gay men are displaced from the public sphere, from the private sphere, and from our social future. Given this, three liberties are particularly crucial: 1) the liberty to represent one's identity publicly 2) the liberty to have a protected private sphere, and 3) the liberty to equal opportunity to influence future generations (Calhoun 159).

We have seen that the Henricksons face obstacles to at least two of these liberties: they cannot be open about their family in public are forced into facing the challenges of the closet and rather than having a protected family sphere they are vulnerable to the law, discovery by neighbors, even threats brought by members of their own biological families. While they can biologically procreate without aid and can therefore influence future generations, the other two necessary liberties enumerated by Calhoun are denied both to many gays and lesbians and the Henricksons. As an analogy for the queer family *Big Love* functions effectively to represent some of the challenges such families face.

Polygamy As Queer

Reading the family in *Big Love* as queer on its own terms brings up two crucial questions: what exactly makes a family or a couple queer and how important is sex in this equation? In some ways the Henrickson family reinforces aspects of heteronormative families, like procreation and patriarchy, that many scholars describe queer theory as

working against (Monson-Rosen 233). On the other hand, the Henrickson's marital arrangement challenges normative couple-based-monogamy and the presumption of a family organized by blood and traditional marriage. *Big Love* simultaneously presents viewers with a family form that is both deeply historically based and a representation of what Judith Stacey calls "the postmodern family." Judith Stacey says that she studies gay and lesbian families not because they are "marginal nor exceptional, but rather to represent a paradigmatic illustration of the "queer" postmodern condition of kinship that we all now inhabit" (Stacey 15). She uses the phrase postmodern family "to signal the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of our contemporary family cultures" (Stacey 7). The Henrickson family which can be read as simultaneously "queer" and "not queer" fit this description beautifully since their status as a family is contested and defining the family as traditional, queer, etc. is ambivalent.

In "Queer Families and the Politics of Visbility" Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann asks "what is a queer family?" and explains that they use the "the term "queer" families here to signify the diverse family structures formed by those with nonnormative gender behaviors or sexual orientations" (Bernstein 3). The problem with this definition is determining what constitutes "nonnormative gender behaviors". In many ways Barb, Nicki and Margene have exceptionally normative gender behaviors: they are housewives and mothers, do the grocery shopping, the cleaning and the cooking. In other ways their gender behavior is complicated. Is it nonnormative gender behavior for a woman to marry another woman even if they are also married to a man? Is it nonnormative gender behavior to love another woman? To court her? Even if the women involved have only a

non-sexual love for one another. These questions complicate Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann's attempt at a clean definition of the queer family.

Despite the Fundamentalist polygamist groups general emphasis on patriarchal priesthood authority, it is when Bill is pursuing a fourth wife, Anna, that his authority is most undermined. Bill attempts to break things off with Anna multiple times, the first time Margie intervenes to get them back together (and continues to see Anna behind Bill's back). Later, after Anna cheats on him it is Barb who insists Bill take her back. She tells him that whether or not to date her isn't only his choice anymore and that since she likes Anna, Bill should go to her and take her back (Prom Queen). The bringing on of a new wife in this case does not give Bill more patriarchal power, rather the emotional attachment of his other wives to Anna significantly complicate his attempts to "date" her in the heteronormative way.[18] Eventually Barb insists that all four of them, Bill and the wives, date Anna circumventing the traditional heteronormative dating ritual. In this very postmodern (and traditional) family, an attempt to bring on a new wife produces a storyline in which we see the "queer" and "not queer" collide. A very not queer aspect of the family, Bill's patriarchal authority, is undermined by a very queer one, the feelings of desire, love or affection of his current wives for a potential new wife.

If we accept the possibility of a queer family or relationship in which same-sex sex does not take place, the proposition of the "straight queer" subject, then their is clear queer potential in the Henrickson's particular brand of polygamy. I will be focusing on how their polygamist family can be queer in terms of how it challenges the couple norm

[18] Earlier in the series Don has a similar problem when all of his wives vote out the woman they were considering for a new wife (A Barbecue for Betty).

of marriage and relationship and the depiction of non-sexual love, commitment and courting amongst women.

Straight Queer

In the last few years Calvin Thomas, Richard Fantina, and others have proposed that queer theory can be applied to heterosexual subjects. This de-coupling of queer subjectivity from queer (or at least same-sex) sex is both tantalizing and potentially problematic. In "From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace" Suzanne Danuta Walters worries that reduction of "queerness" to nonnormative sexuality is so broad that it include "hetero S/Mers, dissatisfied straights, and so forth?" will dilute queer politics that it "reduces queer politics to a banal (and potentially dangerous) politics of simple opposition" (Walters 8). Other scholars are fearful that including heterosexuals as potentially queer subjects will be a problematically "normalizing" force, the appropriation of a marginalized groups discourse and politics by a dominant one.

Even scholars who apply queer theory to heterosexual subjects are concerned about the consequences of such a project but conclude that the benefits outweigh the risks. Deborah Kaplan and Rebecca Rabinowitz argue that

> while it is important to identify and minimize the potential pitfalls of applying queer theory to heterosexuality, such application can free heterosexuality from its traditional state of mythic non-complexity, preventing what Anna Marie Jagose calls the inappropriate maintenance "of heterosexuality and homosexuality" as radically and demonstrably distinct from each other (Kaplan 197).

Many scholars of queer theory distinguish between heteronormativity and heterosexuality in the introduction to *Queer Studies: An Indisciplinary Reader* Robert J. Corber and Stephen Valocchi observe that "although they overlap, heteronormativity and heterosexuality are not co-extensive and cannot be reduced to each other. Thus there may be modes of organizing sexual relations between straights that are not heteronormative" (Corber 4).

Calvin Thomas refers to non heteronormative heterosexuality as "straightness with a twist." He claims that "straightness *with a twist* would, rather, work to mitigate, or militate against, those institutional, compulsory ideals, those compulsory performances" (Thomas 31). As we have seen by the way that *Big Love* functions as queer analogy, the performance of family life in the Henrickson's polygamous family undermines the compulsive performance of heteronormativity as it applies to rigid definitions of normative nuclear family life. In so doing it creates a "queer space" which

> recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture. In this sense, the use of the term *queer* to discuss reception takes up the standard binary opposition of *queer* and *nonqueer* (or *straight)* while questioning its viability, at least in cultural studies, because, as noted earlier, the queer often operates within the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does with the queer (Doty 73).

My previous discussion of the show's storyline about courting Anna as a new wife has already demonstrated that *Big Love* is capable of simultaneously deploying queer and nonqueer elements and allowing them to interact together in productive ways.

Thinking Beyond the Couple

One of the hallmarks of many scholars definitions of heteronormativity is the prioritization of monogamy and the "couple" form for marriage and parenthood. As we have seen, thinking beyond the couple in relation to both these categories is central to *Big Love.* In Robin Wood's analysis of Jean Renoir's work in the context of gay liberation he discusses "our entrapment in ideological notions of love and sexuality, with their emphasis on pairing, choice, and exclusivity; and the continuously repressed but insistent vision of the potential loveliness of genuinely shared relationships" (Wood 16). In *Big Love's* portrayal of love and sexuality pairing and exclusivity are not required; in fact exclusivity is denied as a possibility for the Henricksons. Barb tells Bill, during an argument about their abandoning monogamy, that "I sacrificed our love" (meaning exclusive love) "for the love I have for this family" (Damage Control). She recognizes that she had to give up one kind of love in order to be part of a family where exclusive love is sacrificed for the love of several. Bill's attempts to date Anna alone fails, so often does his frequent attempts to go to one wife when another is angry. Barb chastises Margie for allowing Bill to have sex with her on a night that Barb had denied him sex.

Attempts at reproducing simple exclusive relationships, even in parenting, often fail. When Ben, who has decided he wants to be a polygamist, is arguing with Nicki, he tells her "you're not my mother." She dismisses this telling him "you don't selectively choose which parts of the principle you like young man. It's a package deal. It's plural wives and plural mommies" (The Happiest Girl). This issues goes to the core of heteronormativity. Donald E. Hall in "A Brief, Slanted History of 'Homosexual' Activity"

cites "a still expanding, reproduction-dependent economy organized through a monogamous (emphasis mine), patriarchally controlled domestic unit" (D. E. Hall 104). A lack of monogamy is not to be confused with an anything-goes attitude about sex; thinking beyond the couple does not make infidelity impossible. While dating Anna is not considered cheating, when Barb and Bill start sneaking off to have sex together on other than Barb's designated nights with Bill, it is framed as an affair. Barb's friend Peg warns her "he's not going to leave his wives" (Roberta's Funeral). While Barb's desire to continue sneaking around clearly evidences her desire to have exclusivity with Bill, she stops because although Bill and Barb are married, what they are doing can hurt their other wives. When Sarah, who is completely against polygamy, finds out about her parents' affair she is happy, yet Barb is horrified that she knows because, having chosen polygamy, Barb realizes what she is doing is essentially cheating on Nicki and Margie and that she has to give up exclusivity in order to get something else and to be faithful to her sisterwives.

According to Maureen Sullivan,

> the heterosexual nuclear family is our guiding image of what "real families" look like; it constitutes a kind of truth regime in that its power guarantees that human beings will not only strive to conform to this image but will also recognize as families only those social relationships that do so. Those who do not conform, for example lesbian co-parent families, are not socially intelligible within this truth regime. Mother-mother-child families are literally inconceivable (Sullivan 231).

Faced with the literal inability to conceive, the Henricksons conceived of a mother-mother-mother-father child family that, as Nicki insists, refuses to elevate only biologically paired parents to the status of "real parents." While it may initially be tempting to see Bill and his wives as three parallel couples, indeed the show at first teases us with this possibility[19], the programs depictions of the family's operation rejects this possibility by showing the importance of thinking "of the needs of our family as a whole" (Block Party). Understanding of this dynamic comes to various characters as a process. Nicki comes from a polygamist background and immediately understand that marrying Bill also means marrying Barb, and eventually Margie. For Margie this realization comes later, but she embraces its implications wholeheartedly when she tells Bill she wants to be baptized to ensure that she will be with the entire family in the afterlife. She tells him "when I married into the family I guess I must have thought that I was just marrying you and now I realize I was marrying all of you. I was marrying sisters...my sisters. That was my choice and I would make that choice all over again" (The Baptism). It is not enough that Margie affirm her understanding of her marriage as more that about the couple; she also has to identify and reconfirm this as her conscious choice. Soon after she is telling Barb that she does not believe she can not be married to Nicki and Bill if she isn't also married to Barb (Damage Control).

Love

Rather than simply being the consequence or condition of marrying Bill, the love and marriages between the women, despite often being conflicted, are depicted as

[19] The first scenes show Bill in bed with Nicki and him sneaking out of her house the next day while his daughter watches from the window of the house next door.

valuable and unique in their own right. When Barb and Bill are fighting, Nicki tells him that "Margie and I know her in way that you will never know her" (Damage Control), reminding him that their marriages to Barb are different and as important as his marriage to her.

While the language of sisters emphasizes the platonic nature of the love Barb, Nicki, and Margie profess for each other frequently, other language and coding in the program emphasizes a more romantic tinge to some of their relationships. Margie, shortly after meeting Anna, tells her that she is a polygamist. When Anna asks her about her wives, Margie tells her that her "sisterwives, they're amazing. You know how they say everyone has a soulmate? Well so far I've found three" (Dating Game). This "so far" leaves space for finding another soulmate in Anna. Indeed the program codes their relationship as romantic; "This Magic Moment" is played on the soundtrack when Marge and Anna first meet (Vision Thing). When Anna later finds out that Bill, who she'd been dating, and Margie, who she befriends, are married she is hurt and thinks that she's been manipulated. Margie explains to Anna that this wasn't planned with the language of a romantic comedy telling her, "we just both fell for you" (Oh, Pioneers). This romantic attachment worries Nicki who says it is too much in character for Margie who she thinks "forms these inappropriate attachments to other women." Interestingly Bill reinscribes Nicki's objections in somewhat romantic terms saying "you sound a little jealous." Ultimately it does appear that Nicki feels betrayed when she tells Bill "it's dangerous when a sisterwife strays" (Dating Game).

While Nicki and Barb often use less romantic language than Margie, they nonetheless claim to love their sisterwives and behave accordingly. Even in anger loving or intimate relationships can be demonstrated. When it is revealed that Nicki has secretly been taking birth control Barb goes to her feeling betrayed that Nicki no longer seems to want what she said she wanted at the time of their marriage, to expand their family (Fight or Flight). Although anger seems a strange place to locate love, it is Barb's feelings of betrayal that alludes to the intimacy of their marital relationship. As Nicki reminds Bill at the beginning of season two, "there are four of us in this marriage...you can't compartmentalize a separate thing with one of us when there are four of us. This is my marriage and Margie's too" (Damage Control). No part of the marriage, in Nicki's formulation, can be separated from the other parts. All three wives lives are meaningfully interconnected and interdependent.

Kath Weston identifies love as the crucial component of queer kinship; she finds that "grounding kinship in love deepmhasized distinctions between erotic and nonerotic relations...as such, love offered a symbol well suited to carry the nuances of identity and unity so central to kinship in the United States, yet circumvent the procreative assumption embedded in symbols like heterosexual intercourse and blood ties" (Weston 107). This can be seen in Nicki's insistence on her full status as Ben's mother and on the homomarital and sometimes homoromantic[20] but never homoerotic relationship between the wives. Weston's rubric of the queer family makes space for the possibility of non-erotic familial couples or relationships. She reports that "when I asked interview

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[20] Homoromantic and homomarital are used by D. Michael Quinn in *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans*.

participants if they were currently involved in a relationship, a few were uncertain how to answer. Of those who hesitated the women wondered whether they should count primary emotional bonds as relationships in the absence of sexual involvement" (Weston 140). *Big Love* as queer text brings this question center stage. The women in *Big Love* clearly share deep emotional bonds that are central to their lives (the plurality of the marriage makes primacy a problem), but there is no sexual involvement. If sex and sexual, rather than romantic or emotional, desire is backgrounded, there is a clear case for seeing the Henrickson's version of polygamy as queer.

Explicit Queer Representations

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in "Sex in Public" refers to the need "to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment" (Berlant 172). While some of the explicit representations of queer subjects in *Big Love* can be described as homophobic, which is unquestionably problematic; they still contribute to creating a "queer space" or queer mise en scene in which a queered depiction of the Henrickson family can take place.

The darkest depiction of a queer subject involves Roman's son, Nicki's brother, Alby who is an extremely closeted homosexual. We are privy to only two of Alby's disasterous attempts at cruising. The first time he goes to a motel with a man he picked up but as things begin to get sexual he cracks, he starts shaking, banging his head against the wall, and shrieking until the other man runs off (Eviction). The second time he attempts to have sex in a public bathroom and is assaulted by a man his mother hired to attack him as vengeance for Alby trying to usurp Roman (Block Party). More generally

Alby is portrayed as an extremely negative character; immoral, conniving and brutal, he is by no means a sympathetic portrayal of a homosexual.

A similarly occasional brutal character is the gender queer Selma Green, who once tries brand Bill. When Selma is initially introduced, she appears to be an extremely butch woman in a suit but could also easily be a man. In later episodes Hollis Greene refers to Selma as his "brother" to Bill (Kingdom Come). In season three it is revealed that Selma, is in fact biologically female and is Roman's sister and Hollis' wife. Roman bullies her into not only allowing Hollis to take another wife but humiliates her by forcing her to wear a dress for the wedding. Previously we have only seen her in suits and she looks miserable and awkward in the pink dress (Fight or Flight). The gender difference in presentation is clear. While clad in a dress she is silent, awkward, passive, and endlessly harassed by a pig snuffling at her legs and back, equally menacing and violating; (Fight or Flight) in the very next episode, back in a suit, she speaks for Hollis, is commanding and aggressive, coming after Bill violently with a stapler (Rough Edges). Despite clearly being a stable character Selma behaves radically differently in the two episodes; here the clothes, or really the gender presentation, really do make the person. Interestingly Roman instructs her to "perform her marital duty unambiguously" (emphasis mine) (Fight or Flight). Ambiguity can be understood as a key feature of the postmodern or queer family as Stacey defines it.

It is important in this context to remember that the LDS church, like many religious institutions, has a reputation for being homophobic. *Big Love* reflects this in subtle ways. Heather tells Sarah that she volunteered at a shelter for gay, lesbian and

transgendered homeless teens to prove that she's not "too Mormon" and that she is "open minded" (Viagra Blue). Rhonda blackmails Heather by saying she'll tell people that she has sexual feelings for Sarah; she tells her that she "knew women like you from the compound" (The Happiest Girl). A particularly interesting example is a couple Sarah interviews as prospective adoptive parents to her baby. The husband tells her that he struggles with same-sex attraction but that "through the lord's help I've been able to develop a lot of masculine qualities; some day I believe I will no longer have homosexual attraction. It might not be until I'm resurrected from the dead" (On Trial). Sarah does not want this couple to adopt her child because their relationship has "no true intimacy." She believes that the church shouldn't counsel gay men to marry women and straight women to marry gay men. She says "I don't know what the solution is to the gay thing but this isn't it" (On Trial). Surprisingly it is her LDS friend Heather who suggests that "they seem to really care about each other" (On Trial) implying that their marriage could be good without sexual desire. Generally encouraging gay men to marry woman is a strategy opposed by LGBT groups and their supporters, and is an effect of religious homophobia. In the specific context of *Big Love* it again beg the question of a marriage; it appears a loving marriage, not based on sexual desire such as the marriages between the Henrickson wives. It would be problematic to conflate these two marriage types, particularly since the former is based on repression and homophobia, but they inform one another in meaningful ways. The representation of negative explicitly gay and lesbian characters and homophobic religious structures in *Big Love* does not impede the texts ability to deal positively with queer issues, instead these problematic depictions of

homosexuals contribute to the tension between discourses inherent in the show. *Big Love* shows that non-normative families and marriages can be potentially viable and still have not only negative queer characters but also characters oppressed by homophobic institutions.

Despite Rhonda's comment that she knew lesbians on the compound, we see no clear explicit lesbians living polygamy in *Big Love*. There is, however, an extremely subtle moment with two of Don's wives, Vernie and JoJo, that allows queer counterpublics and queer aware publics to read in lesbian desire in a polygamist context. There is a very brief moment in the show's second episode in which, while playing bridge, Vernie and JoJo are seen playing footsie beneath the table (Viagra Blue). It is an extremely brief and subtle scene but for a counterpublic or public used to looking for coded cues it is enough to allow viewers to question Bill's adding "together" when Peg tells him "Vernie and JoJo ran off" (Empire). How viewers will read this "together," whether they ran off together or ran off *together*, depends on their position as viewers and how they read such incredibly ambiguous and subtle cues as those described above. In later episodes when Don attempts to convince them to come back to him with proof that polygamy was never intended to be abandoned by the church and they tell him "that they only loved each other and their children" not Peg or Don, this potential reading is strengthened (Rough Edges). The extent to which this is surprising, or even understood as queer, is greatly influenced by the ability of audiences to notice and recall the first subtle moment of intimacy in "Viagra Blue."

Conclusion

In many ways the development of queer discourse in *Big Love* is radically different from the way the series' religious and historical discourse is constructed. While the development of religious and historical discourse in *Big Love* is based more on specific referentiality, the queer discourse practice is based primarily on coding. In many ways this is consistent with an historically situated queer reading practice that involves looking for subtextual cues in texts rather than specific references to queer issues. This reading practice has historically been very important for the application of queer theory to media since only recently have gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people begun to be portrayed explicitly frequently in film and television. Because *Big Love* is made in a very different historical context, contemporaneous with many explicitly gay and lesbian themed shows, the role of its queer subtext needs to be looked at very differently. The portrayal of queer subtext and queer-related questions of marriage and family in an explicitly heterosexual context brings up some important issues. Here I have used some of the scholarship surrounding a relatively new field of inquiry into "straight queer" to address the ways that heterosexual practices can be looked at as queer and as pertaining to queer questions.

I have examined three different ways in which the text approaches queer discourse: *Big Love* as queer analogy, the Henrickson family as queer in and of itself, and the portrayal of explicitly queer characters in the text. *Big Love* as queer analogy addresses issues confronting queer families like closeting and coming out, dealing with being a non-biological second (or third) mother, and having to confront a frequently

adversarial or hostile outside world. Functioning as a queer analogy the family, in *Big Love* plays out issues confronting queer families in a significantly different context. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the religious discourse in the text significantly complicates the way the text can be approached as a queer analogy. However the ability of the text to employ a queer discourse and address queer issues without relying on explicit representations of LGBT individuals is very important in terms of the potential for texts that employ this strategy for getting questions about the position of non-normative marriages and families in this society in front of audiences who may not watch explicitly queer texts. Michael Warner has observed that "any number of factors make for a pool of queer sentiment in persons otherwise distant or phobic about queerness" and that "queer sentiment can be largely independent of queer sexual practice and therefore an opportunity for translation work" (Warner 222). The queer discourse in *Big Love* can be looked at as doing this kind of translation work.

Queer sentiment is also fundamental to *Big Love*'s portrayal of polygamy itself as in many ways queer. This is related to the recent scholarship on "straight queer" but also brings up some fundamental questions about thinking beyond the couple and love between women that are relevant to more traditional queer theory frameworks. Fundamental to this question is how essential sex is made to issues of love, including romantic love, and marriage. *Big Love* recognizes the inherent queerness in love, fidelity, romantic desire, and co-parenting between two women, even when sex is not present. How this relationship between two wives can become more explicitly queer is indicated in the extremely subtle narrative arc of Don's wives Vernie and Jojo who eventually

decide to run away together. Although the majority of representations of explicitly LGBT individuals in *Big Love* are problematic at best and blatantly negative much of the time, the presence of explicitly queer character in *Big Love* does work to help create a queer mise en scene for the text in which the more positive and complex work on queer issues can be done through queer analogy and the portrayal of polygamy as queer. In the next chapter I will look at how queer discourse is further complicated by the religious discourses in *Big Love* that is an important part of its context.

Chapter 3 - Barb: Interaction Between the Text's Discourses

Although thus far I have been looking at *Big Love's* queer discourses and faith related discourses in terms of their cogency to separate (but potentially overlapping publics), in reality these two discourses frequently come into conversation in fascinating and productive ways. The last moments of the third season of *Big Love* beautifully illustrates the possible meetings of these discourses. Like so many narrative arcs in *Big Love,* the end of season three entangles traditionally theological and queer family discourses. After discovering that Nicki has been using birth control (undermining the families theologically based goal of growing the family), briefly dating her boss (cheating on both Bill and her sisterwives), and has been a spy for her parents at the DA's office (endangering her entire family who are illegal in the eyes of the state), Bill decides that he wants to be unsealed from her. Margie's resoundingly negative response to not being consulted in the decision to separate from Nicki, let alone to become unsealed from her, has both a theological and homomarital basis. From a theological perspective Margie's baptism in the faith and sealing to Bill and her sisterwives assures that they will be together in eternity; to unseal from Nicki is to open up the possibility that not only will they not be with her in the after life but also that potentially either Margie or Nicki may not be with the children Nicki gave birth to in the after life. When Barb, who is being ex-communicated by the LDS, and Nicki speak of being cast into outer darkness this has two dimensions: the theological casting out from the kingdom of heaven and being cast out, sent away, from ones community and/or family. From a queer discourse perspective Margie's marriage to Nicki is being ended against her will. The social and emotional

components of the relationship that Margie has with Nicki are important to Margie and its dissolution has consequences beyond its religious implications for her. The threat to kinship relationships that Bill getting unsealed from Nicki embodies is severe on many levels. This is an example of how queer and religious discourses in *Big Love* function in relation to each other and cannot be looked at as unrelated and discrete discourses. In the example described above we can see how in many parts of the narrative elements from both the show's theological and queer discourses inform important moments in the show. Here a publics awareness of both queer and religious elements of the narrative can provide a better sense of the full extent of what is at stake in Bill's threat of unsealing himself (and therefore the family) from Nicki.

The reincorporation of Nicki into the family also takes place, with very little discussion, on both religious and queer levels. Bill has decided to claim the keys of the priesthood and is in the backyard with Barb, Margie and the children giving Sacrament to his family. Nicki comes in with her estranged daughter from a previous marriage. Her acceptance back in the family is not indicated verbally but by two crucial visually coded moments, one queer and one religious. When Barb goes over to Nicki and takes her hand, this gesture can be read as Barb's accepting her back, affirming Barb's marriage to Nicki although she cannot affirm Nicki's marriage to Bill. On a queer discourse level, the wives marriage to one another and not merely to Bill once again becomes central. Bill does not welcome Nicki back on a romantic level but rather on a theological one as he offers her and her daughter the Sacrament. When Nicki accepts it, she accepts Bill as the holder of the keys, as well as her own personal priesthood holder. Bill's offering of the

Sacrament, after declaring his family its own church, to both her and her daughter returns Nicki to the family while incorporating her daughter wordlessly into their complex network of kinship relationships. It would be a grievous error to imply that these discourses, theological/historical and queer can only be read separately; in fact in the scene I have described above these discourses are more effective when read together. While Margie's concern about Bill unsealing form Nicki is to a great extent for her current, worldly marriage to Nicki, her homomarital desire for Nicki impacts upon fears that they may not be together in the afterlife as well, something Margie was baptized to insure. The offering and acceptance of Sacrament is on the surface a purely religious act but in the scene described it is used in part symbolically to reinstate and cement relationships. Thus far we have discussed how different publics have varying levels of access to specific references and discourses in this chapter I will be looking at how the fullest reading of this text puts these discourses in conversation with each other and depends on viewers from various publics recognizing and considering elements that may be *most* cogent for other publics.

Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* writes about her concerns regarding the pursuit of gay and lesbian marriage rites and focus on kinship and this searching for legitimacy through the state. She observes that

> the state can become the site for the recirculation of religious desires, for redemption, for belonging, for eternity. And we might ask what happens to sexuality when it runs through this particular circuit of fantasy: Is it alleviated of its guilt, its deviance, its discontinuity, its asociality, its spectrality? (Butler 111).

Reading religious and queer discourses in tandem with each other and against each other in *Big Love* does precisely this, without the aid of the state, it inserts sexuality into a framework of religious desire that is deeply invested in redemption and particularly eternity; a religious desire that posits sexuality extending into eternity. Because of the particular historical stigmatization and state criminalization and pathologization of polygamy, this sexuality is able to, for better or worse, preserve sexuality's deviance and discontinuity, in a way that is linked both to queer desire and a specific history of religious persecution. Butler cites Sylvian Agacinksi as claiming "that it goes against the "symbolic order" to let homosexuals form families" (Butler 112). William R. Handley joins gay marriage and plural marriage together as examples of violations of the "good order" in society, a subversive force in the eyes of much of society (Handley 91). Publics and counterpublics are not discrete entities they often overlap in significant ways. Extremely few viewers will view *Big Love* solely through its religious or queer discourse registers. While some publics will pay more attention to one discourse than another and may have an easier time decoding particularly references and subtexts associated with one discourse more than another, very few members of any given public will be entirely unaware of the discourses more associated with other publics. In many cases viewers may belong to more than one public, such as queer, or queer aware, individuals who are or were Mormon; in almost all cases they will share some of the knowledge basis of another public These discourses are most vital when they are commenting on one another, I will be examining how *Big Love* places these two discourses in productive tension with each other, how these discourses support one another in depicting issues that both discourses

share (such as questions of stigmatization), and why the use of these two, sometimes conflicting, discourses in *Big Love,* rather than simply producing for example a straightforwardly "queer" or "gay" show, is an important technique or strategy for *Big Love* particularly and for creating highly complex television shows more generally.

Productive Tension

The use of productive tension in *Big Love* is an important part of the narrative, it demonstrates how a show can depict discourses that have some conflicting and contradictory elements without either glossing over these elements or making them purely oppositional. In *Big Love* we see discourses with opposing elements put in conversation with each other in a way that preserves the tension between the two discourses but problematizes and complicates the discourses and these tensions in a productive way. It is not uncommon for scholarship reflecting on queer subject positions to set up traditional and religious discourses as oppositional to queer subjectivities. Indeed this is often the case in religious organizations; todays LDS Mormonism has taken an oppositional position regarding not only gay marriage (Krakauer 339) but also polygamy, working actively at different times against both forms of marriage in order to defend "moral values." In some cases there may be a part of the program's Mormonism informed public that is also part of its queer aware public that is particularly engaged with the shows queer discourses because of conservative beliefs that actually oppose queer kinship or same-sex marraige while also being engaged with the Henrickson family's traditional beliefs about pre-marital sex. In the previous chapter I focused primarily on queer counterpublics, but another public who may by hyper-aware of queer

subtexts are those who are passionately opposed to homosexuality and fear its influence in public life such as "fundamentalists" who "offer a different critique of children's television and consumer culture based on....taboos on sexuality - especially queer sexualities-and nudity" (Seiter 91). Because publics have access to varied discourses in a single text, to varying degrees the tensions between these discourses can be an important part of their experience of the text, and an important tool for incorporating complexity into the text. In many ways this tension between conservative religious values and non-normative family formations is central to *Big Love;* but rather then being placed in opposition to each other these two elements are put in productive tension with one another in regards to patriarchy, procreativity and non-marital sex, and traditional religious values. The intersection of these discourses and the examination of the tensions they create can in some instances demonstrate instabilities and problematics present in the issues around which tensions take form.

Patriarchy

A particularly productive tension can be seen surrounding the issue of patriarchy in *Big Love,* patriarchy is a traditionally and theologically significant part of Mormon fundamentalist polyga but is particularly problematic for the show's queer narrative because traditionally queer theory has positioned itself in opposition to patriarchy. However throughout the show patriarcy is shown not to be secure and the tension becomes productive when the queer connections between the women problematize Bill's patriarchal control. William R. Handley in "Belongings: Plural Marriage, Gay Marriage and the Subversion of "Good Order"" writes that

> what marital forms could be farther apart socially or religiously than a marriage between two women, on the one hand, and between eight women and one man, on the other? Whether or not the former involves children, it has no foundation in patriarchy, polygamy, on the other hand, is profoundly patriarchal and most often theocratic in its practice (Handley 90).

In *Big Love* polygamy clearly has a theocratic motivation, one that has a particularly strong relationship to patriarchy, given the status of the priesthood, reserved solely for men, in Mormon society and the role of the father as the receiver of revelation for his family. Bill clearly attempts to exert this authority frequently throughout the series, making decisions behind his wives' backs that affect the entire family, attempting to dictate to this wives how they should behave and secretly involving himself in compound drama despite risks to his family. Nicki sometimes gives lip service to Bill's right to exert his patriarchal authority over the family. Nicki tells Barb that "the men on Mount Rushmore are patriarchs. I want Bill to be Godly....Look, I know how to submit and that's why I'm happy" (Circle the Wagons). Such a statement would make the Henrickson family irredeemably patriarchal if it were true, but consistently Bill's wives undermine his attempts to exert control. Despite Nicki's speech to Barb, she regularly subverts Bill; running up credit card debt, secretly taking birth control, and scheming to aid compound friends and relatives.

Barb and Margie more straightforwardly undermine him. Barb class him a "caveman" and tells him, "remember Bill, there's a patriarch above you he's called our Heavenly Father" (Circle The Wagons). Barb's statement indicates how this particular

tension over patriarchy can be a productive one. By reminding Bill of his own subordination to their Heavenly Father, Barb uses a specifically theological and patriarchal framework to undermine Bill in his attempt to exert patriarchal control over his family. A similar framework to the loss of control Bill experiences in his consideration of Anna as a fourth wife. Bill has next to no control over this narrative arc. First Margie then Barb develop their own intimate relationship with Anna and later each insist that Bill continue their (not solely his) relationship with her when he is ready to give up on it. Although Bill does get to initiate the proposal of marriage, Barb and Margie propose moments later (On Trial). Barb also insists that all four of the spouses date her (Block Party) removing a traditionally patriarchally based institution from Bill's exclusive control. In the end of this narrative arc, Ana's getting divorced from the family is her decision and is based on the wives' relationships and the family eco-system, not her specific relationship with Bill (For Better or For Worse). Here the theological framework of Mormon fundamentalist polygamy can both preserve male authority through patriarchy and undermine it by establishing complex relationships between women. in *Straight Writ Queer* Richard Fantina explains of the anthology an interrogation of some straight sexual practices demonstrate that many of these can be as subversive to patriarchal values and institution as same-sex practices. By focusing on some of these transgressive acts and counter hegemonic gender positions, this collection seeks to blur the divide between homo- and heterosexuality, while deconstructing heteronormativity (Fantina 14-15). Although Fantina's anthology focuses on examples that more directly attack patriarchy and do not preserve it to the extent that *Big Love*'s narrative does, I still

believe *Big Love* also has this kind of transgressive potential. The productive tension incorporated into *Big Love's* portrayal of patriarchal polygamy allows the text to explore the instability of patriarchal control in a generally patriarchal institution. Rather than solely presenting patriarchy is inherently and inescapably part of polygamy or as clearly subverted as it is in some queer theory by the use of productive tension that demonstrates patriarchy as strong and problematic but that can be potentially undermined in surprising ways that incorporate elements of both of the show's major discourses.

Procreation and Non-Marital Sex

The Henrickson family's relationship to sex presents a similar problem to that of patriarchy discussed above. While traditional religious sexual mores and polygamy make procreation central, queer theory is often about non-procreativity and chosen procreativity in *Big Love* these discourses are put into productive tension with each other by being shown as both proscribed and problematic, both a biological goal of sex and related to childrearing by non-biological parents. Procreation is a significant part of the motivation for the Henrickson family. It is vitally important in Mormon theology to bring children into the world and to raise them in the Mormon faith in order to allow them to progress spiritually. Barb's inability to have more children after her hysterectomy is variously perceived as a punishment for her and Bill's initially not living the principle of plural marriage but also as a motivation for their beginning to live it. More than simply being a spiritual duty Mormonism, like many faiths, discourages non-procreative, pre-marital and non-marital sex. When Bill realizes that Nicki has not been having children for some time, he reminds her "growing the family is why we're here. Matthew 18:5

whosoever shall receive one child in my name receiveth me" (Prom Queen). Later Nicki repeats this similar sentiment when she replies to Margie's questions about whether she wants another baby with the ideology she's been taught at the compound. Nicki tells Margie: "it is my wifely duty to bear as many children as I can to bless this family and bring glory to my husband in the afterlife" Margie replies that "I thought we could have a serious conversation about this" (Prom Queen). Margie's reply, acknowledging the unsatisfactoriness of regurgitated ideology, and Nicki's use of birth control at the time of this statement both complicate the portrayal of procreation centered marriage in *Big Love,* again producing a kind of production tension between the shows conservative and queer discourses. Robin Wood writes in *Out In Culture* that that "the present status of both" (women's and gay liberation) "has been made possible by the increasing public acceptance of birth control, with its implicit acknowledgment that the aim of sex is not necessarily procreation, and its consequent undermining of the tyrannical and repressive norm of monogamy and family" (Wood 14). Because the Henricksons' marriage nominally does have procreation as a primary motivation for sex, it appears to be in conflict with this facet of queer kinship as challenge to the centrality of procreation (Weston 34); however the distance between rhetoric and behavior again puts these tensions in productive conversation. Nicki's use of birth control is, of course, one manifestation of this tension; but this tension can also be seen in the other non-procreative relationships in *Big Love.* Barb and Bill continue to have sex as a part of their marriage, although she can no longer become pregnant, Nicki is shocked when she finds out that Bill performs oral sex on Margie (Kingdom Come), and Bill and Barb joke

earlier that when Bill talks to Ben about not going to far with his girlfriend that he can say "save yourself but oral is moral" (Viagra Blue). Although this is clearly a joke, the specter of non-procreative sex is always present in this otherwise traditionally procreation centered family. It is also present in the non-sexual spousal kinship that the wives have with one another whose commitment to one another includes the goal of childrearing but not procreation which, despite Barb referring to Wayne as "her son by Nicki," is impossible without the male spouse or other intervention.

Traditional religiously based sexual mores in *Big Love* also prohibits pre-marital or ex-marital sex, but yet both teenagers and adults engage in this prohibited behavior in the text. When Sarah discovers her brother Ben is having sex with his girlfriend, she reminds him of the religious admonition they both were raised with; she reminds him that their Sunday school taught them it was better to see their children dead then unchaste (Reunion). Ben's former bishop tells him about God, "we're fortunate because he's given us the path to eternal marriage and eternal family. But sexual morality is at the heart of that plan" (Dating Game) and his father tells him that "it's not an unnatural desire but its the most unholy thing you can do with your body. That's your temple, son" (Kingdom Come). Despite this clear awareness of religious expectation, Sarah herself eventually has pre-marital sex and becomes pregnant, and it is revealed that Bill had sex with both Margie and Anna prior to marrying them. The narrative relationship to breaches of proscribed sexual morality is much more complex then simply the lapses of characters unable to uphold sexual purity mores. Ben not only breaks these expectation of chastity but this failure to remain chaste ends up causing a re-dedication of himself to not only

Mormonism but committing to the idea of polygamy. After this sexual lapse, he attempts to marry the girl he lost his virginity to; and when this fails to occur, he begins dating twin girls from the fundamentalist compound. Bill condemns Nicki and Sarah's sexual transgressions, the use of birth control and pre-marital sex, shortly after he himself has sex with Anna prior to their marriage. Although Sarah has much more serious consequences to her engagement in pre-marital sex then Ben, in fact she becomes pregnant and subsequently has a traumatic miscarriage, she does not experience a religious awakening; her reunion with her boyfriend in fact takes the form of sex in Nicki's bed. However Bill's decision to sanction Sarah's engagement to her boyfriend, against Barb's wishes, is motivated by his feeling that getting married somehow "makes right" their transgression of pre-marital sex (Sacrament). Rather than simply showing personal lapses what these examples evidence is a complex interaction between desire, religious conviction, and traditional values in the text. A lapse can cause religious conversion or lead to desire for queer kinship as when Sarah and Heather vow to raise her unborn child themselves. The relationship to these events and lapses are structured by the differing backgrounds and perspectives of the characters leading to different outcomes from the interaction between discourses.

These apparent conflicts and complexities deepen *Big Love's* relationship to this subject. In part the relationship between conservative sexual mores, polygamy, and queer subjectivities is already present in many outside discussions of polygamous and gay marriage. Handley write that the language of "promiscuity" is, of course, one of the chief conservative charges against gay people in defense of heterosexual monogamous

marriage, as indeed it was against Mormon polygamy in the nineteenth century, which was seen as a sanctified form of licentiousness (Handley 94).

This reminder of the position of Mormon polygamy in many people's eyes as "perverse" in its own way troubles the more general valorization of conservative sexual mores in the Henrickson family household. The complications multiple mothers add to otherwise simple heterosexual biological regulation also upsets the "good order" of the culture Butler observes in *Undoing Gender* that "the belief is that culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child, and that the child have this dual point of reference, for its own initiation into the symbolic order" (Butler 118). Butler is not addressing situations like that of the Henricksons who arguably maintain the symbolic order by providing children with the point of reference of biological father and mother in some ways that are quite traditional. However, the distractions to this dual point of reference, the extension of kinship inherent in the non-biological mothers' major role in the children's lives, can violate the symbolic order by countering the limited nuclear family as the paradigmatic family form. Like in the previous examples we see tension between proscribed and voluntary (or non existent) procreativity and that through the elaborate combination of religious and queer discourses this seemingly simple opposition can be destabilized and complicated.

Conservative Religious Groups and "Family Values"

Implicit in the discussion of patriarchy and procreative/marital sex thus far is the structuring role conservative religious values play in the structuring role conservative religious values play in the Henricksons' lives, despite the fact that most conservative

religious groups, including the mainstream LDS, oppose polygamy and often rhetorically associate it with an opposition to same-sex marriage. Handley argues that

> Mormon polygamy and same-sex marriage may seem to make strange political bedfellow, and yet a familiar conservative argument against same-sex marriage is that it would lead inexorably to the legal sanctioning of group marriage and polygamy. The (il)-logic of "if gay marriage, then polygamy"...has become so routine in the last decade among such conservative writers as William Bennett, Stanley Kurz and others that it seems to have acquired the paranoid quality of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Handley 89-90).

Roman Grant in *Big Love* tries to deploy this logic in reverse for public relation purposes. While taking a reporter on a tour of the compound Roman tells her, "If the supreme court says, yes to the privacy rights of homosexual persons, surely it's time to recognize our rights to live in peace too" (Home Invasion). This is a calculated use of same-sex marriage by Roman for political reasons; in no way does it indicate a genuine political alliance or acceptance of homosexuals as Adaleen and Roman's disparaging comments about Alby's secret homosexuality show. This is consistent with D. Michael Quinn's observation that there has been a "rise of homophobia within the Mormon hierarchy since the early 1950s" (Quinn 375). Handley in fact associates the church's opposition to same-sex marriage to its history of moving away from polygamy, saying that "as if having internalized the marital and economic ideology behind its coerced transformation after 1890 (when it gave up polygamy), the church is also one of the leading political forces behind the effort to draw a new line between civilized marriage

and its latest threat, same-sex marriage" (Handley 89). Beyond particular sexual or religious motives for individual actions the decision to represent queer kinship question in the context of frequently homophobic faiths in itself produces tension.

This intricate matrix of traditional religious norms, consistent with the LDS, fundamentalist polygamous groups values and queer kinship produces a tension that interrogates the question of what defines "family values." Mark Simpson in *It's A Queer World* speaks of those who panic about a loss of "family values" and believe the family is in crisis from whom "the solution to this crisis is to close down the alternatives...The "family values" or Retrosexuality Movements is deeply unhappy with the separation of sex from reproduction that contraception and late consumer capitalism has brought about" (Simpson 8). In this respect the Henricksons, at least on the surface, meet this "family values" expectation by putting reproduction center in the family, although in a clearly problematized way. Robin Wood looks at conservative ideology from a very different perspective; noting that "when dealing with ideology, it is always necessary to ask not only what it *ex*presses but what it *re*presses. The opposed, largely contradictory, ideological positives our culture offers (monogamy and family, romantic love) have one obvious feature in common: the insistence on exclusivity and mutual possession with "fidelity" thought of basically in sexual terms and sexuality mystified as "sacred"" (Wood 15). Here fundamentalist polygamy as practiced by the Henricksons defies the traditional ideology by centering on what this ideology *re*presses, particularly the rejection of exclusivity. Although in some ways mutual possession is still present in *Big Love,* one must share those they possess with other spouses, complicating the relationship

to possession. Despite rejecting a focus on exclusivity, *Big Love* retains and even heightens the sense of "sexuality mystified as "sacred"" evident in the language used by Bill and his bishop when admonishing Ben for having pre-marital sex. Even while destabilizing some elements, although by no means all, of dominant "family values" ideology, potentially the focus of *Big Love* on marriage complicates its radical potential. Butler observes about the fight for gay marriage that "for a progressive sexual movement, even one that may want to produce marriage as an option for non-heterosexuals, the proposition that marriage should become the only way to sanction or legitimate sexuality is unacceptably conservative (Butler 109). Yet it is this looming conservativeness that co-exists with the Henrickson family's subversive and scandalous elements that creates the conflicts and tensions that complicate *Big Love* as a text and illustrate that conflict over what constitutes family values is more nuanced then conservative versus radical positions.

Parallel Themes

Publics who interact with the multiple discourses present in any given text do not interact solely with the ways that these discourses conflict with and contradict each other. In many cases different discourses in a text interact by highlighting the similarities between seemingly disparate discourses and subject positions. *Big Love* illustrates the ways in which the seemingly radically different positions of religious polygamous marriage and queer kinship face similar challenges in a culture that perceives them as threats to the symbolic order. Although the discourse of theologically motivated polygamy is explicit in the text and the queer discourse is much more implicit and sub-

textual, both are at stake in a variety of issues explored in *Big Love* including the affect of stigma, including passing, the importance of ritual, and the importance of legitimacy. For example I've already discussed how queer discourses complicate traditional religious values discourses in *Big Love;* but the relationship between these two discourses can also be looked at in terms of how they support one another, and not how they conflict, by using the queer discourse to bring out the queer potential in traditional religious frameworks that religious faiths usually deny.

Queer Theology

The intersection of religious and queer discourse in *Big Love* as discourses that can enhance and support each other when addressing issues that both discourses have a similar perspective. Uniquely the intersection between these discourses can evoke the fascinating work on queer theology. Scholars who have considered the question of queer theology have drawn attention to the ways that Christianity can be thought of as symbolically queer. Similarly to *Big Love* these scholars interrogate the ways in which theological frameworks that are often deployed as arguments against same-sex marriage and queer kinship have aspects that contradict the standards that are the basis of their opposition to same-sex marriage and families. Gerard Loughlin in *Queer Theology* addresses the opposition to same-sex marriage on the basis of the inability to procreate by point out "the threat posed by gays and lesbians to family and society is often proclaimed by men - named "fathers" - who have vowed never to beget children. The pope lives in a household of such men...that reproduces itself by persuading other not to procreate. Why is this refusal of fecundity -the celibate lifestyle- not also a threat to family and

society?" (Loughlin 5). Although celibacy is not an issue in *Big Love,* the show deploys a similar technique, asking why segments of society will not recognize either the non-biological mothers prescribed by religiously motivated polygamy or the second mother (or father) in lesbian and gay families, while valorizing non-biological mothers who adopt in a heterosexual marriage, such as Barb's LDS intensely anti-polygamy sister. This comparison comes out strongly when Sarah's workmates joke "Sarah has three mommies" (Pilot) a play on the title of a children's book about lesbian parents, tying together in the very first episode of *Big Love* polygamy and queer kinship. In "Subjectivity and Belief" Kathy Rudy considers the role of community in faith and argues for its acceptance in terms of kinship when she claims "that progressive Christians should stop encouraging gays and lesbians to take up monogamous relationships and try instead to understand and the value of a lifestyle built on community" (Rudy 37). A community of faith is central to fundamentalist Mormon polygamy, particularly on the compound, and although their family expands beyond the nuclear, the Henricksons' exile from community is always a strain on them and their faith; Nicki laments "I've given up hundreds to live in the suburbs with ten" (Reunion).

Scholars and *Big Love* both explore how aspects of theology can be inherently queer Loughlin explains in *Queer Theology* that "as we have seen, the Christian tradition has always imagined same-sex marriage -at least for men. Men have always been able -if not required- to play the bride to Christ's groom" (Loughlin 5). Here the dictates of faith encourage a queer orientation, men being Christ's bride, as does polygamy when it seals a new wife not solely to a man but to his other wives. They also place desire in the context

of faith. Rudy in "Subjectivity and Belief" says that celibacy testifies to the truth "that all desire is ultimately oriented towards God. Our desire for the other is ultimately desire for the Other and will not be satisfied until it reaches its *telos*, its end in God" (Rudy 68). The Henricksons are similarly oriented in the kingdom yet to come, building their family for the afterlife. Even when speaking of worldly business interests Bill orients his decisions towards both his worldly and eternal life. When Don finds himself unexpectedly monogamous, Bill asks him to use this newfound legitimacy to obtain a bank loan for their casino project; he assures Don "this is the solid foundation we've been looking for to build our earthly and celestial kingdom" (Empire). In Bill's worldview the earthly kingdom is a preparation for the celestial one, as is their earthly marriage also celestial; therefore if their earthly marriage has queer attributes so will their celestial marriage be queer. Religious and queer discourses interact with one another in the text in a way that brings out the relationships between the worldly and earthly marriages and the possibility of theological frameworks having implicitly queer elements, something crucial to *Big Love.*

Stigma

Both polygamous and queer families must confront the issue of stigma as defined by Erving Goffman. Stigma is one of the areas in which queer and religious discourses are not in conflict but rather Mormon fundamentalist polygamists and queer kinship groups both routinely have to deal with stigma. The parallels between the discourses demonstrate how marginal groups confront similar problems and go to the question of dealing with difference generally rather than solely specifically. Religious and queer

discourses also put their own distinct, but not conflicting spin on the question of stigma, such as religious motivations for the embrace of stigma symbols They both belong specifically to the discreditable stigmatized and those who have a "tribal stigma of...religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of the family" (Goffman 4). Stacey has observed that children of gay parents become "vicarious victims" of homophobia (Stacey 135); those who carry a "tribal stigma" such as children of parents who are fundamentalist polygamous Mormons similarly become "vicarious victims." Concerns for the victims of the children of the religiously marginalized are shown to be also relevent to children in queer kinship groups, and visa versa through the interaction of the show's two discourses. The Henricksons' oldest daughter Sarah particularly struggles with this tribal stigma, struggling with the extent she can separate herself from her family's stigma. Despite Sarah's clear objection to her family's polygamous lifestyle, she is consistently unable to separate herself from them and their stigma. When Margie asks Sarah if she thinks of herself as a polygamist Sarah replies, "No. Well, kind of. For the longest time I thought I wasn't. I mean my family may be and my parents may but I'm not. but then I was like, well I mean, I'm living here, so whether or like it or not I kind of am" (The Baptism). Here stigma by association becomes inescapable for Sarah. Sarah also strongly opposes the deceit that her family must engage in in order to remain discreditable rather than discredited by their secret stigma; this secrecy puts a strain on most of the family but Sarah objects particularly strongly to it. Goffman observes of the discreditable person that "when his differentness is not immediately apparent, and is not known beforehand (or at

least known by him to be known to the others), when in fact his is a discreditable, not a discredited person, then the second main possibility in his life is to be found" (Goffman 42).

To avoid being found out the Henrickson's engage in passing in various forms. Bill and Barb pass as a monogamous couple, Nicki and Margie have to pass as single mothers. In some cases the children have to pass as not Bill's children. It is interesting to note that the form of passing expected of Nicki and Margie affixes to them a different stigma, that of the unwed mother, that is also vulnerable to conservative religious reprobation. Unhappy with his particular stigma as well Margie eventually makes up a story about being a surrogate mother in order to pass in a different way (Rock and a Hard Place), because in the eyes of the law Nicki and Margie are in reality single mothers this can be thought of a double passing on Margie's part. Passing has been a traditionally challenging and important part of the queer experience for many, it can be seen as explicitly functioning this way as Alby passes for straight and Selma passes for male. The motivations for passing are many but rather motivated to high religious, familial, or queer stigmas passing is shown as universally problematic.

In the family's attempts to pass, Nicki routinely becomes a liability because she alone in the family is the bearer of stigma symbols. Goffman describes stigma symbols as "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy" (Goffman 43-44). Nicki does not cut her hair, usually wearing it in a long braid, and dresses very conservatively; her clothes and hair style are a toned down version of what is worn on the compound. Her bearing of these stigma symbols makes

her discredited in the eyes of many people; the Henricksons' neighbor Pam, who calls Nicki "the braid," suspects her of being a fundamentalist without even considering that Margie or Barb could be polygamous. Motivated by this suspicion she sends missionaries to Nicki's house who confirm her suspicion. Because of her stigma symbol, Nicki quickly moves from discreditable to discredited. Pam tells Margie about Nicki that "she's fundamentalist, polygamist. Right on our street. Isn't that terrible? They're like cockroaches. No, I don't mean that in a harsh way I mean that they come in and try to hide. They're secretive probably because of the shame of it all" (The Baptism). Pam not only responds negatively to Nicki's stigma but tells Margie, who is passing herself, that she objects to Nicki's attempts to "hide" to pass. Although she claims to object to Nicki's attempts to remain discreditable rather than discredited, it is invariably Nicki's bearing of stigma symbols, what makes her disredited, to which Pam responds. She much more readily accepts Barb and Margie, who are more successful passers, when they come out to her. For Nicki it is religious status that makes her discreditable in the first place but also that motivates her bearing of stigma symbols. Goffman observes that "it is possible for signs which mean one thing to one group to mean something else to another group" (Goffman 46). Nicki's dress and hairstyle are negative stigma symbols in the eyes of the neighbors, but for her they are a link to her family and community; they mark her as normative and keeping to her faith on her returns to the compound. Just as Nicki has to dress in ways she is uncomfortable with to attend Barb's awards ceremony (The Ceremony) or to work at a job outside the home (Block Party), Margie has to cover up to go to the compound (The Writing on the Wall). *Big Love's* depiction of stigma symbols

that are voluntarily worn is very important it shows how something that is a status symbol, or basic expectation, in one context becomes a stigma symbol in another. What makes Margie a good passer in their neighborhood makes her offensive on the compound. This is a challenge faced by gays or lesbians who may wish to wear certain symbols at a club or event with other gays and lesbians but that may become stigma symbols if they run into their boss at the gas station on the way home. They, like Nicki, have to choose or reject symbols that may make them feel connected to one community while isolating them from another.

Passing and closeting is a significant part of independent polygamists experience, part of living in mainstream culture rather than on a compound; it is also an important part of the experience of many gays and lesbians, particularly older gays and lesbians. In *Big Love* the process of moving from discreditable to discredit individuals incorporates both religious and queer discourses. Nicki's bearing of stigma symbols has a foundation in her religious belief and involuntarily "outs" her. Barb and Margie on the other hand intentionally become discredited. Goffman claims that an individual "can voluntarily disclose himself, thereby radically transforming his situation....from that of a discreditable person to that of a discredited one" (Goffman 100). Margie and Barb both voluntarily "out" themselves at least once, Margie to Anna and Barb to Pam; in both cases this outing takes on a queer tone. Barb tells Pam when she comes out to her that "Margie is my sister-wife and I love her dearly" (Oh Pioneers). Margie also emphasizes her love for her sister-wives when disclosing herself to Anna whose first response is to note that she doesn't bear the stigma symbols of polygamy saying "you don't look like

the women I see on television" (Dating Game). This emphasis on love for ones sister-wives as a part of disclosure indicates that while religion may be the motivation behind polygamy, creating the need for passing and the motivation for the bearing of stigma symbols, choosing to become discredited as opposed to discreditable is associated with relationships including the queered relationship of sister wives to one another. The shows treatment of stigma deploys both queer and religious discourses in deeply interrelated ways that enrich the portrayal of stigma and the practices of passing and coming out.

Importance of Ritual

In some ways we can think of this disclosure process as a kind of ritual. Ritual is an essential site in which queer and religious discourse comes together. Religion consistently puts a high value on ritual and it has been noted as an important part of queer kinship practices. In the case of *Big Love* rituals with religious motivations such as family home evening or baptisms often simultaneously serve to solidify *Big Love*'s queer inflected relationships such as the marriages between the women in the family. Butler writes about the "thesis that kinship is itself a kind of doing, a practice that enacts that assemblage of significations as it takes place" (Butler 126) In *Big Love* kinship as doing often takes the form of ritual. Kath Weston also locates the importance of ritual to kinship when she observes of her own experience that "the centrality of the meal-sharing food on a regular basis in a domestic setting- certainly contributed to our growing sense of relatedness" (Weston 104). Meal sharing is an extremely important ritual in *Big Love;* its incorporated into the program's opening as part of their experience in the afterlife. Meal times and meal preparation are the times that the whole family is most frequently shown

together. The viewer first realizes that Bill is not cheating on his wife but is married to three women when he comes in and they are all cooking dinner together (Pilot). Later in the episode the picture of a united family brought together by a form of marriage built on religious faith is solidified when they all share a meal together at a large picnic table in the three houses open backyard and Bill leads them in prayer. A relatively long sequence takes place just of them eating together (Pilot). From the very first episode shared meals become a ritual in which both kinship and religious work takes place. The religiously motivated practice of family home evening, framed by prayer, becomes, consistent with Kath Weston, an occasion for the solidification of queer kinship relationships.

The final season of season three, discussed above, transforms this ritual of communal eating into one with more explicit meaning when Bill offers his family the sacrament as part of his laying claim to the keys and greater religious authority (Sacrament). I have already discussed this scenes complex relationship to both religious ritual meaning and queer kinship, and a similar set of symbolic meaning making can be seen in the baptism rituals shown on the program. Margie's choice to become baptized represents her acceptance of the full implications of a polygamous life, that she is not solely married to Bill but to Nicki and Barb as well, and the queer kinship that is part of this proposition. It also indicates her full realization of the religious implication of this life that marriage is to be eternal and that this eternal marriage can only be obtained through fundamentalist Mormon religious faith. When she asks to be baptized, she tells them she now understands that she was marrying sisters and that "I wanna be with you guys forever too 'cause I love you guys and I need you guys and I never ever wanted to

not be in this family here or in heaven." She tells them, "I'm ready" (The Baptism). Margie's baptism symbolizes her acceptance of both the queer and religious aspects of her marriage. Nicki and Barb's smiles and hand-holding as they watch Margie be baptized further extends the experience to include Barb and Nicki, solidifying the queer marital relationship between the women as part of the baptism experience. Baptism again complicates queer kinship relationships when Barb stands in for Margie's mother in a baptism for the dead (Come Ye Saints), allowing her to be with them and to have salvation in the afterlife. The exception to this relationship to ritual is Barb's participation in a temple endowment ceremony; this unites her with her LDS mother and sister for a final time before Barb is excommunicated for being in a polygamous relationship (Outer Darkness). However because she is excommunicated rather than leaving her family later in the same episode, in some ways this endowment ceremony can be read against its typical intention as a "last dance," a ritualized experience of LDS Mormon faith before leaving it permanently for her polygamist family. Consistently ritual is important for both religious and queer discourses in the text and religious ritual routinely plays an important role in queer kinship maintenance simultaneously.

Importance of Legitimacy

Butler speaks of marriage in terms of "a kind of legitimated public sex" and explains that "marriage compels, at least logically, universal recognition: everyone must let you into the door of the hospital: everyone must honor your claim to grief; everyone will assume your natural rights to a child; everyone will regard your relationship as elevated into eternity" (Butler 111). Butler, who is generally quite wary of the quest for

legitimacy, here indicates the very practical benefits of being perceived as legitimate. As family's that are not recognized by the legal system and much of the culture as legitimate Mormon fundamentalist polygamist and queer families both must face similar problems brought on by lack of legitimacy that are explored in *Big Love.* While the Henricksons' marriage is elevated into eternity in the eyes of other polygamists for mainstream LDS it is not. Because their marriage is not recognized by Barb's family members, neighbors, co-workers and the laws the Henricksons, like those in queer relationships, are denied many of the recognitions Butler discusses. A desire for legitimacy and recognition is crucial in *Big Love* at both the corporate religious and personal level. Don and Bill's pursuit of a letter supposedly proving that Wilford Woodruff never intended the church to give up polygamy is clearly a pursuit of legitimacy for their faith and marriages (Rough Edges). On a personal level the women who are not first-wives seek recognition and legitimacy. Lois despite her personal dislike and conflict with her husband Frank seeks to become his legal wife when his first wife dies. Although she claims to be concerned with making her children legitimate, she admits that ultimately she wants the legal protection that legitimacy affords her, although emotional reasons seem to also be in play (Roberta's Funeral). Handley has noted the importance in the past of making children in polygamous families legitimate, so Lois' claims can also be seen in historical context (Handley 104). Lois is by no means alone in her desire. Margie is eager to become the public wife in their second business when Bill buys Weber (Damage Control). She wants to have an environment where she can be the recognized wife. Bill expresses a similar desire when he becomes very invested in Wayne, attending a particular Catholic school in a different

part of town so he can be publicly recognized as Wayne's father in at least one place outside their home (Vision Thing).

The denial of legitimacy for Handley has particular social and political motivations. Because of the tension between status and contract "status became unfixed" and so

> granting legitimacy to polygamy and gay marriage is in this sense unthinkable: it would disinvest property (the material sign of status) of those amorphous values that status is made to represent and that require (often shaming) exclusions for their maintenance, which is why even just the existence of gay people or polygamists is enough to be an "affront" to other people's relationships, beliefs and fellow, if unequal, rights (Handley 107).

Handley's analysis ties together polygamists and gays and lesbians as groups for whom society has perceived the legitimation as a threat as well as groups for whom legitimation is extremely important. Handley notes "whether gay marriage, polygamy or pornography, the potential of the threat is rhetorically the same: the subversion of good order" (Handley 92). Butler has her own concern about the primacy of legitimation as a goal. She observes that

> this crisis of legitimation can be considered from a number of perspectives, but let us consider for the moment the ambivalent gift that legitimation can become. To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there, and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation (Butler 105).

By looking at polygamy, rather than a straightforward gay or lesbian marriage, *Big Love* shows the inability to achieve legitimation from the current lexicon of the culture in a different light. Not only does it draw upon discourses of love between women, not part of our current lexicon, it rejects exclusivity and monogamy, and upsets the presumption of biology in parenthood as well as the presumption that children will have only one mother. *Big Love* violates the lexicon of legitimacy in ways both similar and different to depictions that show monogamous gay or lesbian relationships and parenthood like *The L-Word* or *Noah's Arc*.

Conclusion

Ultimately although the text concerns itself with many issues that are a part of explicitly queer television series, this chapter has sought to demonstrate why the fact that *Big Love* is not an explicitly queer text is crucial to its importance as a show. Bakhtin writes that "along with the internal contradictions inside the object that the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object...the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (Bakhtin and Holquist 278). What *Big Love* does is to take a cultural question about non-normative marriage and family from the social context that it contemporarily most frequently comes up, same-sex couples, and into an extremely different social context with its own history of controversy. As an internally dialogic text, both contexts and their associated discourses remain present in *Big Love*. This results in a text with two prominent, related, but in many ways different discourses that the text skillfully integrates and puts into conversation with each other. This enriches and complicates the core questions about the

non-normative families that the text addresses by incorporating a variety of perspectives, including religiously motivated perspectives on the question.

The introduction of religious belief as an argument *for* non-normative marriage and family forms is rarely part of contemporary discussions on the issue. Generally, although by no means exclusively, religion's role in this debate has been most prominently to be an argument against non-normative marriage and family forms as they take form in same-sex relationships. In fact some of these religious groups have deployed polygamy as part of a "slippery-slope" argument against gay marriage, ignoring the traditionally specifically faith-based motivation for polygamy. *Big Love* brings this faith-based motivation back into the equation while skillfully retaining the role of religious groups in opposing non-normative sexualities and family forms. This can be seen in explicit reference to polygamy in Barb's LDS families staunch opposition to her choice of polygamy and their estrangement from her as a result; in this as in most discourses in *Big Love* there an implied narrative of queer individuals who become estranged from their family after coming out. The issue of opposition from traditional religious group to non-normative family forms and sexuality can also be seen explicitly targeted at gays and lesbians in the text through the portrayal of the rejection and repression of queer subjects in the text; this includes the potential adoptive father of Sarah's baby who is gay and encouraged by the LDS church to marry a woman, the disparaging comments of Adaleen and other compound individuals about Alby, and Roman's bullying of Selma into presenting as female in a way that clearly is uncomfortable for her.

Rather than undermining *Big Love*'s narrative, I have argued in this chapter that in addition to the ways in which the two discourses I have focused on, religious/historical and queer, run parallel to and support one another in the depiction of certain issues, the ways in which these discourses come into conflict also enhance the narrative by the creations of productive tension. Here I use the term productive tension to indicate the way that conflicts between the two discourses in the text when addressing certain issues complicate the topics that they discuss. For instance, traditionally the positions of Mormon Fundamentalist religion and queer theory on issues of procreation and patriarchy have been deeply in opposition to each other. However we have seen that the way these conflicts actually play out deeply trouble the positions of both discourses. In Nicki's professed faith in the centrality of her life's role as a mother and bearer of children but behavioral avoidance of procreativity we can see a deep and complex conflict. The show does not depict her as rejecting her faiths belief in her responsibility to have children, but rather she is depicted as being frightened about the impact on her marriage of constant childbearing and is shown to be genuinely reluctant to continue to have children, something that in the past has shown to be emotionally difficult for her. Nicki's character struggles with both religious discourse and the potential for self-determination birth control provides (as discussed in queer theory); for her these discourses are not in simple opposition but struggle with each other in the very real conditions of her character's life. Other subjects dealt with in the text, such as the issue of legitimacy, find the text's two major discourses not in opposition but rather in conversation with one another in ways that support each other. In depictions of

stigmatization faced by the Henrickson family, the kinds of stigmatization confronted by queer individuals in various ways are re-contextualized as issues confronted by polygamous families. This functions in a variety of ways; it posits that those stigmatized by society, for any reasons, confront at least some similar challenges, that families that are in some ways like yours (the Henricksons are religious, heterosexual, and procreative) can still be stigmatized as "not counting" as families, and most interestingly discourses can introduce elements that do not conflict with, but are different from, the traditional elements of this discourse. An example of this can be seen in Nicki's bearing of stigma symbols as part of her religious belief. Stigma symbols are also present in the queer community, often ones that, like Nicki's, are voluntarily worn, but *Big Love*'s introduction of religion as a motivation significantly deepens and complicates the issue of stigma symbols in the text. Although revealing to others you are polygamous is certainly an issue for those few polygamists who live out in general society rather than on compounds or in closed societies, generally work on polygamy does not discuss a coming out process as it is known in queer communities. The addition of the "coming out" ritual to *Big Love* as part of its queer discourse significantly complicates the relationship of the show's characters to being discovered or revealing themselves by incorporating questions of pride, self-realization and the claiming of a partner in the public sphere into the show. When Barb tells neighbors that she is married to Margie all of these issues in queer discourse come into play.

This chapter shows that differing discourses in television texts can not only co-exist harmoniously in a text and address multiple publics but that they can, and should,

also interact with each other in ways that deepen and enrich the text. This is contrary to work on television that has tended to take it as a simplistic and simplifying media form and, to use Bakthin's phrasing, take its viewers as passive. Rather the interaction of discourses in *Big Love* demonstrate televisions ability to support the kinds of complexity that Bakthin recognizes in the novel. In the case of *Big Love* this complexity is used to address questions about non-normative marriage and family forms that are very relevant to our culture from a new perspective and context.

Conclusion

I have spent a good deal of time discussing the queer coding and subtext of *Big Love* as well as the way it addresses a core question "what makes a family" and what happens to families that are not recognized which is in many ways a question of concern to queer counterpublics and communities. Some may wonder why, if these are my interests, that I did not write on many of the excellent television shows that are specifically and explicitly about gays and lesbians and their kinship formations. There are a variety of answers to this question. I have addressed this question in part in this chapter by looking at how the religious discourses in the text complicate and inform the queer discourse in the text, and visa versa, in ways that would not be possible in a text solely about queer questions. It is also important to examine television texts that exhibit the complexity to employ diverse discourses in the ways I have looked at here particularly in light of the tendency of some commentators to assume that television simplifies and dumbs down discourse. I think it is also important that *Big Love* is a text that can address issues in a sometimes indirect way, allowing it to shed new perspective on the given issue and perhaps to engage a somewhat different audience. While a specific audience reception study would be required to make a empirical claim about *Big Love*'s audience it is reasonable to posit that there are some viewers of the show who would have access to its interrogation of questions of family who would be unlikely to watch an explicitly queer show whether out of prejudice, discomfort or simple disinterest. Finally, the novelty of polygamy as a topic, and its recent appearances in the news, may generate interest for the show that another topic may not provide, further expanding to a different

kind of audience then an explicitly queer show might reach in its interrogation of issues confronting the non-normative family and non-normative marriage structures.

It is important that topics like queer kinship and family issues be approached by television programs that reach different audiences and take different perspectives because television plays an important role in social and political discourses. Jennifer Reed in "The Three Phases of Ellen" explains that "in fact, the teaching that happens on television is the most influential teaching that allows us to cohere as a society...It is the primary way we understand the differences between us. And more importantly, it is the place we learn how to behave toward each other as fellow citizens" and elaborates that "the point here is that the actual differences that are represented are less important than learning to deal with difference "respectfully and equitably"" (Reed 11). While I may not make this statement quite as strongly, certainly there is no way to claim that it is the *most* influential teaching, what goes on on television is clearly an important source of societal discourses. In *Prime-Time Families* Ella Taylor observes that "like all our storytelling, television speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual or collective lives, to complete what is incomplete, as well as to our desire to know what is going on out there in that elusive "reality"" (Taylor 3). William Douglas in *Television Families* similarly concludes that many consider television portrayals realistic (Douglas 10) and that viewers seek out families on television that look like their own (Douglas 14). *Big Love* defies these assumptions about how families are portrayed on television. While as a program it certainly addresses our concerns about contemporary families, it is not intended to represent families that look like yours in a straightforward

way. Although the Henricksons' have factual religious and historical roots, they are not positioned as representing "reality". Instead they represent, and must represent, a situation radically different from most viewers in order to interrogate questions that may be unfamiliar to them. In order for *Big Love* to interrogate questions of difference and stigma, it must represent something that is different itself. Ellen Seiter in *Television and New Media Audiences* observes that "often, conversation about the media is used as a pretense to talk about interpersonal relationships, longings, and desires, or 'taboo' topics such as sexual violence, gay and lesbian sexuality, racial tensions" (Seiter 2-3). *Big Love* is a show that provides pretense, an opportunity to talk about sexuality, religion and queer kinship without having to talk about examples that may hit to close to home. By incorporating religion into the text, it can frame the question radically differently, adding questions about faith, rather than biology or choice, as a motivator, and considering the role of religious freedom, and how we approach non-normative family forms that may also uphold certain traditional values more faithfully then many citizens and viewers.

Because of the viewer's potential emotional engagement with the characters and their lives they may feel differently about these questions over time. This is related to television's rather unique ability to interrogate issues and discourses over a quite significant period of time, the multi-voiced discourses in the text are able to interact or interchange over time. The text and the issues explored in it have time to change, mature, and the opinion and position of the audience may also change over time. In the first few episodes the Henricksons' polygamy may seem exploitive, patriarchal and motivated by sex, longer viewing may change a viewer's opinion and they may feel compassion for

Bill, seeing him as a man whose taken on too much to handle, or begin to see the companionship the wives provide each other as appealing, and may begin to recognize the religious motivation that accompanies the sex. John Corner writes that "the involvement with narrative is often a para-social one, in which engagement with portrayed characters leads to an imaginative investment in their actions and situations" (Corner 49). He goes on to say that these narratives can often perform an informational function. I would argue that narrative's para-social and informational functions inform one another. Because some viewers may be invested in Nicki as a character, they may be more likely to pay attention in away that helps them engage with the informational component of her story line about fundamentalist theology and history. The co-existence of these and other functions only increase televisions functionality as what Corner calls "a system of public symbolism" (Corner 10).

I have been using a lot of modifying language in my discussion of television commenting on what viewers *might* do or *could* perceive but this should not be mistaken for a lack of confidence in my argument. Rather it is to avoid the trap that too often television scholars fall into when they make claims that are problematically unverifiable. Douglas in *Television Families* takes research that indicates some viewers associate television with a perception of family decline and elaborates it to imply this impacts the perception of contemporary families as "distressed" in reality and even implies that they may impact on or reflect the actual decline of families (Douglas 170). Such a claim is simply not verified in his work and I believe unverifiable using his methods. Janet Steiger

in *Media Reception Studies* has been relatively critical of the kind of work I have done here. She points out that

> certainly one of the earliest and still the most prevalent method for finding evidence about the reception of media texts is scholarly analysis of written and oral texts from which the critics then make claims about what readers do. (Readers always make the meaning that the critics want the to turn out!) (Staiger 8).

Aware of these critiques I have tried to qualify my claims and focus on available readings in the texts rather than definitive readings.

I believe in the importance and validity of this kind of reading as a different approach to interrogate publics and the possible discourses in a given text than reception studies can provide. Ellen Seiter notes ways that reception studies itself has limitations. She notes that

> what people say when talking about the media cannot be taken at face value. We cannot assume that what subjects say in an interview, reflects individual, idiosyncratic views, or that what is spoken is all that is to be said on the subject. First, our subjects may not have access to all that might be going on with their media consumption, because of the role of the unconscious (Seiter 29)

and that "at its best, this research accepts that the audience is ultimately unknowable in some totalizing way" (Seiter 29). Studies of actual audiences may be a valuable next step to this research, but the kind of textual analysis done here is also vital. My analysis has paid more attention to subtexts, coding, and conflicting discourses than is usual pursued

in reception studies and depends on the subtler and more complex elements of the show that may not be the first things audiences would articulate. Accepting that audiences are ultimately unknowable, this text seeks to provide another way of approaching them and obtaining an incomplete kind of knowing. A text like *Big Love* requires this kind of approach drawing on rather than rejecting complexity. in *Publics and Counterpublics* Warner observes that "multileveled analysis.., I think, is always demanded by public texts" (Warner 15). Warner's call for multiveled analysis is one that suggests that texts need to be looked at as complex, and investigated for complexity, particularly given the multiple, and overlapping, publics that are engaged with any text. Unfortunately many persist in seeing television as a simplistic and simplifying medium.

Ella Taylor claims that "the heterogeneity of viewers must be simultaneously catered to with pluralistic images and glossed over with a more universal language in order to *create* a mass audience" (Taylor 166). *Big Love* finds a radically different way to address the same goal; rather than simplifying and limiting "ambiguity, uncertainty and the dissident voice" (Taylor 167) as Taylor claims the industry often does, it instead creates a text that functions on many different levels of legibility. Rather than attempting to create a text that is the same for all viewers, something that is never really true of a text, it draws on various discourses, information sources and coding to provide a text that has varied pleasures for varied publics, that serves a mass public through diversity not simplification. This approach also indicates an active and intelligent form of viewing. John Corner argues that

> narrative organization in television frequently seduces the viewer into aesthetic relations with what is on screen...in a manner which reduces critical distance and inhibits proper engagements with issues. It promotes a form of lazy viewing in contrast to the thoughtful and intensive attention required by many literary, theatrical, and even filmic models (Corner 51).

I would argue that *Big Love* as a text discourages lazy viewing and rewards active viewing by its incorporation of obscure historical and theological fact, extensive coding and subtext, and complex and conflicting discourse. In some ways *Big Love* encourages its audience to work for its pleasures. I have mentioned cases such as JoJo and Vernie's romance and the Wilford Woodruff missing word where extremely close attention on the part of the audience is rewarded as narratives unfold by giving those audiences who have noticed subtle detail added insight into what is going on that helps them make sense of sudden plot twists. Looking at television programs like *Big Love* that defy these, often negative, assumptions about television as simple and television viewers as passive, should be an important task to any television scholar in order to begin to think of television as complex and capable of politically varied and complicated discourses in the way literature, theater and film have been approached.

While *Big Love* is unusual in its approach, I do not mean to imply that it is unusual in its incorporation of complex and diverse discourses. In some ways television is particularly well suited to Bakthin's notion of polyvocality. Unlike the novels Bakhtin looks at, television texts have many authors who participate in their creation and influence the final product; their narratives take place over many hours, months, and

often years, and often include a wide variety of characters frequently with differing points of view. This makes television texts particularly able to incorporate different voices into a single narrative. Bakhtin observed that

> linguists have by and large gotten no further than the compositional forms by which the listener is taken into account, they have not sought influence springing from more profound meaning and style. They have taken into consideration only those aspects of style determined by demands for comprehensibility and clarity - that is, precisely those aspects that are deprived of any internal dialogism, that take the listener for a person who passively understands but not for one who actively answers and reacts (Bakhtin and Holquist 280).

Bakthin's work in *The Dialogic Imagination* seeks to redress this, to take the listener for one who is active by focusing on the internal dialogism of not solely the text as a whole but internal dialogism down to the level of the word. In his definition of dialogism Michael Holquist explains that "everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole - there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning other" (Bakhtin and Holquist 426). In *Big Love* we can see crucial interactions between meanings. In chapter three I have looked at how these discourses and meanings do in fact condition each other. My focus on religious and queer discourses locates my interest specifically towards social speech types (Bakhtin and Holquist 262). In chapter one and chapter two I have tried to interrogate the culture and discursive frameworks from which these social speech types come from. Bakhtin writes about various forms of stratification of language such as generic stratification and

professional stratification (Bakhtin and Holquist 288-89) and the role that their specific vocabularies play in the dialogic interactions of the discourses in the text. In chapter one and chapter two I have looked at the visual, verbal and narrative vocabulary of *Big Love* in terms of its theological/historical and queer discourses.

The specific vocabularies present in *Big Love* play a crucial role in structuring the series' publics. Michael Warner claims that "the making of publics is the metapragmatic work newly taken up by every text in every reading" (Warner 12). Part of the way the text performs that work is through the vocabulary that makes up the discourses I have spoke of here. Reception theory often discusses the personal life experiences, demographic characteristics, and emotional orientation of viewers in relation to the texts that they view. While the publics and counterpublics I have spoken of may overlap in many ways of the ways looked at by reception theory, I have tried to focus on the knowledge basis and orientation towards information de-coding as the central aspect of the publics I have discussed here. This is in part because the study of publics and counterpublics I perceive as more about how texts address and "make" publics and counterpublics, making it very different from reception scholarship which is focused on how groups "receive" a text. In the case of the texts theological and historical discourse it is certainly more likely that a Mormon individual would have more of the knowledge necessary to recognize the information and vocabulary coded into the text than would any random viewer. However it is also likely that a scholar of Mormonism, from any individual faith or from no faith, would also have access to the knowledge necessary to interperet these aspects of the show. It is also likely that there are many Mormon individuals who are not particularly

well aware of much of their faith's theology or history and are certainly not aware of history or theology behind the practice of polygamy before or after its prohibition by the church. A similar claim can be made about the queer aspects of the texts I have discussed. Gays and lesbians and their friends and family may be more aware of certain of these issues but so may be those who actively oppose gay marriage and queer kinship. However I have treated queer discourses somewhat differently, and spoken of specifically queer counterpublics for two reasons. One reason is I have not been addressing solely informational references and facts in terms of *Big Love's* queer discourse but a specific process of reading texts that involves decoding and resistent reading. This process is historically situated and is a common part of queer communities viewing practices. When I speak of the relationship of specifically queer viewers of *Big Love,* I am less interested in their personal social experiences in queer life than I am their experience with a particularly viewing practice that is part of knowledge making in the queer community. The other reason that I have treated queer discourses differently is because Michael Warner makes an important distinction between publics and counterpublics. He explains that "counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (Warner 63) and that "a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wide public but a dominant one" (Warner 119). These definitions could certainly fit a specifically polygamous counterpublic but is much less likely in contemporary times to fit a LDS Mormon public living in Utah. Due to this definition, a queer *counterpublic* and a queer

aware *public* are significantly different things. Although some individuals may be members of both not all members of the queer aware public, whether sympathetic to queer issues or not, will be members of a queer *counterpublic*. Nonetheless all of the queer discourse I discussed in chapter two and three would be available and interpretable to a queer aware public whether or not they are part of the counterpublic I have discussed.

Ultimately *Big Love* depends on this fact. It draws not solely on the idea of multiple publics but multiple publics with intersecting knowledge basises in order to put these discourses in constructive conversation with one another. While in some ways I have examined the discourses in *Big Love* as discrete, they cannot remain that way in order for the series' narrative to fully function. For Warner "counterpublics face another obstacle as well. One of the most striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency" (Warner 122-23). *Big Love* potentially gives voice and agency to the queer counterpublic. The program achieves this through a double-voicedness portrayed not with characters that would be part of a mainstream public but with those associated with a radically different *counterpublic* of fundamentalist religious polygamy. *Big Love* uses this double-voicedness not to erase difference to obtain legitimacy by playing on the dominant society's terms, as Butler fears, but rather to interrogate our culture's relationship to difference as it relates to marriage and family. It addresses Jennifer Reed's potential goal for television of teaching audiences to think about conditions of difference and potentially to learn to deal with difference rather than solely addressing one specific kind of difference (Reed 11).

Mark Warner writes that "any number of factors make for a pool of queer sentiment in persons otherwise distant or phobic about queerness" and that "queer sentiment can be largely independent of queer sexual practice therefore an opportunity for translation work" (Warner 222). It is important that media scholars look at television texts like *Big Love* in terms of doing this translation work and other kinds of socially and politically relevant work. It is important both because television media has become an increasingly influential form of discourse in our culture but also to combat writing about television that presumes its influence being primarily or exclusively harmful or merely being a dangerous distraction as John Corner draws attention to when he writes that in some models of viewing pleasure "television...acts within the terms of the classic 'bread and circuses' formula, keeping the populace happily uncritical" (Corner 103). Like Bakthin's linguists, I believe that those who follow this model are assuming the audience is passive.

Looking at the discursively rich internally dialogic of narrative in *Big Love* I have argued for a text whose publics must be active if they are to have access to a significant part of the meanings of the text. Warner introduces the phrase functional intelligibility to indicate the viability of the concept of a public, I would like to put this phrase to different use to address levels of intelligibility of a multiple-voiced mass media text. In order to function as a mass media text, *Big Love* must have a level of functional intelligibility to a general public regarding some of its emotional and plot register. However as a multiple-voiced and internally dialogic text, *Big Love* also has many other levels of intelligibility that we have looked at here: its legibility in terms of religious and historical discourses, its legibility in terms of queer discourses, and its legibility at the many levels that these

discourses speak to each other. There is other work left to be done on *Big Love* including work on the show's other areas of legibility, such as the business and political practices, on the compound, or its questions about childhood and abuse. There is also potentially reader response work that could be done to look at not the potential publics constructed by *Big Love* but at the actual responses of viewers of varying kinds. What I have tried to do, however, is the necessary first steps to think of *Big Love*, and other television shows, as not having *a* message in the singular way Stuart Hall sometimes uses the term (S. Hall 129), but as having complex interrelated discourses. Taking this as our first premise, the complexity of the narrative can be brought out, as well as some of the narrative's potential social or political implications. Whether it is Margene first realizing that Teenie can think of her as a mother but Ben cannot, Sarah's resistance to the family's passing, or the impact of deep religious faith on the decisions the family makes for the future, *Big Love* demonstrates the complexity to do the metapragmatic work of making multiple publics that have the potential to be active and aware readers.

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